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Speaker: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, March 8, 2021

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayer

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1100)

[*English*]

NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIABETES ACT

The House resumed from November 27, 2020, consideration of the motion that Bill C-237, An Act to establish a national framework for diabetes, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to address the House of Commons this morning. It is a beautiful sunny day here in Winnipeg. Quite frankly, I would not want to be anywhere else.

Bill C-237 is an important piece of legislation. I want to recognize the member for Brampton South, who put such a spirited effort into this bill in the previous legislature. There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever in my mind that her heart and mind are with this issue. I have heard her speak to it on several occasions, both inside and outside of the House of Commons. She is one of the most persistent and tenacious ladies I know, and she is trying to address a critically important issue in health care, no matter what province or territory one lives in.

As a former health critic who tries to understand the issues of health care in a broader sense, I can say that diabetes needs a lot more attention. We need to see different levels of government working together, not just the federal government working with the provinces and territories. We need to incorporate indigenous community leaders to be able to deal with even municipal levels of governments. Our school trustees, school divisions and education are so vitally important to the issue of diabetes.

The bill, although it is not complicated, if passed, would have a profound and positive impact on all Canadians in all regions of our country. We are not talking about dozens, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, but millions of Canadians who are impacted directly by diabetes, not to mention the indirect impacts on families

and friends. Suffice it to say that this disease affects all of us directly or indirectly in one way or another.

The costs of ignoring the issue of diabetes are astronomical. because it can lead to heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, eye issues, dental disease, and diseases related to nerves, legs and feet. From a personal point of view, one of the first real experiences I had regarding the severity of diabetes was when a good friend of mine had his leg amputated, which came as a bit of a shock to me. More of a shock was when, a couple of years later, he passed away. From what I understand, this was attributed to diabetes.

This is life-saving, and the impact it could have is profound. That is why it is important that all members of the House recognize the true value of Bill C-237. I assure the member for Brampton South that I will be supporting this important piece of legislation. I would be shocked and disappointed if any members of the House did not support it.

In essence, the bill is asking for the design and development of a national framework to support improved access for all Canadians to diabetes prevention and treatment. How could one not support that? If we truly understand the issues of health care and look at the mobility of people today, it is a no-brainer that we need this type of legislation to move us forward.

• (1105)

There are even some time frames within the legislation for when it is passed and receives royal assent. Twelve months after coming into force, there would be a report setting out that national framework, which would be prepared and ultimately presented to Parliament. There is a sense of accountability from the Minister of Health, and a time frame for when the minister must report on the effectiveness of that strategy.

I believe these things would have a very strong impact on all of our communities. This one of the reasons this is something we should get behind.

Establishing a national framework would provide the Government of Canada the opportunity to work closely with many different diabetes stakeholders. There are some fantastic groups out there. I suspect one only needs to talk to the member for Brampton South, who could cite some of the stakeholders, individuals and constituents she has met with to address this particular issue.

Often when I make reference to stakeholders, I make reference to the different levels of government. We have some very strong advocates in the Canadian Diabetes Association and many other organizations that support people and advocate on this particular disease.

Private Members' Business

We need to be bringing those organizations together, and bringing in the different levels of government, including indigenous communities, as I consider them a level of government equal to the national government, to have that important dialogue on diabetes and understand the very basics. Back in the mid-1990s, general education on diabetes was in great need. Even with Google today, the need is still there.

We need to see this legislation passed. I look forward to it going to committee and hopefully getting through the House.

• (1110)

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to continue debate on Bill C-237, which was brought forward by the member for Brampton South, and to listen to the previous member. I agree with him. I do not see much to disagree with in this private member's bill. It was in the format of a motion in the previous Parliament, and I know the member for Brampton South is well-meaning in the work she is attempting to have the House pass to committee to study this issue.

The contents create more reports to Parliament and parliamentarians in which we would get further information, hopefully from government sources, that will track and provide very specific timetables and details in the content of this report, which I am all for.

Generally speaking, we find that in government legislation there is simply an ask for a report to be made to Parliament, but often it does not ask for much detail. This one does. It has five points that would be in the report, including an explanation of diabetes and prediabetes. It also asks for things like data on the promotion of research, prevention and treatment. There are a lot of good things this bill is attempting to do.

It could have also asked the Canada Revenue Agency to provide more information on the disability tax credit, which we know many diabetics would like to use. In 2017 or 2018 the Liberal government made changes, and thousands with type 2 diabetes were no longer able to obtain the DTC.

We also know that the DTC and the registered disability savings plan are two very important programs that a lot of people with serious disabilities make use of, and the DTC maximum payable tax benefit in 2019 was \$8,416. This is a substantial amount of money to help people with a disability. For constituents with type 1 and type 2 diabetes, it is a very serious disability.

A mom came to one of my town halls, and at a later point to an annual general meeting in my local association, and she explained how difficult it is to live with a daughter who has diabetes. It involves waking up in the middle of the night because an alarm would go off on the diabetic pump. It is trying to ensure that they have enough insulin, especially after eating.

It is a serious condition, but I do not think many Canadians really understand the depth of how bad it can go. The member for Winnipeg North spoke to how serious this condition can be because of the complications that arise from being a diabetic, and of one of his friends having had a leg amputated.

I have a friend who was diagnosed later in life, and he had half of his foot amputated because of diabetes, so we know it is a very serious condition. Diabetes Canada and JDRF have done extensive, profound work to try to sensitize Canadians and governments across Canada to how serious this condition is, but also to the weight it places on our health care systems. It is one of the fastest-rising chronic conditions in our health care system, and it is a big driver of Canadian health care costs.

If we look at Diabetes 360°, I think Diabetes Canada has put forward an excellent plan on it. This framework could be used to further those types of private sector projects that are trying to gather more support, both from government and from private sources, to ensure that we deal with the rising tide of diabetes diagnoses across our country.

There is a Yiddish proverb that says, "Spare us what we can learn to endure." Diabetes is a difficult condition to endure. I have kids who have a chronic kidney condition, so I have an inkling of what goes into trying to manage a condition like this. A framework to Parliament is a simple ask by the member from the back benches in this Parliament for the government to build information and report it back to Parliament so we can have good, solid evidence for decisions to be made in the future.

The disability tax credit is one of the key tools being used by those with a disability across Canada. Members will know I proposed Bill C-399 in the last Parliament. It never came to a vote because I drew too high a ballot count. It would have made changes to the DTC specific to diabetics. This is where it ties in with the national framework that the member is asking the House to pass to committee.

• (1115)

Making it easier to access the disability tax credit, or any type of disability program that the federal government could run, should be addressed directly in the framework. I would hope that the reports provided to Parliament in the future would specifically address the disability tax credit, how it functions, and how it addresses issues and conditions such as diabetes.

An important piece of evidence to be tracked is the cost per person, across all of Canada's health care systems, of a diabetic's condition as it worsens in later years. Its annual cost to the health care system would lead to better decision-making at the front end when considering different types of insulin and technology, and whether there is a government role or support that could be provided to bridge the gap for those who cannot afford it.

One of the recommendations in the pre-budget report from the finance committee in this Parliament was to make the disability tax credit refundable. Because tax credits are administered by the Canada Revenue Agency, those types of decisions would be easier to make if a national framework, and a report from a national framework specifically on diabetes, provided information and evidence from the DTC program on the top 10 doctors in Canada who are approving the six-page form for the DTC, and if they are approving them specifically for diabetes. That would offer an excellent opportunity for parliamentarians to reach out to those doctors and ask them to describe their experience filling out these applications, how serious the condition is, what the downside is and what it can lead to. That would be an interesting data point, and we cannot easily get that information without having something like a national framework that produces evidence.

As I said, I would like to see the Canada Revenue Agency compelled, through a report tabled in Parliament through this national framework, to provide such information. I would also like to see which provinces are applying the most for this one condition, specifically diabetes. JDRC, Diabetes Canada and other stakeholder groups have all asked in the past for more information to be provided to us so that we could make better decisions.

Often, I find that the Canada Revenue Agency is a black box: It does not like to reveal any type of information. A few years ago, the Auditor General reported on the DTC and the program's performance and administration. It was not very good. It was not what we parliamentarians would expect to see in the administration of such an important tax credit for Canadians.

A report like this is important. It is beneficial. I applaud the member for bringing it forward. I have no doubt that we will be able to pass it to committee, and I am hoping at that stage there would be further consideration given to perhaps including a specific mention of the disability tax credit and other federal government programs specific to diabetics, and that we could address the specific lack of information in the framework. When the bill returns to the House and we have our final say before it heads to the Senate, we could add that important piece of information. The changes that were made a few years ago by the Canada Revenue Agency, as directed by the government, really hurt the case for thousands of diabetics across the country who were removed from the disability tax credit. It would be good for us all to have that type of information available.

I will be voting for this private member's bill. It is a good bill. It provides the foundations for better work to be done at committee to add the disability tax credit angle. Again, spare us not what we can endure to learn. Diabetes is a very serious chronic medical condition, and it is about time we had a framework in this country to deal with it.

• (1120)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Madam Speaker, it is important for me to speak to this issue this morning. I thank the member for Brampton South for giving us the opportunity to do so.

Private Members' Business

Unfortunately, despite the many efforts that have been made to combat diabetes in Quebec and Canada, this chronic disease continues to progress. The percentage of people with diabetes continues to grow. Nearly 8% of Canadians have either type 1 or type 2 diabetes. More than 888,000 Quebecers and 4 million Canadians have diabetes.

Today, the treatment and management of this disease and its impacts impose a financial burden estimated at \$3 billion a year in direct and indirect costs. Diabetics require a range of health care services, mainly to treat and manage the disease but also to diagnose and treat related complications.

The direct costs are those associated with the health care services covered by public or private health insurance or by the individuals and their families. The indirect costs are those that are not related to health care and have an impact on the economy and individuals when a loss of productivity arises as a result of the disease, a disability or premature death.

Canada has a long history of fighting diabetes. In 1999, 4% of the population had diabetes, and that number has doubled in the past 20 years. Grabbing the bull by the horns, the authorities created Canada's first diabetes strategies, which involved collecting and sharing information and mobilizing stakeholders. Ten years later, in 2009, efforts to fight diabetes were augmented by funding for research and public awareness. Since 2019, organizations have been calling on the Government of Canada to set up a strategic framework and fund a national strategy. That brings us to today. Bill C-237 would create a Canadian national framework for diabetes.

What is a national framework? Its goal would be to improve access to diabetes prevention and treatment. That is a good thing. We have to act fast, because the incidence of diabetes is rising at an alarming rate. I would point out that the purpose of Bill C-237 is to have Canada's Parliament recognize the need to be proactive in the fight against diabetes and to have the Government of Canada develop and implement a national diabetes framework.

The bill provides for the strategy to be designed in consultation with the provincial governments and Quebec. Organizations, provincial governments and the federal government must work together to develop this national framework and determine the broad themes to be included, such as education about diabetes, identification of needs, promotion of research, promotion of knowledge sharing and analyses of what is already being done to achieve health care equality.

Private Members' Business

The bill gives the government one year to develop the strategic framework and five years to report on its effectiveness. This is all well and good. The Bloc Québécois supports Bill C-237 as long as the Canadian national framework does not infringe on Quebec's jurisdiction over health care. Before the bill can move forward, the Bloc Québécois must ensure that the Canadian national framework reflects the demands of Quebec and respects its jurisdiction. As far as Quebec is concerned, the federal government should only be involved in the areas of prevention and research.

I want to acknowledge the efforts of the hon. member for Brampton South. I would like to highlight what our colleague has done in the fight against diabetes. She worked in the health sector for 15 years and devoted part of her career to the cause of diabetes, since it is very important to her. She took part in the Diabetes Canada 2018 forum. She has also moved three motions on diabetes to raise public awareness. She wrote a report entitled "Defeating Diabetes". It presented a cross-section of the various stakeholders that are likely to make an impact on the issue. We at the Bloc Québécois believe that her desire to contribute to the cause is sincere and that, at the very least, she knows what she is talking about.

More than ever, we must fund research. The way we beat diabetes is by ensuring better prevention and making discoveries that will lead to a cure. We must give more funding to research so we can contribute to the global effort on diabetes research. This research is making progress on many fronts. The latest advances include improved methods for insulin delivery and control of blood sugar, as well as better insulin pumps. The most significant breakthrough in all this is the transplantation of insulin-producing cells.

• (1125)

A number of researchers are working on transforming stem cells into healthy beta cells that can be transplanted into patients. We can now manage insulin-producing cells that act like the beta cells we have in the pancreas.

These are promising advances, but we cannot overlook any aspects of diabetes. Research is needed so that we can learn more about the mechanism of diabetes and expand our knowledge in such areas as pharmaceutical research, diabetes screening, food, weight issues and physical activity programs tailored to people with diabetes.

Let us talk about the close relationship between obesity and diabetes. The governments of Quebec and Canada have developed strategies to promote healthy lifestyles among Quebeckers and Canadians. Governments must continue to promote awareness, which is not easy to do, since big multinationals bombard us with advertising and sell us high-calorie foods that can cause obesity and, as a result, diabetes.

Governments must continue promoting physical activity through awareness campaigns and also through enhanced tax credits for sports. The rise of type 2 diabetes among young children is alarming, so we need to get kids moving. Governments also have to continue promoting healthy eating and a healthy weight. They must also provide financial support to organizations like Diabète Québec and Diabetes Canada.

I would be remiss if I did not remind the federal government that it needs to provide more help for Quebeckers and Canadians, and in particular indigenous communities, which have much higher rates of diabetes than the general population.

I want to throw out a question about COVID-19 vaccinations for us to think about. Should people with chronic diseases like diabetes get priority for the COVID-19 vaccine?

For all of these reasons, the Bloc Québécois is in favour of developing a strategy, provided that it respects the provinces' demands and the division of powers.

I would also like to point out the work being done by local and regional stakeholders. I especially want to acknowledge the work of my friend Anne-Marie Trépanier, who has had type 1 diabetes since forever. Many people are battling diabetes and must develop a different lifestyle. We must be there for them because, from what I have understood by talking with my friend, they require a significant amount of psychological and physical support. Associations play a fundamental role in these areas. In terms of awareness of this disease, we must also think of local associations, which offer essential services.

I will conclude by mentioning that this disease can strike anyone at any time. There is a strong link between cardiovascular disease and diabetes. My father passed away 10 years ago, and in his final days we suspected that diabetes was involved. Diabetes probably accelerated his failing health and contributed to his heart attack.

It is important to invest in research, especially in diabetes management, which could have given my father better health in his final days and extended his life so that he might have been able to enjoy his grandchildren for a few more years.

[English]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Resuming debate, the hon. member for Windsor West. I will take this moment to wish him and his wife a happy anniversary.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Madam Speaker, that is very gracious of you. I appreciate it, because it is a special day. I want to thank Terry for 24 years of putting up with this. I will take these glasses off because they will fog up as I talk in the debate today.

Private Members' Business

It is a great debate. It is something that I think the House will support, but it is also something that I am hoping, after my 18 years here in the chamber, will actually get some action. How many times do we have to talk about diabetes and issues like it and not have any real action. Why are we waiting? What will change between now and 10 years from now? Nothing. We know diabetes has a significant consequence on our population. We know it has a significant consequence on our economy and a significant consequence on what we do every single day, yet we still do not have a national strategy. We have not supported it through either a provincial or a federal plan.

I do not see this as a jurisdictional issue, whether it be Quebec, British Columbia, Ontario, Saskatchewan or Newfoundland. I see it as an issue that kind of brought me to politics. As an employment specialist for persons with disabilities and as a PSW, I met people with diabetes who had extra complications in their lives. Why we would not provide the support for medications and proactive engagement in their treatment is beyond me as a legislator in this House and in this chamber. Having discussions and spending time on this issue is kind of incomprehensible in many respects. We know that if we actually do the right things, we can support people. The modest things that are necessary would give them extra life, extra employment, inclusion and, most importantly, the sense of fulfillment that we all enjoy.

We know that the percentage of our population who have diabetes is rising and we know that there are solutions for that, yet here we are today, debating a bill, which is fine, but we are not acting. That is where I have an issue with this situation right now. It is that we need to move forward.

We all have a unified vision that this is a serious issue for all Canadians, and the House and the chamber acknowledge that, but we are still going through a process that is very draconian with regard to getting results for people who are suffering from diabetes. I am really happy to discuss this because it still raises this issue and brings us another step forward, but I hope we can actually go farther than that.

When we look at the issue of diabetes, we see it is one of those things that is affected by the consumer element and the products and foods being pushed onto people. At the same time, we expect people to manage their disease with medication, but some people do not have any choice. Some of us can drive to a grocery store or elsewhere to get food and other supplements that are better choices, rather than having to go to stores in their own neighbourhoods, but other people cannot, because they have to take a bus or rely on other people or do not have the support or experience to look at all the ingredients on the labels of the products they need.

The situation is that diabetes is different for those privileged to have an income that allows them to deal with it through a logical plan and provides supports to do those things and make those choices. Then there are other people who have to deal with it but cannot get out of their apartment. They are stuck with limited choices. They do not have the choices that other people have to help themselves. They know that, so they have to do the things necessary just to manage the situation.

• (1130)

I am hoping this motion will propel the government to do something. We can have lots of slogans, different motions, committee studies, all of those different things, but we know diabetes affects people right now, as I am speaking. There are solutions for it, like insulin, which is a pride of our country in terms of its development and use in society, but it is not without cost or effect on populations.

Young people with juvenile diabetes organize and spend their time and their youth fighting for political change by us here, which is a sad thing. How wrong is that? How wrong is it that we are asking young people to spend their time and their youth advocating a public policy we know is true and just? That is what gives me difficulty in this whole situation and what is going on here when we have all of those tools.

We have seen the things that were impossible before COVID-19 and now are possible. We have bailed out banks. A good example is Bell. With \$112 million of government assistance, Bell laid off people and made \$5 billion in profit, but at the same time we cannot afford strategies for diabetes. Those are good examples of what was impossible before COVID-19 and are possible now.

I am hoping we will see the light with regard to diabetes through the legislation before us, Bill C-237, and other bills that come before the House. I am hoping we will actually start to act. It is important, because none of the debate here really matters, in the sense that it does not affect an individual at the end of the day unless it reaches the goal line. Hopefully, the discussion today will translate to real results.

The Liberal administration had a supermajority in the past Parliament but now has a minority, so we can push things like this forward. I am hoping the government will do that. I do not think we need a five-year study to tell us the effects of diabetes. We do not need more research and development to understand its connection to human bodies and how it affects us as citizens in our communities. We need action.

The discussion here today should be about whether we are going to act or not. That should be the benchmark. The benchmark should be whether we are going to act.

And we should act on this now, not in five years but in five weeks. There should be an initiative to support what needs to be done. The research is there and the population is there, and we can certainly see the inequity in the demographics and research, which shows that people can deal with this issue better if they have money versus not having money, which puts a greater onus on us from the expectations of the population.

Private Members' Business

It is of even greater importance than ever before for us to act now. Because of COVID-19, we know what we can do to prevent health issues. We can do that with pharmacare, dental care and a series of things, but if we do not act, it does not mean anything. That is the reality. Why do we need another study to understand diabetes? I do not understand that. I will support this bill and the NDP will support it. We will be behind it, pushing really hard for real results, but action is necessary now. It will save us money and give us the opportunity to save lives. I am thankful that this bill has come forward.

• (1135)

Ms. Pam Damoff (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indigenous Services, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to begin by acknowledging that I am speaking today on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. As someone who lives and works on the traditional territories of indigenous peoples, I recognize my responsibility to acknowledge and listen to their perspectives and interests.

I am thankful as well for the opportunity to speak in favour of the member for Brampton South's private member's bill to establish a framework for diabetes. I also want to commend her. Since she was elected in 2015, she has been tireless in raising awareness about diabetes and in advocating, as the chair of the diabetes caucus, to ensure the issue receives the attention it deserves. On this International Women's Day, I am so proud to serve in this Parliament with her.

Diabetes is an important public health issue that affects millions of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. Diabetes happens when the body loses its ability to produce or properly use insulin, a hormone that controls blood glucose levels. When diabetes goes undetected or if action is not taken to keep it in check, serious complications can develop, and in some cases, premature death can occur.

As we know, there are three types of diabetes. Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disease in which the body is unable to produce enough insulin. It is usually diagnosed in children and young adults and is not preventable. My cousin Adam Fraser and my friend Dave Millar live with type 1 diabetes, and I have seen the challenges they face to manage their disease.

Type 2 diabetes generally develops in adulthood and accounts for 90% of all individuals living with diabetes. It is caused by several factors, including obesity, ethnic background, a family history of type 2 diabetes and other environmental factors.

Gestational diabetes is diabetes that is first diagnosed during pregnancy and usually disappears after delivery.

Many Canadians live with the impacts of this disease. Diabetes or prediabetes affects one in three Canadians. One in two young adults will develop the disease in their remaining lifetime.

Research has shown that some indigenous peoples and Canadians are more susceptible to diabetes than others in the general population. First nations and Métis people, Black Canadians and South Asian Canadians have significantly higher rates of type 2 diabetes than other Canadians. The increased risk for type 2 diabetes in these groups is often a result of inequities in social determinants of health related to income, education and the social and physical en-

vironment. These inequities can limit the ability of individuals to access nutritious foods and be physically active, and can increase the risk of obesity, diabetes and other major chronic health conditions.

Higher rates of diabetes among first nations and Métis people reflect the long-standing effects of colonization that disrupted the transmission of culture across generations and resulted in physical changes to the environments of their communities. Among other negative impacts, these factors limit the availability of and access to important sources of nutritious foods as well as the ability to engage in traditional active lifestyles.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and unmasked the challenges faced by people living with diabetes. We now know that people living with diabetes are at increased risk of developing severe symptoms and dying from this infectious disease. We also know that people living with diabetes can face significant challenges to participating fully in the economic and social life of Canada. This debilitating disease exacts a significant toll on our nation's economy and health care system.

I have had the privilege to work with Kimberley Hanson from Diabetes Canada and Mike Swartz from my riding to advance their Diabetes 360° initiative. Both Kim and Mike live with diabetes and have advocated that our government needs to do more. I agree. I sincerely hope our government provides funding to implement Diabetes 360° in our next budget.

A recent study estimated that new cases of diabetes between 2011 and 2021 account for \$15.36 billion in health care costs. Beyond the immeasurable human costs of this disease, if prevalence grows by 40% in the next decade, as projected, the health care costs associated with treating people with diabetes in Canada will top \$39 billion by 2028.

To reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, the most common and preventable form of the disease, it is important to help Canadians in every way to develop healthier lifestyles. Canadians of all backgrounds and in all regions must have the opportunity to find ways to sit less, move more, eat more healthily and stop smoking.

During the pandemic, at a time when we encourage people to stay home, we can find ways to be active safely, such as going skating, skiing or snowshoeing or bundling up for a hike. Being active and promoting healthier weight are fundamental in helping to prevent type 2 diabetes.

• (1140)

Canada was the first country to develop 24-hour movement guidelines for the early years, children and youth. Through additional guidelines released last year, Canada now has a complete set of recommendations for physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep across all age groups.

These guidelines are important in helping Canadians integrate healthy behaviours into their everyday lives, and reduce their risk of major chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes. Healthy eating is also a key factor in preventing diabetes.

The Government of Canada is taking action to help Canadians eat better and access nutritious foods. Through our healthy eating strategy led by Health Canada, we have strengthened nutrition labelling on food products, eliminated industrially produced trans fats in foods, and are working toward restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

In 2019, we updated and published a new Canada food guide, based on the best evidence available to promote healthy eating. Further, to help Canadians consume less sodium, last fall we released revised sodium targets for processed foods. The Government of Canada is also working with its partners to promote healthy living and prevent chronic diseases, such as diabetes.

Being aware of one's risk for diabetes is also key to helping people take action to prevent the disease. The Public Health Agency of Canada, in collaboration with its partners, developed and promotes a diabetes risk questionnaire called CANRISK to help Canadians understand their level of risk for developing prediabetes and type 2 diabetes.

The Government of Canada is also investing in innovative community-based programming and public education to test and scale up projects that help to prevent chronic diseases, such as diabetes, and encourage healthy living choices. The government is providing extensive support for diabetes research. From 2014 to 2019, the Government of Canada, through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, invested approximately \$229 million in diabetes research.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the discovery of insulin. I grew up in London, Ontario, the home of Sir Frederick Banting. One of my high school's rivals was Sir Frederick Banting Secondary School. Canadians should indeed be proud of the work that Banting and Best did with their discovery of insulin.

The Government of Canada is working with partners to commemorate this monumental Canadian innovation that has saved millions of lives worldwide. However, while this milestone is indeed worthy of celebration and a source of pride, we have more to do. Diabetes Canada has stated:

When the world looks to Canada in 2021 to see how we are faring at treating diabetes 100 years later, Canadians will have less to feel proud of. Double the number of Canadians lives with diabetes than did 15 years ago, and Canada is in the worst third of developed countries for both prevalence and costs of treating the disease. The problem of diabetes is very bad, and rapidly getting worse. We need to do something bold to address this problem and mark this important anniversary in 2021.

Private Members' Business

Eleven million Canadians are living with diabetes or prediabetes. Chances are that the disease affects someone or someone we know.

I am pleased to support Bill C-237 as the government continues to undertake meaningful efforts toward preventing and reducing the impact of diabetes and other chronic diseases on Canadians. This bill reminds us that we need to increase our efforts and work together, alongside individuals living with diabetes, to reduce the burden of this devastating disease and improve health outcomes for Canadians and indigenous peoples.

Finally, I would like to again thank the member for Brampton South for bringing this bill before the House of Commons and for her tireless advocacy.

• (1145)

Mr. Ted Falk (Provencher, CPC): Madam Speaker, Mitch Beauchemin was a lifelong resident of Ile des Chênes, Manitoba, in my riding of Provencher. His family and friends described him as a quiet, gentle and generous individual, always ready to lend a helping hand, yet never needing recognition.

I am going to give him a little recognition this morning. Mitch was a member of the Ile des Chênes Knights of Columbus Council and an advocate for Diabetes Manitoba. He was passionate about supporting those living with diabetes, and he actively lobbied the government on behalf of those with the disease.

Mitch was not just an advocate; he lived with type 1 diabetes for 40 years. Then, early last year, Mitch was able to receive a kidney and pancreas transplant, effectively closing the chapter on decades of managing his diabetes.

Sadly, he passed away this past September, but not without leaving his mark. In 2016, I was invited to be one of several guest speakers at a fundraiser Mitch organized called "Let's Get Pumped", with proceeds going to the Canadian Diabetes Association. It had all the trappings: a luncheon, live music, speakers and a silent auction, and a 50/50 draw. He was quoted in the Niverville Citizen at the time, saying that he wanted to do this event, not only because of his own experience but also for all diabetics in the province.

Beyond this event, my office heard from Mitch from time to time, always making sure that diabetes was top of mind for decision-makers. Though I know many, including his wife Cathy, are missing him dearly, his memory lives on.

Private Members' Business

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to speak to Bill C-237, the national framework for diabetes bill. I would like to think that Mitch would be pleased to see this conversation taking place today in this House, in Parliament. I want to thank my colleague, the member for Brampton South, for bringing forward this legislation. Her advocacy has been generating general awareness about diabetes for several years now.

As Diabetes Canada so succinctly puts it, “Diabetes is a disease in which your body either can't produce insulin or can't properly use the insulin it produces.”

Some 11 million Canadians are living with diabetes or prediabetes. If we consider an average 24-hour period, about 20 Canadians will die as a result of diabetes complications, 620 will receive a diabetes diagnosis, and 14 of them will have their lower limbs amputated. These numbers represent real people, family members, friends and neighbours whose lives have been lost or dramatically changed as a result of this disease.

The national framework for diabetes bill seeks to develop a national framework designed to support improved access to diabetes prevention and treatment to ensure better health.

It looks to include measures to explain what diabetes and prediabetes are, identify the training and education needs of health care professionals related to the prevention and treatment of diabetes, promote research and improve data collection.

Bill C-237 would also require the Minister of Health to hold at least one conference with relevant stakeholders to develop this framework, and within one year from when this act comes into force, the minister would have to report to the House on this framework. This is an important accountability mechanism that would ensure that the minister would do the work necessary to build this framework, although we must also be wary that there is no guarantee that the minister would meaningfully address issues that diabetics face here in Canada.

Canadians should have stable and reasonable access to the health care and the treatments they need. By working with stakeholders like Diabetes Canada, we can take concrete steps forward to develop a plan for the prevention and management of diabetes in Canada through a national strategy.

When the health committee studied this subject in 2019, it made important recommendations that bear mentioning. The first one was that the Government of Canada, in partnership with provinces and territories, and in collaboration with stakeholders such as Diabetes Canada, plan and implement an approach to the prevention and management of diabetes in Canada through a national diabetes strategy.

Second, as part of a national diabetes strategy, the Government of Canada, in partnership with the provinces and territories, and in collaboration with stakeholders such as Diabetes Canada, should explore options for establishing a national diabetes registry for people living with both type 1 and type 2 diabetes; explore options to reduce diabetes-related stigma; and, finally, explore options to improve public health awareness and education on diabetes, particularly through community programming, including public awareness of the relationship between nutrition and diabetes.

• (1150)

The bill serves to answer the call of these 2019 recommendations, but it is worth noting that programming already exists to address common risk factors of diabetes within the integrated strategy on healthy living and chronic disease. In going forward with the bill, there must be clarity about how the national strategy would tie in with existing programming.

A number of previous governments have taken important steps forward on diabetes as well. In 1999, the federal government created the Canadian diabetes strategy to further the prevention, early detection and self-management of diabetes and its complications, and national surveillance. It committed \$115 million over five years for that strategy. In 2005, the Canadian diabetes strategy became part of the integral strategy on healthy living and chronic disease. Funding for the Canadian diabetes strategy was renewed in 2005, and \$18 million a year was introduced for the Public Health Agency of Canada's diabetes programming. Funding for diabetes research is also disbursed through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. In 2010-11, under the previous Conservative government, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research funded approximately \$44 million in diabetes research.

As I reviewed this history, I was struck by the gap between the previous Conservative government's funding and where we find ourselves today. When the health committee's recommendations that I highlighted earlier were laid out, the committee had a Liberal majority, which was supported by Conservative members of the health committee, and it was understood that the government needed to act. Unfortunately, we have not seen much action by the current Liberal government in recent years. As a government, it could have introduced a government bill, but no such bill was introduced—not when the Liberals had a majority and not now in the current Parliament. Had they chosen to introduce a government bill, Parliament could already have had work under way to develop this framework. Bill C-237 is important, but Canadians with diabetes also know that it is late.

It is also troubling that the Liberal government's most memorable connection to diabetes was when it oversaw a Canada Revenue Agency crackdown on access to the disability tax credit, which is a non-refundable tax credit that helps persons with diabetes reduce the amount of income tax they might have to pay. In 2017, the CRA began restricting access to this disability tax credit, which affected hundreds of Canadians living with diabetes and other rare diseases. This happened because officials changed the interpretation of the rules around life-sustaining therapy and associated requirements for those diseases. Our Conservative opposition sounded the alarm and stood with organizations demanding that Canadians continue to receive the benefits they ought to have access to. Given this history, I think there would be value in including an amendment to ensure that the Canada Revenue Agency is administering the disability tax credit fairly and that the disability tax credit is designed to help as many persons with diabetes as possible. This is something that the committee can look at when the bill is referred to it. I think we can all see how this would give greater certainty to those folks who rely on the disability tax credit.

It is my duty as an opposition member to constructively critique the proposal. I have highlighted where I think it could be better, but I do not want to dwell on that. I appreciate that the member for Brampton South is stepping up in the absence of action from her government. She is using the opportunity that she has been afforded through the private members' bill lottery to move the dial forward on this issue, and I commend her for that. At a time when so much attention has been dedicated to COVID-19, it can be easy to forget that the daily challenges faced by individuals with diabetes have continued without their receiving much media attention and without widely publicized diagnosis.

The final word is this: There is merit to committed and coordinated federal leadership to tackle diabetes in Canada. We have an opportunity to move the ball forward and a strategy that could help support those living with diabetes and help prevent millions of potential cases. As I said before, we are talking about real people, and this could better the lives of millions today and in the future. I encourage all members to move the bill forward to committee so that we can take a long-overdue step.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Resuming debate.

The hon. member for Brampton South has five minutes for her right of reply.

• (1155)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank all the members who spoke to this bill: the members for South Okanagan—West Kootenay, Winnipeg North, Calgary Shepard, Abitibi—Témiscamingue, Windsor West, Oakville North—Burlington and Provencher, and the members who spoke during the first hour of debate. The member for West Nova, whom I serve with on the health committee, spoke about his son's diagnosis. The member for Shefford told us about her relative's diagnosis. My friend from Brampton North told us about her grandmother and her childhood friend who would later pass from complications related to diabetes. There are too many heartbreaking stories like these.

Private Members' Business

Almost 11 million Canadians live with diabetes or prediabetes. The number of diagnoses has doubled in the past 20 years, and every three minutes another Canadian is added to the list. In my city of Brampton, every sixth Bramptonian lives with this disease.

For 18 years, working in health care, I saw how diabetes impacts Canadians. Often I would see patients with cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, amputation or high blood pressure, and diabetes was often an underlying and complicating condition. Diabetes also disproportionately impacts Canada's indigenous and racialized communities because of socio-economic factors.

In the last term, I met with Canadians through my cross-country consultation and with world-leading experts through international conferences. If we rededicate our efforts in reducing the number of cases and improving treatment and care for those living with this disease, we make progress in the battle against diabetes.

I would like to take a moment to thank the individuals who have supported this bill and helped it come together. I want to thank the mayor of the city of Brampton, Mayor Brown; city council members, including Councillor Medeiros; the Peel medical officer of health, Dr. Lawrence Loh; great advocates like Laura Syron, Russell Williams and Kim Hanson at Diabetes Canada; organizations like JDRF, CNIB and the Canadian Nurses Association; and of course my colleagues in the all-party diabetes caucus and the JDRF caucus, as well as many others.

As someone who has served on the Standing Committee on Health since 2016, I was proud when we brought forward a report calling for a strategy, such as Diabetes 360°, to fight diabetes. It was concluded that diabetes would cost Canadians almost \$40 billion a year by 2028. We need to work with the provinces and territories, indigenous groups, medical professionals and community organizations so that we can best serve patients living with diabetes and advance the research that will end it.

Bill C-237 calls on the government to do that and create a national framework for diabetes. As parliamentarians, let us recommit to helping everyone battling this chronic disease, whether they are patients, doctors, researchers or loved ones, and continue fighting it so that more Canadians can lead a healthy life.

Privilege

This year we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the discovery of insulin by Frederick Banting, which is recognized as one of the most important medical discoveries of the 20th century. Since then, we have continued to lead the way with stem cell research, which could one day lead to a cure.

Canada gave insulin to the world. Why can we not lead the way in defeating diabetes? I hope all members will join me in supporting my bill, Bill C-237.

• (1200)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to remind members, if they know they are coming up to speak, to make sure their mikes are selected correctly before they start, to ensure that the interpreters are able to interpret what they are saying in both official languages. We do appreciate the fact that documentation is being provided ahead of time, which means that if there is an issue, the interpreters are still able to continue to interpret.

The question is on the motion.

[*Translation*]

If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the motion be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, I request a recorded division.

[*Translation*]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Pursuant to order made Monday, January 25, the recorded division stands deferred until Wednesday, March 10, at the expiry of the time provided for Oral Questions.

* * *

• (1205)

PRIVILEGE

INTERPRETATION SERVICES IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Madam Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege following a point of order raised on Thursday, February 25 regarding the use of masks during speeches in the House.

We are dealing with a fundamental issue here, and we ask that the Speaker rule on it. The House of Commons interpreters must be allowed to do their jobs in compliance with the Official Languages Act and out of respect for both official languages. It is clear that the use of certain masks is impeding the interpretation of the proceedings of the House, and the events of February 25 confirm that.

Last Thursday, the Liberal member for Kingston and the Islands made some comments that call into question the fundamental right of members of this House to properly understand the debates. He said, and I quote:

...this is the second time during the last several weeks the Bloc Québécois has brought up that wearing a mask is what is interfering with the ability of the interpreters to do their work. I do not know if it is up to us to decide what is effective or not. I do not think anybody in this room is qualified to assess if it is specifically a mask that is interfering with that.

The Bloc Québécois is of the opinion that the use of certain masks undermines the interpreters' ability to do their job. As my colleague from Rivière-des-Mille-Îles said, "Masks muffle sound. Thicker masks muffle it even more. The interpreters cannot make out the words. It is as simple as that."

Unlike the member for Kingston and the Islands, I do actually believe that the Chair is well positioned to indicate to all hon. members the appropriate balance between the use of masks and the right to interpretation services.

I would like to remind the House that interpretation in the House is an essential service. In 1958, the House agreed to set up a simultaneous interpretation system for both official languages. The Official Languages Act states that English and French are the official languages of Parliament and protects the right of members to use either language in any debates and other proceedings of Parliament. The act goes even further, guaranteeing in part I the right to simultaneous interpretation of parliamentary debates and other proceedings. I would like to read the beginning of section 4 of the act, which relates to parliamentary debates and proceedings:

4 (1) English and French are the official languages of Parliament, and everyone has the right to use either of those languages in any debates and other proceedings of Parliament.

(2) Facilities shall be made available for the simultaneous interpretation of the debates and other proceedings of Parliament from one official language into the other.

For one thing, the interpretation service enables all MPs to understand their colleagues' speeches. When minor technical difficulties crop up, the House typically suspends debate momentarily so the interpreters can do their work.

There are also times when the Speaker brings in new procedures in the interpretation service so that our practices can better meet the House's emerging requirements. In a June 20, 2017, ruling in connection with a question of privilege raised on June 8, 2017, by the hon. member for Winnipeg-Centre regarding the right of members to speak in indigenous languages in the House, Speaker Regan said the following about interpretation services:

This critical service, which began by way of an order of the House when members unanimously agreed to a government motion on August 11, 1958, continues to provide integral support to members as they search to understand and participate in parliamentary proceedings.

Speaker Regan also said that members need "not only to be free to speak but also to be understood." He added that the "right of members to speak is not what is now being questioned; rather, it is the right of members to be understood immediately when they speak in a language other than one of the two official languages that is being raised."

Another aspect of interpretation services is to ensure that hon. members can freely express themselves and be understood.

• (1210)

In its June 2018 report entitled "The Use of Indigenous Languages in Proceedings of the House of Commons and Committees", the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs stated, and I quote:

Members of the Committee are of the view that all members' ability to effectively carry out their parliamentary functions are adversely affected when they are unable to immediately understand a speech being made by a member in a language recognized by the House other than French and English.

The committee also emphasized the vital work of interpreters:

Currently, the simultaneous interpreters for English and French working in Parliament are required to possess a master's degree from a recognized university program and are certified by Board of Examiners of the Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council. The Committee heard this degree of rigour was important because the consequences of an interpreter committing an error can be significant and because interpreters must be capable of interpreting immediately without the opportunity to refine, edit or revise the interpretation.

A third aspect of interpretation services is that interpreters must be able to do their job properly. Because of the pandemic, Parliament has had to adapt its practices. We are now working in a hybrid Parliament with simultaneous interpretation occurring both off-site and in the House and the debates being broadcast in French and English.

A lot has been accomplished in the past year. The fifth report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, entitled "Parliamentary Duties and the COVID-19 Pandemic", which was presented on May 15, 2020, recommended that the House respect the Official Languages Act during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that simultaneous interpretation of indigenous languages continues during the pandemic. The report also recommended that the minimum standards set by the Clerk of the House, in consultation with the Translation Bureau, be respected by all members and witnesses, for example, with respect to using a headset or microphone; that it be recognized that the burden of simultaneous interpretation during the pandemic is higher for francophone interpreters; and that measures be taken to alleviate this burden and protect the health and physical well-being of parliamentary employees, including the interpreters.

Since then, a new issue has found its way into the House: the wearing of masks and the impact on the ability of interpreters to do their job properly. Last Thursday, the Liberal member for Kingston and the Islands made unfortunate remarks that called into question the fundamental right of members to properly follow the debates in this chamber.

He stated the following:

...this is the second time during the last several weeks the Bloc Québécois has brought up that wearing a mask is what is interfering with the ability of the interpreters to do their work. I do not know if it is up to us to decide what is effective or not. I do not think anybody in this room is qualified to assess if it is specifically a mask that is interfering with that.

Madam Speaker, unlike the member for Kingston and the Islands, I do believe that you are well positioned to indicate to all hon. members the appropriate balance between the use of masks and the right to interpretation services.

I believe that the blue surgical mask is a good compromise for those who want to wear a mask when speaking. I would like to thank the member from Orléans, who clearly understood the Bloc Québécois' arguments about the importance of the interpretation of the House of Commons debates and agreeing to change his mask and wear a blue surgical-type mask.

Privilege

[English]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Madam Speaker, on this question of privilege, I would raise two quick points and then I would ask that perhaps you would hold off on your ruling until I have had more time to digest what the member from the Bloc has said and then respond in due course.

For starters, my comment about how many times the Bloc had intervened on this point was with respect to the fact that a couple of weeks ago Bloc members had an issue with the fact that the member for Ottawa West—Nepean was wearing a mask when she was speaking and then again when the member for Orléans was speaking.

On this side of the House, we are very concerned about the fact that more variants are out there with respect to COVID-19. When I am standing and speaking, there are staff people near me. When the member stood up to speak, there was a staff person two metres in front of her. My understanding of the way the virus is spread, and of course it is just my understanding, is that when I am speaking and projecting, I am possibly putting other people who are in front of me at risk, namely the folks who are making this operation work for us, the people at the table and the individual who is sitting right in front of the member who was just speaking.

Therefore, we have taken the position that until such time that it is deemed safe, it is probably in the best interest of members to wear a mask while they speak. I respect the fact that other members of the House might feel differently, and that is entirely fair. None of us are experts, and we have to get through this in the best way we see fit.

I would leave it at that for now, Madam Speaker, but I would ask that before making a ruling on this, you would let me consider, in more detail, the comments made by the Bloc member so I can respond perhaps more appropriately.

• (1215)

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Speaker, I want to make sure that members understood what was being said. The Bloc Québécois never suggested that the solution was to prohibit members from wearing masks. The solution that was humbly submitted to the Chair was for members to wear a surgical mask. I want to make sure that members understood that the Bloc Québécois is not asking members to take off their masks when they are speaking.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Thank you for your comments.

The member for Kingston and the Islands is free to raise other points. The Speaker of the House will be the one to answer the question.

I appreciate all of the input that was given today. We will consider it because this is a very important issue. The Speaker will get back to the House on this as soon as possible in order to resolve the problem.

*Government Orders***GOVERNMENT ORDERS***[English]***CANADA ELECTIONS ACT**

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Lib.) moved that Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (COVID-19 response), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Madam Speaker, I am pleased to begin the debate at second reading of Bill C-19, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act, COVID-19 response.

Across Canada, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to change the way we live and interact to protect the health and safety of our fellow Canadians. Elections have been no exception.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Canada has experienced two federal by-elections, four provincial general elections and seven local elections. These elections were delivered in a way that aligned with public health guidelines and sought to provide electors, particularly those who are most at risk of infection, with a variety of ways to safely exercise their right to vote.

With lessons learned from other jurisdictions and building on the recommendations of Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, we have an opportunity to take action to ensure that, should an election be required, a federal election held during the current pandemic can be even more safe and more secure. This is why, on December 10, 2020, the government introduced Bill C-19, which, if passed, would temporarily supplement provisions of the Canada Elections Act in support of a safe, secure and accessible election during the pandemic, again, should one be required.

• (1220)

[Translation]

Bill C-19 would reassure voters, election workers and all other participants that the federal electoral process remains safe, secure and accessible, despite the pandemic. To that end, the bill would give voters unprecedented opportunities to vote during the pandemic, whether it be in person or from the comfort and safety of their home.

This bill is based on the October 2020 recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer regarding holding an election in the context of a pandemic and the work of our colleagues, who carried out a study on the same topic.

Bill C-19 contains four elements that I will explain in greater detail: a three-day polling period, the safe administration of the vote to residents of long-term care facilities, increased adaptation powers for the Chief Electoral Officer, and the strengthening of measures related to mail-in voting.

[English]

To ensure that electors who make the choice to go to vote in person are as safe as possible, the legislation proposes spreading the polling period, in other words the voting day, effectively over three days. Instead of one 12-hour voting day, Bill C-19 would establish

a three-day polling period, with eight hours of voting on both Saturday and Sunday and the traditional 12 hours of voting on Monday.

Extending the voting period over three days will prevent overcrowding at polls and support electors and poll workers in maintaining physical distancing protocols. Maintaining the Monday would also ensure access to some individuals who may not be able to vote on a Saturday or Sunday. For instance, it recognizes that electors and candidates alike might have religious obligations that inhibit them from voting or campaigning over a weekend.

In addition, maintaining the Monday recognizes that public transit may offer reduced schedules over the weekend and child care options may also be less over the weekend.

With Bill C-19, we are working to reduce barriers for electors with disabilities and electors with young children who may be facing particular challenges during the pandemic.

As the Chief Electoral Officer indicated in his recent report, a pandemic election could complicate efforts to find polling places and recruit election workers. In light of this, a three-day polling period would provide Elections Canada with more opportunities to identify polling places. As the Chief Electoral Officer has stated, Elections Canada may also seek out non-traditional polling places such as arenas or hotels.

In advance of every general election, Elections Canada recruits more than 230,000 Canadians to work at polls across the country. However, as the Chief Electoral Officer highlighted in his recommendations report, recruiting that many election workers during an ongoing pandemic could possibly provide some challenge.

During the 2019 general election, close to half of those workers were 60 years of age or older. Given that this age cohort is at an elevated risk if they contract COVID-19, these people may be less inclined to work the polls during a pandemic election.

Importantly, at least one legislative change made through the 2018 Elections Modernization Act may help mitigate potential recruitment issues. As colleagues will remember, that bill allowed Elections Canada to hire 16- and 17-year-olds as election workers, opening up an entirely new contingent that may be open to working at the polls.

Finally, a variety of other in-person voting opportunities will be maintained under these proposed changes. This includes four days of advance polling, with 12 hours offered on all four days as well. To account for the three-day polling period, advance polls would then be shifted to the Thursday through Sunday in advance of the first day of the polling period.

Government Orders

As we all know too well, long-term care facilities have borne the brunt of COVID-19. Many deaths associated with the pandemic have been linked to long-term care facilities and many facilities, sadly, continue to endure outbreaks. In an effort to curb infections, many facilities limited access to outside visitors. This has been hard on families and friends because they have been unable to visit a loved one in person. Lockdowns at these facilities and differing public health orders in effect across the country make it necessary for us to ensure these residents can still cast a ballot should an election be held during a pandemic.

Accordingly, Bill C-19 takes a number of steps that would ensure these electors could safely exercise their right to vote.

First, the legislation proposes a 13-day period prior to the beginning of the three-day polling period that would better facilitate the administration of votes in these facilities. Rather than administer the vote in these facilities exclusively on election day, which is now how residents would have been able to vote in past federal elections, the legislation proposes establishing a lengthier period which the vote could be delivered, for example, by mobile polls. As COVID-19 conditions vary across provinces and territories and from region to region, this period would enable Elections Canada to better plan according to the unique context of each long-term care facility.

Bill C-19 would also allow returning officers to establish a polling division composed of a single long-term care facility or of a particular part of a long-term care facility. This amendment recognizes the existence of dedicated quarantine zones in some long-term care facilities and ensures a positive COVID-19 test will not impede a resident of these facilities from being able to vote.

Taken together, these amendments aim to ensure that senior citizens and those living with disabilities in long-term care facilities, citizens who are among the most vulnerable populations in this pandemic, have safe and reliable opportunities to exercise their right to vote.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

At present, subsection 17(1) of the Canada Elections Act authorizes the Chief Electoral Officer to adapt provisions of that act, “if an emergency, an unusual or unforeseen circumstance or an error makes it necessary...for the sole purpose of enabling electors to exercise their right to vote or enabling the counting of votes”.

In the last election, this is one of the powers the Chief Electoral Officer exercised in order to allow workers temporarily residing outside their electoral districts to vote.

However, the ongoing uncertainty generated by the current pandemic justifies broadening the grounds for adapting this legislation.

Under Bill C-19, therefore, the Chief Electoral Officer would have the power to adapt the provisions of the act to ensure the health or safety of electors or election officers.

This amendment is particularly important to protect not only voters but also the election workers and volunteers who dedicate themselves to the democratic process. As I said earlier, Canadian election workers are older on average. If older individuals decide to

work once again during a general election—and of course we hope they will—we must do our best to ensure that they can do this important work safely.

[*English*]

Over the last year and during the pandemic, jurisdictions in Canada and abroad that held elections witnessed a significant increase in the use of mail-in ballots: for example, British Columbia and its October 2020 election, the United States' November 2020 presidential election and, most recently, Newfoundland and Labrador's election. In response, Bill C-19 includes measures designed to improve access to mail-in voting. Mail-in voting, which is safe and secure, has been instrumental in providing opportunities to older electors, electors with disabilities, immunocompromised electors and those who are unable to vote in person because of the pandemic.

While electors in Canada have long been able to vote by mail and Elections Canada has significant experience safely administering the federal vote-by-mail system, Bill C-19 proposes specific amendments in anticipation of a sharp increase in mail-in voting. First, Bill C-19 would allow electors to apply to register to vote by mail online rather than through the mail or in person, as is currently the case. Providing this option would not inhibit registering to vote by mail or in person for those without access to the Internet. By allowing online registration, we are simply giving Canadians one more option to register to vote by mail.

Finally, in an effort to further simplify the registration process, Bill C-19 would provide electors with the ability to use an identification number, such as a driver's licence, to establish their identity and residence when registering to vote by mail. Presently, electors are required to provide a copy of their ID when registering to vote by mail, which may inhibit voting by individuals without access to printers, scanners or photocopiers at home. More precisely, it would allow Elections Canada to use information already in its possession to confirm an elector's identity and residence.

In recognition of potential privacy implications, electors would need to explicitly consent to Elections Canada using this identification number to facilitate their vote-by-mail registration. Some electors may choose to register to vote by mail, but with circumstances changing regularly across the country, they may not be able to return their ballot kits by mail in time. In anticipation of this, Bill C-19 proposes the installation of secure mail reception boxes at every polling station across the country.

Government Orders

Bill C-19 would also allow electors who initially chose to vote by mail to change their minds and vote in person. However, to do so, electors would need to either return the mail-in vote kits they received from Elections Canada when they went to vote in person or sign a declaration that they had not yet voted. Elections Canada has a robust series of measures to deter electoral fraud. Returning the mail-in vote kits or attesting in writing that electors had not yet voted would act as a deterrent to any malicious actors and would support the integrity of the vote. These measures would also help create an appropriate paper trail for auditing and enforcement processes.

It is important to remember that we are not proposing permanent changes to Canada's electoral law. All of the proposed legislative amendments that we have outlined are temporary. They would only apply to an election that is called 90 days after this legislation receives royal assent or earlier if the Chief Electoral Officer has indicated that all the necessary preparations have been completed.

• (1230)

Moreover, these legislative changes would cease to be in effect six months after a general election was administered during the pandemic or earlier, as determined by the Chief Electoral Officer after consultation with Canada's chief public health officer.

[*Translation*]

With Bill C-19, we are maximizing electors' opportunities to exercise their right to vote. If the bill is passed, electors will get four days of advance polling, three days of regular polling and better access to mail-in voting. Bill C-19 would also give Elections Canada greater legislative flexibility and authority to safely administer an election.

In closing, I invite our colleagues to examine Bill C-19 so it can be studied by a committee and amended if necessary. We want to work with all parliamentarians to ensure that elections will be safe and accessible for all Canadians.

• (1235)

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Madam Speaker, through you, I want to say how good it is to see the minister looking as robust as he does. It is a real pleasure to have him back in full fighting form. Parliament as a whole, and the government, can certainly use his services as I believe he is the longest-serving parliamentarian in cabinet.

I want to ask a question on the issue of non-traditional voting locations and accessible voting requirements. Long-term care facilities frequently have the best accessibility. In some small villages these are the only accessible locations. The Human Rights Commission has required that certain accessibility criteria be met in order to allow voting to take place.

Would it be possible to have slightly less accessible locations in some cases for voting under this legislation? If so, would the government contemplate allowing such a thing to make sure it is possible for people to vote, especially in smaller locations?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, my colleague and I have served on a number of committees together as well as in the

House of Commons. On a personal level, I very much appreciate his kind remarks and thank him for that.

Our colleague from Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston has a lot of experience regarding Canada's Elections Act. He has been a steady and effective voice on these issues for a long time. I served on the procedure and House affairs committee with him in that context.

Obviously, the government would not seek to reduce accessibility with respect to polling stations, but rather would have faith in Elections Canada by increasing its authority and ability to adapt to an election in a pandemic. We have every confidence it would find the right way for people to vote without limiting accessibility for Canadians living with disabilities.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Madam Speaker, I agree with regard to mail-in ballots, but I am concerned about people being able to change their minds and go vote in person by simply signing a declaration.

I expect people to be honest. However, some people who mail in their ballots could then vote in person by signing a declaration that they did not use their kit.

I am having trouble seeing how we will be able to prevent this.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague, the member for Beauport—Limoilou, for her question.

That is an example of the kind of adaptation we would like to put forward. I am sure we all want to eliminate the possibility of electoral fraud. Nobody in the House wants to enable people to cheat.

We believe that signing a declaration should deter people with dishonest intentions. It will be pretty easy for Elections Canada to find out if that person voted, and anyone doing so would be subject to rather serious quasi-criminal prosecution.

However, if the bill goes to committee and my Bloc Québécois colleagues want to amend or adjust that part of the bill, we will certainly work with them. My colleague from Beauport—Limoilou and I are very much on the same page.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, my thanks to the minister for bringing this legislation forward. I think it is an important issue we need to address. I am wondering about his openness to considering amendments at committee. I think there are some important extant issues. Some of these may need to be addressed in legislation, while others may not.

Government Orders

I hope the idea here is to collaborate, so that all parties in the House can agree on the ground rules for a possible pandemic election. If so, there are some things that I wonder if he might consider. In particular, we have seen a lot of online applications for some things throughout the pandemic. We know these are a barrier to many people who do not have the technology or know how to use it.

Is the minister open to having in-person registration for special ballots occur at Canada Post outlets, and maintaining the campus vote program in a pandemic election as well?

● (1240)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, the member for Elmwood—Transcona has offered very constructive suggestions in the past with respect to the elections act. It is obviously the government's intention to work with all parties and all colleagues in the House to find the appropriate temporary amendments to the Elections Act that would make an election more accessible and safer for Canadians should one be required.

Are we open to amendments and working with other parliamentarians? The answer is obviously yes.

Voting on campus is certainly a priority for us. We think it is important. I know my colleague has spoken publicly about that. We would welcome an opportunity to work with him to ensure that it is reflected in the legislation.

I very much like his suggestion of allowing people to register at post offices to be able to vote in person. It is something that would make it more accessible in small communities, such as mine in my riding. The post office is a site where people could safely do this, and I would welcome that kind of suggestion.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada will remember that in Guelph we had robocalls a few elections back when Conservatives were calling people in my community saying that election locations had changed. They also went on campus to try to take one of the polling boxes from our campus.

Having consistent polling election locations for the pre-votes and the day of the vote would be important, as are the changes made in Bill C-76 to modernize the Canada Elections Act and have the Elections Canada commissioner able to communicate to Canadians the best way to vote in their communities, the locations of polling stations, and having some means to promote the vote.

Could the president comment, first of all, on how we can maintain consistency of polling locations, if that is possible, and also how Elections Canada can communicate those to our communities?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, when Frank Valeriotte was the member of Parliament for Guelph, I remember that there was some controversy surrounding robocalls and some attempt to suppress the vote in that election.

Obviously I share our colleague's view that having consistency in polling locations increases voter reliability and accessibility.

We would support any enhancements that would allow Elections Canada to properly communicate polling locations to voters. It is precisely why we think it would be helpful if this legislation could

be sent to the procedures committee. There, colleagues could offer constructive amendments and suggestions that would improve the bill, while also hearing from electors and Canadians about their experiences to ensure that the legislation reflects the security and safety of elections and that an election would be accessible, should one be required, in the context of a pandemic.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, I want to join other friends in saying how very pleased and grateful we all are to see the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada back among us so well.

I am pleased to see Bill C-19, but disappointed that there is nothing in the bill that addresses an issue of concern to many of us in politics who have endured lies being spread that have been approved by official agents for other parties. These are things that are completely untrue that would not pass in the marketplace for consumer products, for instance.

My colleague will remember that the Green Party and I have pressed for the notion of truth-in-advertising legislation, such that there are always going to be opinions that are unpleasant. There are going to be attack ads that are unpleasant. Those are freedom of speech issues, but—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I did ask for a brief question. There are only 20 seconds left for the minister to respond.

The hon. President of the Queen's Privy Council has time for a brief answer, please.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Saanich—Gulf Islands for her kindness and generosity towards me personally. We have discussed this in the past, and I share her concerns about the increase of disinformation, and about attempts to hack elections and election processes.

The Prime Minister has asked me to work with colleagues in Parliament on the issue of disinformation in the electoral context to ensure, as the member said, freedom of speech. It is obviously an important value in an election context, but there is a point where disinformation and malicious actors can attempt to influence the outcome.

I would welcome an opportunity to work with the member and other colleagues on the appropriate way to address those issues as well.

● (1245)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Before we resume debate, I would like to let members know there is a lot of interest for participation during questions and comments. I would ask them to make sure they go directly to their question or comment, or get there as quickly as possible within the minute mark. If members cannot get to their question quickly, I will unfortunately have to cut them off to allow as many members as possible to participate.

We will now resume debate. The hon. member for Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon.

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Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Madam Speaker, I will begin my comments on this important piece of legislation by sharing some anecdotes from recent federal elections. The names of the two people I am about to talk about are not their real names, but the people they represent are familiar to anyone involved in past elections.

My mind goes first to Sue. She is a loving grandmother who has spent her years tending to her family and household, volunteering for charitable causes in her community and enrolling as a poll worker when general elections were called. Her knowledge of the community and its members is derived from decades of friendship and service.

Her institutional knowledge of the electoral process is the kind that is acquired from working multiple elections at all levels over a lifetime. She is the kind of person that poll workers, scrutineers and volunteers flock to with their questions in search of answers and insight. Without people like Sue, elections in Canada would be a shamble. Her dedication is a credit to our country and is essential to the functioning of our democracy.

Also coming to mind is someone like Gurpreet. He is a new Canadian, having arrived in his new homeland from abroad about a decade ago. As a poll clerk in his first Canadian election of any kind, he is proud of his role in promoting democracy, standing up for democracy, and ensuring a fair and transparent process of ballot counting and voting.

This is an exciting new experience for Gurpreet, which gives him an inside view of how the Canadian election system works. He has the added benefit of serving as a poll clerk alongside Sue, the seasoned DRO and loving grandmother, whose intimate knowledge of Canadian elections puts him at ease. It allows him to participate and work within the electoral process with comfort, confidence and pride.

Colleagues, these anecdotes are not exceptional. This type of interconnectedness, of community members coming together from disparate backgrounds and various life experiences, such as students, seniors, new Canadians and stay-at-home moms, to serve the rest of us by upholding the integrity in our democratic process is what happens in every federal election in polling places nationwide.

This coming together of the community is important for fostering trust in Canadian elections. The adage that all politics are local is especially salient here. People are more likely to trust their neighbours and friends. That trust is especially important when it comes to counting our ballots and having faith in the outcome of that count.

However, let me be clear: Canadians do not want an election during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the actions taken by opportunistic incumbent provincial governments over the last year, 80% of those surveyed are against forcing Canadians to polling stations at this time. Despite this, we are here debating government Bill C-19, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act, COVID-19 response.

Bill C-19 was introduced in December 2020. This was, I might add, before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs issued its recommendation after studying the matter in depth.

Putting aside the misplaced hubris of the Liberal-knows-best approach, there are changes in this proposed legislation that do meet the threshold of common sense, but sadly this does not extend to all of them. There are a number of issues in Bill C-19 that have been overlooked.

If an election is held in a pandemic, the protection of poll workers, voters and our tried and true Canadian democratic process is essential. My first point is that, from the outset, I am especially concerned about the provision, or lack thereof, for voting in long-term care facilities and other institutions home to immune-compromised Canadians. These are the places where we have seen the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in this country.

We do not need the grave mistakes of this past year repeated by increasing the time our vulnerable citizens are exposed to the avoidable risk of external transmission. Everyone must be given the opportunity to vote, and clarifications are needed to ensure that those in long-term care facilities have the ability to vote safely. In these instances, polling stations should be open for the minimum amount of time it take for residents to vote, although at multiple periods of time during the 13-day provision mentioned by the president of the Privy Council.

• (1250)

My second point is the glaring issue of the absence of a built-in sunset clause to remove what must remain temporary changes. Instead, we have the following in the bill:

The enactment also provides for the repeal of the new Part six months after the publication of a notice confirming that the temporary rules in that Part are no longer required to ensure the safe administration of an election in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have been told to self-isolate for weeks upon weeks by the federal government and other governments in this country. We are not falling for that again. The addition of a sunset clause containing a fixed date that these provisions cease to be enforced is required.

My third point is that we need clarity when it comes to proposed powers for the CEO to withdraw the writs of election. It must be made clear to us now, while we debate this bill, how any decision to withdraw the writs would be made. Ending an election midway through is a decision with major ramifications that cannot be made arbitrarily.

Common sense can foresee that any decision to end the election before voters have had their say would sow chaos, confusion, and distrust that would last for generations. With great power comes the great responsibility to explain its use. If we cannot explain to Canadians why the CEO would pull the plug on an election, perhaps we should do likewise and pull the plug on this clause of the bill.

Another significant area of concern is the mail-in ballot provisions proposed by the legislation. Bill C-19, as it is presently written, states that an elector who requests a special ballot:

...shall ensure that the special ballot is sent before the close of polling stations on the last day of the polling period and is received by the special voting rules administrator in the National Capital Region no later than 6:00 p.m. on the Tuesday following the last day of the polling period.

This would mean that Elections Canada would count a hypothetical vote received as much as 23 hours after the general election polls had closed.

I have heard of ballots being disbursed and cast prior to a general election having been called. This scenario was central to the case of *Mitchell v. Jackman*, which made its way to the Supreme Court of Newfoundland and Labrador. The main argument in that case was whether it was constitutional for special ballots to be issued to voters in Newfoundland and Labrador prior to a provincial election. It was decided in 2017 that such a rule was an infringement of voters' charter rights under section 3, the democratic rights clause.

On the other hand, I am at a loss when it comes to finding an example of an election in Canada where ballots were accepted after the close of general election polls, notwithstanding the present electoral calamity that has befallen Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, who are mired in an election that should have wrapped up almost a month ago. Counting ballots after polls have closed is one thing. It is very normal, and it happens in every election. Accepting ballots after the general election polls have closed is another thing. It is abnormal because it does not happen.

If this bill passes in its present form, who knows how long the tallying process will take for millions of mail-in ballots received by Ottawa and, under the current bill, counted in Ottawa. Valid ballots accepted for the count should be received prior to the close of voting. That is why we have an election day. Even in British Columbia, whose recent provincial election garnered notoriety for the 13-day lag time between the close of the polls and the counting of mail-in ballots, it was only those votes received by the close of the polls that were counted.

I agree with the provision for the Chief Electoral Officer to increase the number of elections officers. Arguably, this is something that should have been done in previous elections. It is going to take a coordinated, collaborative civic effort to ensure the proper execution of an election during a pandemic. This is especially true when it comes to special ballots. Once the writs are issued, there should be a large and well-advertised window of opportunity for voters to request a special ballot online within the context of this new extended writ period.

• (1255)

To streamline the process from the beginning when applying for special ballots electronically, voters should be required to provide evidence that they are Canadian citizens over the age of 18 and it must be verified that they are indeed living. There are those on the other side of this place who vilify my party for expecting voters to provide identification. I do not understand this. We must strive to provide as many options for voting as possible. We cannot infringe on the sacred right of citizens to vote, but, quite simply, voters do have to be verified citizens. Elections Canada's current ID verification options are many, so I will not belabour that point.

It is a safe assumption that demand for mail-in ballots will be high in the next federal election, likely the highest ever seen. There is a clear precedent in Canada for giving people a window of opportunity, contained within the writ period, to vote by special ballot.

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We all want the next federal election to be conducted with the utmost integrity, as we do for every election, but allowing the receipt and counting of ballots after an election day opens our process up to the speculation of electoral fraud and uncertainty. Special ballots should be postmarked one week before the election period commences in order to be counted on election day. Otherwise, if mail is not an option because of time, special ballots should be accepted at returning offices and polling places in a designated drop-box up to the close of polls on election day, as previously discussed.

Moreover, people trust their friends and neighbours. For folks like Sue and Gurpreet, who I mentioned earlier, sending special ballots to riding offices to be counted by local officials will enhance Canadians' trust in election outcomes, especially when we are anticipating that the next federal election will see an astronomical number of votes by mail. We cannot have an extended period of uncertainty between the close of polls and the ballot count during the pandemic and in a minority Parliament situation especially.

Now is not the time to fundamentally change the way we do elections in Canada. During these unsure times, our institutions must perform at the highest standards. Again, as we saw in British Columbia's election, mail-in ballots will comprise a significant portion of the total vote count, as over 30% of all votes cast in B.C. were by special mail-in ballots.

Virtually all votes cast in the Newfoundland and Labrador provincial election that is currently under way will be by special mail-in ballot. On the federal scale, this could mean 10 million ballots in the mail and possibly more. Banking on sending millions of special ballots directly to Ottawa for processing is a recipe for disaster and delay. Mail-in ballots, although they may be sent from anywhere, should be received and counted in the ridings in which they are meant to be cast. If Elections Canada feels it needs more personnel on the ground in constituencies, it can send more staff as needed, or better yet, it can train the local staff to perform these tasks, as it has always done.

It is an honour and a privilege to stand in the House. Having run in two federal elections, I fully grasp the importance of having local returning officers as administrators and arbiters. In my riding, our returning officer has the ability to bring candidates from across the political spectrum together so that everyone is on the same page when it comes to the rules of the electoral game. I think of myself and all of the candidates in my riding in the last election. We felt more assured when our returning officer brought all the candidates together to sit at a table and hash it out so we were all on the same page. That needs to happen and that is a good thing.

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I have the utmost confidence in my local returning officer, and I would place a friendly bet that most of my colleagues here feel the same way in their ridings. I trust my local returning officer to oversee the election in my riding. I have faith that they can also oversee the counting of special ballots cast by the voters I represent. If more special ballots are anticipated than ballots from voters on advance or regular polling days, why not have Elections Canada and its returning officer redeploy staff to handle the special ballot count in each riding?

Local elections must remain local. We do not elect Ottawa representatives for our communities. We elect community representatives to fight for our interests in Ottawa.

• (1300)

The importance of Elections Canada workers and scrutineers from the community cannot be overstated. This ensures trust in the local electoral process, and their involvement in it nurtures the Canadian values of inclusion and diversity. I believe local elections and the participation of Canadians within their own communities build confidence in our institution.

Scrutineers have been a fixture of Canadian elections since our earliest days. They cast a watchful eye on the proceedings of election day, the counting of the votes and on the behaviour of other scrutineers. They report this information back to the candidates they represent. Outsourcing the counting of special ballots to Ottawa is wrong and sets a dangerous precedent. For starters, local scrutineers, who are my scrutineers and my opponents' scrutineers, would not be able to observe the counting of special ballots that will impact the outcome of the election in any given riding.

While national leaders secure much of the spotlight, we must remember that in our Westminster parliamentary tradition, we do not elect a prime minister and a deputy prime minister as is done in republics with the president and vice-president. We elect members of Parliament from unique constituencies across the nation. Every member of the House is accountable to the electorate. We have 338 members. This raises the question of how transparent and accountable the vote counting would be in my riding when we are anticipating that a significant chunk of the votes in Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon would be cast by mail and counted by unfamiliar strangers situated several thousand kilometres away in the national capital region.

As my speech comes to a close, I readily acknowledge that the changes to the Canada Elections Act, as proposed by the government, are not meant to be malicious and were made with good intentions. However, we all know where that road leads. The implications of the changes in Bill C-19 are great and wide-reaching. These changes, if adopted, will change the way Canadian voters conduct elections.

If the Liberal government proceeds to make these changes unilaterally, then it will be undermining Canadian democracy. I am assured to hear from the previous speaker that this will not be the case. I do not say these words hyperbolically or inflammatorily. Amending the rules that govern elections in Canada requires buy-in from all parties in the House.

We on this side are open to amendments to the Canada Elections Act to account for the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our system works, but it requires updating from time to time. This is one of those times. I hope the government realizes that and engages all members in a better and more constructive way to get this right. After all, it is from the voters, represented by all members in the House, that the current government and any government derive their consent to govern.

All we have to do is look to our neighbours to realize that Canada's electoral system works best for Canadians. Our system is trusted. As I mentioned in the beginning, it is a system in which folks like Sue and Gurpreet contribute to the integrity of the electoral process and the final results. People trust their friends and neighbours. This is why we need mail-in ballot counting to be done at the local level: in the ridings, at the returning offices in the communities where electors—

• (1305)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I am sorry to interrupt. There seems to be an issue with interpretation.

[*Translation*]

The member for Beauport—Limoilou on a point of order.

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Madam Speaker, the interpretation cut out for a moment there.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): It is working now.

[*English*]

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, let me just conclude by saying that if all politics are local, then so too should be the counting of ballots, including those received in the mail.

I look forward to a constructive debate on Bill C-19 and to getting this bill right for Canadians, because it is Canadians who ultimately make the decisions we are discussing today, and Canadians should feel they have the utmost confidence in our system.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is important for us to recognize that Elections Canada, as an institution, is recognized around the world and within Canada as second to no other when it comes to ensuring that people have democratic rights and the ability to vote. That is worth saying.

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I have a couple of very quick points. First, ballots would be counted in the riding if sent from the riding. This is a very important point to note. I will also remind my friend that there is a sunset clause to the changes we would be putting in place, which keeps in mind the reason we are bringing in the legislation.

The member makes reference to the withdrawal of writs. This is what my question will address. He has a great deal of concern regarding the withdrawal of a writ and how Elections Canada could do it. Elections Canada will, in fact, be appearing before PROC once the bill goes to committee, and that concern and many others could be accommodated.

When would the member like to see this legislation go to the committee so we can have Elections Canada and others answer the many questions he has?

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I remind members to keep their questions to one minute.

The hon. member for Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon.

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, first off, I do not get to determine when a bill is brought forward to a committee. I think the member has more power over that decision than I would any day.

Second, it is incumbent for me to mention again, after reading Bill C-19 and giving my first speech, that it would give extensive temporary powers to the Chief Electoral Officer. We need to have very clear and transparent schedules available to everyone in this country so they know why a decision would be made and under what context such a decision would be made.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Madam Speaker, during the pandemic, there have been some horror stories about CERB and online fraud, with people impersonating other individuals. I am worried that something similar could happen with online voting.

I would like to know what my colleague thinks about that. Does he have ideas for ways to prevent horror stories like those that happened with the CERB?

[*English*]

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, one question I was trying to have addressed earlier in this debate was how often voters lists would be updated at various polling stations across any riding. There are a lot of provisions in the bill that need a ton of clarification to ensure there is no fraud and that people are not trying to vote twice.

Elections Canada has the responsibility to always prepare for the worst-case scenario. What we are seeing in Bill C-19 right now is that certain provisions need a lot of clarification in order to provide us assurances that the system will be robust in preventing double voting and electoral fraud.

• (1310)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I took from the member's speech that a major preoccupation of his is where special ballots are counted. As a member of the procedure and House affairs committee, I can offer a reassurance,

given the study we have undertaken for some time now. We heard from both Elections Canada and Canada Post that the intention is to have special ballots counted locally within the riding, so I think that is already foreseen. I take from his comments that he has not had a chance to consult members of his party who sit on the committee, but we heard some pretty clear testimony to that effect. I offer that by way of reassurance.

The member also talked a lot about the receipt date of special ballots and the issue of people being able to vote in person even if they applied for a ballot. We know there may be delays in people getting their special ballot. For people who have applied in good faith for a special ballot but, through no fault of their own, do not receive one in time to be able to submit it in a timely way, it seems important to offer the option to vote in person. I wonder what he thinks of that principle.

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, that is an excellent question by the member for Elmwood—Transcona. I do not think our positions differ too much on this.

If people apply for a special ballot online and receive that ballot, Bill C-19 would allow them to drop it off in a special ballot box at a polling station. That is a good provision.

From my first reading of Bill C-19 when I was working on my speech, it seemed that all of the special ballots would be counted in Ottawa. I know there is a precedent for that.

I am glad that the member provided me some reassurances from the committee report. However, I want to make sure from this debate that local elections do in fact remain local, because Canadians like having scrutineers of their local elections. They like knowing that their neighbours in the polling station are overseeing the counting of ballots. That is what makes our system strong and what we need to uphold during COVID-19.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): Madam Speaker, I wonder if my colleague could talk of the risks we would be taking by having an election during the pandemic.

I know that here in B.C., we saw a huge spike in cases following the election. Could he speak to those kinds of risks we are putting Canadians to by holding an election during a pandemic?

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, my biggest fear about holding an election during the pandemic is what would happen in long-term care facilities, or to someone like my 93-year-old Oma, who lives on her own but receives lots of support from nurses and care practitioners. We need to make sure that any changes to the Elections Act, whether temporary or not, account for the outbreaks we have seen in long-term care facilities in my riding and ridings across this country.

I am very concerned about holding an election during a pandemic and seeing a spike in the number of cases afterwards. I do not know if it has been verified or not, but in B.C., two weeks after the provincial election, we had a big spike in the number of COVID cases in our province.

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Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I guess we should not be surprised that the Conservatives are trying to sow the seeds of doubt when it comes to mail-in ballots.

The reality is that they did it in committee throughout the entire summer. I was on the committee. I listened to them. The words “fraud” and “mail-in ballots” came up repeatedly from the Conservatives, and also a couple of times from the Bloc Québécois. Equally, I am not surprised to see their doing the same thing.

I can assure the member that we heard from the chief electoral officers from B.C. and from a couple of different provinces on the east coast, and we have heard from experts. I asked the question repeatedly, “Have you ever had any concern about voter fraud with respect to mail-in ballots?” The answer was unanimously “No”. Not a single individual indicated there was a concern with fraud as it relates to mail-in ballots.

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, I am not sowing any doubt or deceit about our electoral process.

My whole speech focused on the fact that I trust the institution and I trust Sue and Gurpreet and all of the other Canadians who work in our local elections to make sure that our democracy is upheld.

I think our Elections Act is one of the best acts we have. It provides confidence for Canadians. For new Canadians, it is one of the first times they really feel they are a part of this country, that they are a part of something greater than themselves, that the words “strong and free” come true when they see the people come to vote.

We are so proud of the Canada Elections Act. We are so proud to get it right during this debate. We love our country. We want to give Canadians the best opportunity to vote safely.

• (1315)

Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Madam Speaker, I support this bill, but one of the things that I find is missing from it is what we have been asking for a long time, and that is electoral reform.

The Green Party got almost 1.2 million votes in the last election, just short of what the Bloc Québécois got, but they then got 10 times more MPs than us. The Conservatives got five times as many votes as us, but 40 times as many seats.

I am wondering if the hon. member thinks this is a fair representation of what voters in Canada were asking for.

Mr. Brad Vis: Madam Speaker, I am not going to lie: I am fan of first past the post. It has its problems, but I love my country and I love our democratic system.

I love the way we conduct elections. I love the fact that Canadians have confidence in our electoral process, and I do not want to see that change. I want to see ballots counted locally, by members of my community to ensure that Canadians continue to have the confidence in our electoral system that makes our country so great.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Madam Speaker, before I begin my speech on Bill C-19, I want to take a moment on this

March 8 to commend my colleagues from all parties and thank them for their commitment to advancing equality, equity and parity.

The Bloc Québécois supports the bill in principle. We cannot be against apple pie and against adjusting the provisions in the bill in order to comply with the public health guidelines of Quebec and the provinces in the event that an election is held during the pandemic. In our opinion, the provisions in the bill should be changed, including when it comes to voting in seniors' residences, the deadline for receiving mail-in ballots and the provisions on a three-day voting period.

Let me provide some context for those who are watching us. The bill deals specifically with the right to vote and vote counting. We could have gone much further than this to adjust the Canada Elections Act during a pandemic. Among other things, we could have talked about political party financing. I would remind hon. members that the government's attempt to reform the voting system failed.

Jean-Pierre Kingsley testified before a committee. He said that, in the interests of fairness, we must reinstate the per-vote subsidy as soon as possible. If the voting system is not being reviewed, then we should at least ensure that the vote is not totally lost.

In our electoral system, some people vote for a more marginal party that may have no chance of getting a member elected. Those people should at least be able to contribute through their vote. Through their vote, they would contribute to the fact that a sum of money is tied to the vote they put in the ballot box. An election is a debate of ideas, a democratic debate.

From the very beginning of the election period, there need to be fair provisions that allow for the exchange of ideas. Every party must be able to put its ideas forward. It was no surprise that fundraising has been a little more difficult during this pandemic, in light of social distancing rules. Some political parties dipped their hands into the cookie jar and decided to grant themselves the wage subsidy that was intended for companies. Meanwhile, some sugar shacks in Quebec were denied access to the wage subsidy and are struggling to get by.

It is really something for the government to want to make some minor changes, only to then engage in unseemly behaviour. As of this moment, I do not think that the parties that promised to pay back the money have done so. We need to amend the Canada Elections Act. I think that reinstating the per-vote subsidy would have been the perfect way to ensure that no voter felt that their vote had been wasted under certain circumstances.

That said, we support the principle of the bill, which would make some amendments. The bill provides for a polling period of three days, consisting of eight hours of voting on Saturday and Sunday and 12 hours of voting on Monday. I mention this because if the bill is adopted as is, a lot of information will have to be circulated to voters.

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• (1320)

The bill also provides for a 13-day period before polling begins to facilitate the administration of the vote in long-term care facilities and seniors' residences where people with disabilities live. These 13 days plus the three-day polling period add up to a total of 16 days.

Another amendment in the bill would give the Chief Electoral Officer more power to adapt the rules for pandemic-related reasons in order to ensure the health and safety of voters and election workers.

Finally, the bill provides for the implementation of a number of measures to facilitate mail-in voting, including setting up reception boxes at all polling stations and giving voters the option of registering for mail-in ballots online.

That is an overview of what is proposed. The government can hardly wait to call an election, and it was in such a rush that it introduced its bill before the committee that was working on those amendments could even propose measures. The committee report includes a supplementary opinion by the Bloc Québécois, which I would like to make members and others who may not have read the report aware of. By doing a quick survey on the ground and talking to different people, we realized that there could be problems administering the election if the bill is left as is.

The Canada Elections Act is the tool that governs our solemn concurrence in what I call the social contract, which is the right to vote. If a decision is made to amend the act, that fragile balance between the fundamental right to vote and the integrity of the vote must be protected. The right to vote comes with an obligation to prove one's eligibility as a voter. Casting a vote is a solemn act that must be totally free of constraint and undue influence. That is why we have a designated day, a single day on which voters exercise the right to vote.

For some years now, voters have been able to exercise the right to vote pretty much throughout the entire election campaign. This bill provides for four advance polling days, three voting days, 13 days of voting at certain institutions where seniors reside, and the option to vote every day up to 34 days before voting day in the case of a 36-day calendar. That means a lot of opportunities to vote. We must ensure that none of those opportunities results in irregularities. I am not talking about deliberate fraud, but certain problems could arise.

• (1325)

Mail-in ballots are currently offered to people who are outside their electoral district. The current wording of the act provides that these people can vote up until 6 p.m. on polling day, but the bill would allow mail-in ballots to come in until the day after polling day. I think this could cause some problems. We have to consider this carefully. We have to ask ourselves why, during a pandemic, we are talking about three days of voting, when people can vote at any time during the campaign or on the four advance polling days.

There is also the matter of voting on weekdays. Why choose Monday when, during a pandemic, we absolutely need locations and logistics that allow for social distancing during voting, because a lot of people are going to travel to vote?

The choice of Saturday and Sunday was welcomed and requested by the Chief Electoral Officer, who, by the way, has the expertise and understands these logistical problems. Every election, he is the one who has to find election workers, as well secure voting sites that make suitable polling places.

Speaking from experience, I can say that in Quebec, holding the vote on a Monday in addition to Saturday and Sunday means the polling location would have to be changed, unless the same location can be used all three days. School gymnasiums are typically used as polling places, and it would be easy to use them. However, Quebec school boards do not rent out their facilities on Mondays, either during pandemics or under normal circumstances. We would therefore end up in a situation where we would not have enough polling locations to hold a safe election. As I understand it, the purpose of Bill C-19 is first and foremost to make elections as safe as possible.

It will also be important to clarify what will happen during the 13 days leading up to the three polling days in certain residences. Our seniors must be given enough time to vote, period.

Looking back at 2019, in some seniors' residences—and I am not necessarily talking about long-term care homes—advance voting took place, and there was only one polling day. All those individuals had ample time to go to the polls without any problem. I have no problem with adding two days, but how can we ensure a secure presence for 13 advance voting days and three polling days? Why should other people be encouraged to go into seniors' residences?

Having spoken with some seniors, I can say that they are not very keen on the idea at the moment. I think the returning officer might have some serious logistical problems organizing that. Obviously, returning officers would be the ones to decide, since they are being given the power to do so.

The other problem is the number of mail-in ballots there will be. A person might request a mail-in ballot because they can vote any day. Voters can currently vote any day at the returning officer's office. If I want to vote on the fifth day of the campaign without leaving home, I think that I would request a mail-in ballot. This would eliminate the problem of having too many people in one place. I imagine that the votes would be counted, that a list would be kept up to date and that the person would not be able to go to the advance poll.

• (1330)

There are also the people who would want to vote in person and those living outside the riding. Where will the votes be counted? The counting should obviously be done within each riding.

Government Orders

However, what happens when a person has requested a mail-in ballot but, for whatever reason, has forgotten about it? Once a person requests a mail-in ballot, they are removed from the voter list. They cannot go to an advance poll or vote during the three days currently provided for. If, for whatever reason, the person goes to the polling station and says that they did not mail in their ballot, will they be stopped from voting?

If they make a declaration and are allowed to vote when they have already cast their ballot, we have a problem. Furthermore, this vote cannot be subtracted from the tally. The ballot is secret, so there is no way to know who they voted for. With regard to mail-in ballots, we must at least be able to ensure that the vote will remain confidential.

We could have discussions about that. I hope we will be able to reach a consensus. However, I do not think it is necessary to extend the mail-in voting deadline to Tuesday in order to count the votes after the fact.

There is a better way to avoid the situation I am talking about. Since people will have been able to vote in advance one week before, those voting by mail could have up until the Friday prior to the polling period to submit their mail-in ballots. This would make it easier to tell someone that their mail-in ballot has been received and that they cannot vote again. The different parties could verify this. It would therefore be impossible to vote in person and by mail. Furthermore, even if the voter were punished, what would happen with that vote? It would already be in the system. Why even allow for this kind of anomaly? Even if there is minimal risk, one fraudulent vote is one too many, especially since this can be avoided.

We must, in general, be cautious. Let us send this bill to committee, look things over and, most importantly, follow the advice from the Chief Electoral Officer, because we will need election workers. It is quite common these days for election workers to be over the age of 60, but there could be some resistance during this pandemic.

Sure, vaccination will do its thing, but this all depends on when the election is called. We must therefore make separate plans unrelated to the vaccination efforts. We need to find the best plan for the election workers.

The Chief Electoral Officer pointed out that people who normally work on Mondays would be available to staff the polls if the election were held on a Saturday or Sunday. We must take these technical and logistical considerations into account if we wish to succeed.

• (1335)

[English]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the member raised a number of interesting points.

First, I do not think there is a rush on this legislation. We have been in a minority government for a year now. An election can theoretically be called at any time and we need to prepare and be ready. Hopefully, we will not have to use the tool that has been developed, but I think Canadians would expect us to be ready for that.

To his issue about Saturday and Sunday versus Monday, having been on the committee, we heard from a number of witnesses.

There was concern for people who would have to get child care on weekends so they could vote. There were concerns from people in the disability community, who said they had better options for getting around and accessing polls on Monday. There were also concerns for a whole host of reasons. I think that is why the minister has proposed the three days, including the Monday.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Madam Speaker, I am not sure my colleague asked a question, but it is 100% clear that any person who might have trouble getting to the polling station will have the opportunity to vote during the four advance polling days, which also happen on weekdays. Also, anyone who expects to encounter any difficulty can vote any day. I think all the bases have been covered to ensure a prudent approach and to give returning officers all the tools they need to ensure secure balloting at their polling stations.

[English]

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I wonder if the member could reflect on the risks of calling an election when the circumstances of the pandemic could change quite dramatically in the middle of it. We saw a situation in Newfoundland when there was some shifting in the middle of the election.

Of course, we are dealing with the possibility of new variants. The public health orders that may be required under certain kinds of circumstances with respect to number of cases and so forth may need to be tightened under other circumstances. To me, this really speaks to how irresponsible the government is in its push, it seems, to have a spring election. I wonder if the member could comment on that as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Madam Speaker, anyone who gets out there and talks to people or meets with them on Zoom knows that nobody wants an election because people have other things on their minds. Still, it is up to the government to make that call.

Actually, I do not understand why the voting process and counting the votes are the only issues dealt with here. Why was the issue of allowing candidates to collect electronic signatures for their nomination not addressed? For the same reason my colleague mentioned, it is clear that Bill C-19 would have to be amended to cover that if a snap election were to be called during the pandemic before we have herd immunity and enough people have been vaccinated.

Government Orders

• (1340)

Mrs. Louise Charbonneau (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Madam Speaker, beyond the safety and security problems that might arise from a snap election, I'm wondering about the fact that the legislative measures would be temporary and would apply only to an election called 90 days after the bill received royal assent. Often, however, temporary measures brought in by governments become permanent ones. Is it possible that this could happen here?

Mr. Luc Thériault: Madam Speaker, it would be hard to ascribe motive at this point.

I think we should start by voting for the principle of the bill to adapt to the context of the pandemic and then clarify the intentions of the bill and improve it clause by clause in committee.

If it is indicated in the bill that these provisions are temporary, then they will obviously disappear from the Canada Elections Act with no problem. In contrast, it would take another bill to make the provisions in Bill C-19 permanent, if that was what was called for.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Montcalm for his speech.

A person could request a mail-in ballot but not receive it on time. It could happen. I think that allowing a person to retain the right to vote in person if they do not receive their ballot is important.

I know that the hon. member expressed concerns about the provisions of the bill on this. What does he think of the principle of allowing a person who does not receive their mail-in ballot to keep the right to vote in person and not lose the right to vote?

Mr. Luc Thériault: That is a very good question, Madam Speaker. That is the main reason why I think that the committee members should review the rules and ensure that the cut-off for mail-in ballots is the day before the three-day polling period, or the Friday.

The person cannot go and vote as soon as they request a mail-in ballot. If it is clear that the vote was not received by the Friday, then the person would have two days, or maybe three, to go vote in person, and there will not be any problems.

That is why I think that the cut-off for mail-in ballots should be the night before the polling period begins.

[*English*]

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Madam Speaker, one of the things this bill does not address that I think should be addressed is with respect to the confidentiality of people's votes.

I hear more and more from Canadians who are concerned that in some way, the way they have voted will be known to the general public. What is not specifically addressed here, particularly as we go to more and different ways of voting, is how the confidentiality of one's vote would be secured and maintained.

I wonder if my colleague has any thoughts on that.

• (1345)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Madam Speaker, that is what I was alluding to when I said that we need to make it easier for people to exercise the right to vote while maintaining the integrity of the vote.

However, I take comfort in knowing that these measures are valid only during the pandemic. I do not believe that mail-in ballots should become a permanent measure. The vote is secret and we need to continue to preserve the solemnity of exercising the right to vote so that people are not subject to intimidation or undue influence.

We do not know anything about what happens from the time the ballot arrives at people's houses and the time they put their ballot in the mail. We also do not know what happens when they are voting. This approach is only acceptable because we are in the midst of a pandemic. It would be worse if people were unable to vote at all. However, this is not a measure that should be used at any time other than during a pandemic. What is more, it is up to the government to decide whether it wants to call an election during a pandemic.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, before I jump into my remarks on Bill C-19, I want to take this opportunity on the floor of the House to recognize that it is International Women's Day. I also note that today we are debating two different bills. We are debating Bill C-19 right now, which is about pandemic elections, and the government plans to call Bill C-24 in the afternoon, which is about dealing with the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Of course, we know that the pandemic has had a disproportionate influence on women in Canada, particularly in its economic impact, because those in the caring economy and those working in low-wage jobs have seen a disproportionate impact on their finances. I think it is important not only to recognize the general importance of International Women's Day but also to recognize its importance in the context of the debates we are having today in the House.

On Bill C-19, I am very glad that it has finally made it to the floor of the House of Commons. As far back as last June, I had reached out as the NDP's democratic reform critic to the other parties to try to get a conversation started on this issue. Unfortunately, that did not happen over last summer, but it did begin finally in the fall, in the procedure and House affairs committee.

For Canadians who are interested in this issue, both reports by the procedure and House affairs committee and the testimony that is on the record there would be a benefit in trying to get a better handle on some of the issues that are at play and some of the very real challenges that Canadians and the country would face in the event of a pandemic election. That is why the NDP has worked hard in this Parliament to make Parliament work and to try to find and broker compromises that would allow us to respond to the needs of people here in Canada to get us through the pandemic and to make sure that partisan politics are not distracting us from that very important task.

Government Orders

When it comes to the bill itself, I will say that the procedure and House affairs committee has heard consistently that there needs to be more flexibility than our current system allows, and in a few different ways, in order to make sure of how things will progress if we have a pandemic election. Of course, we have heard from many sides of the House today that the best way to protect both public health and our democracy during this pandemic is to avoid having an election.

We know that it takes effort on all sides of the House, but principally we need a government that is willing to work in good faith with the other parties in order to define its path forward and to define its pandemic response. We have seen the government do this at various times during the pandemic so far. We have been able to find that path forward, and I think that as long as that spirit of collaboration persists on the government benches, we will be able to continue to find that path forward until it is rightly and properly safe to have an election and let Canadians decide what they liked, what they did not, whose interventions they appreciated and whose they did not, and what they want in terms of a government as we get out of the pandemic and get on with the recovery in earnest.

What are some of the things that Bill C-19 would do?

Bill C-19 would grant an additional adaptation power to the Chief Electoral Officer, which we think is a good thing. There is clearly going to be a need to adapt some things on the fly, as it were, in response to emerging conditions. We think it makes sense, because the Chief Electoral Officer already has power to adapt the act, that we would add public health explicitly as a consideration that the Chief Electoral Officer could take into account when exercising that power to adapt.

There are some moves in the right direction in terms of long-term care and trying to clear some of the legislative roadblocks to conducting a vote safely in long-term care facilities. I am not sure that the bill addresses all of the issues there, but certainly being able to have one polling station per institution, which the legislation currently does not allow for, is an important change. This would provide flexibility for Elections Canada in order to make sure that legislative requirements would not cause Elections Canada either to require the same people to move from institution to institution—which clearly is not a good idea during the pandemic, and in many cases not consistent with local public health orders—or, just as bad or worse from the point of view of democracy, to cancel a polling station in a long-term care facility because of an inability to do it at one facility only.

• (1350)

One of the important themes to bear in mind for members as we debate this legislation and for Canadians as they consider this larger point about a pandemic election is that our job is twofold: It is not only to protect public health, although it is obviously also that, and very importantly that, but to protect democracy as well.

If we have an election during the pandemic that succeeds in protecting public health at the expense of people not voting, either because their perceptions and fears about personal health cause them to choose not to participate or else because people who would choose to participate face insurmountable barriers in doing so, then we would have failed. It is not enough to simply protect public

health; we also have to protect our democracy. That is a difficult thing to do, and that is one of the reasons that it is better if we do it in a preventive way by working well at the job we were elected to do, which is to defend the interests of Canadians, and prevent the triggering of an election in any event.

Of course, the NDP has asked many times in this House for the Prime Minister to commit to not unilaterally calling an election, which is now consistent with the recommendation in the final report of the procedure and House affairs committee. We have not had that commitment yet. I think that would go a long way to reassuring Canadians that we are not going to find ourselves in the unfortunate situation of a pandemic election.

There are some other things that the bill would do. I know my time is even more limited today than usual, given some of the proceedings of the House earlier today, but I do want to speak to some of things that have yet to be addressed in the legislation. By way of challenge, I would note something that the minister also noted in his lead speech on the bill, which is that these provisions are only set to come into force 90 days after this bill receives royal assent—in other words, after it passes through the House and the Senate and then gets the final nod from the Governor General.

That is an important point to bear in mind when we are addressing the general theme of a pandemic election: Even if the legislation were to pass and receive royal assent today, which of course is not going to happen, we would still have to wait another 90 days before an election could be held under these new rules, as opposed to the existing ones. That is important to mention. Although I appreciate that it will take time for Elections Canada to bring these new measures into force, I think it is important to the general point of getting better reassurances from the Prime Minister and the government about whether we will have an election or not. As much as some people in the House will like certain things about this bill, even if we were to pass it today, it would not be in effect for some time, so there is clearly a need to be working in collaboration for some time to come so as to avoid an election on the existing set of rules, which I think are not adequate to the circumstances.

I also know that there has been a lot of talk about whether we should accept ballots postmarked by election day, whether the cut-off should be election day for mail-in ballots and whether the cut-off should be the Tuesday after the election day, as this legislation foresees. There is something I want to put on the record about this point, because I think there is more than one way to solve this problem. I think the best way will be the one on which we can find as much agreement as possible. I beseech members in all parties to keep an open mind about this, because it is a very difficult circumstance.

I do think that having a hard cut-off point for when ballots are accepted that corresponds to election day really does put us in a risky situation. Some people may have applied in good faith for a ballot and did not get it in a timely manner and did as much as they could to ensure that it would get to Elections Canada.

• (1355)

This is recognizing, of course, that “doing as much as they could” will be different for different people. It matters whether someone has their own vehicle and whether the person is able to drive or not. It matters whether or not they have someone in their support network who can get them to a designated drop box outside a returning office. It matters how easy it is for them to get to the local mailbox, which can vary depending on the weather. There are all sorts of things that come into play. It is not like a normal election.

I want us to ensure that people who apply for a special ballot but do not get it in time, or who for other reasons are not able to get it in the mail or the drop box in time are not deprived of their right to vote. This is because I think we have a double duty here both to public health and to democracy.

It would be tragic if a number of Canadians were not able to exercise their right to vote because of administrative complications and deadlines beyond their control. I do think it would be harder to meet the normal deadlines of an election we are used to if we have a pandemic election.

I call for some open-mindedness on that, as we go forward. I am sure it will be the subject of some debate at committee when the bill finally gets there, as I am confident it will. The discussion is not over, and I think it is important that we perhaps at least agree on some of the guiding principles for that conversation before partisan lines get drawn too starkly in the sand.

I do think there are a number of things that are not addressed in the bill that ought to be addressed. For instance, there is the question of how to collect nomination signatures. Everyone in this House knows that 100 signatures from people who live in the riding are needed in order to be officially nominated as a candidate with Elections Canada. Usually that is done by going door to door with sheets of paper and pens. That is not going to make a lot of sense in the context of a pandemic election, so we need another way that is appropriate and safe to do that.

This bill does allow for people to apply for a special ballot online. While I think that is a great thing, a great tool, and that it will be wonderful for the people who are able to avail themselves of that because they have the technological literacy and the equipment in their own home, I am very mindful that there are a lot of people for whom that technology is not accessible. Those people are going to need to apply in person without having to print the documents at home.

We in the NDP recognize that we have an incredibly valuable resource at our fingertips, which is Canada Post. It has a number of postal outlets in every community across the country with people who already check ID for other reasons. I think it is well equipped to be a space for those who need it to go and apply for a special ballot in person.

We encourage the government and Elections Canada to look very seriously at leveraging that network to ensure that people can access their right to vote, if the time comes when they will be required to do so. Whether that is best done in the legislation or not is a question we are open to discussing, but seeing a commitment to

Statements by Members

that is important in recognizing all the people for whom online is simply not the best tool.

We have talked a little bit about the campus vote program. There are obviously some different opinions about whether that ought to continue, but we heard from student representatives at committee. Students very clearly continue to live and work on campuses, and we can increase access to the vote if we maintain that important program. It ought to be done.

I think one of the other things that we need to see, which I am sure Elections Canada will be addressing in its own way, is that we should know if there is anything legislatively required in order to do this in the best way before we approve the bill. There is the question of scrutineering in long-term care facilities. As much as we have talked a bit about how to staff those, there is still the question of having scrutineers come in.

Those are my initial thoughts. I can see the Speaker is anxious to get on with the orders of the day. Thank you very much for your grace in allowing me to conclude.

• (1400)

The Speaker: I want to thank the hon. member for Elmwood—Transcona for cutting short his speech. He will have another six minutes when we return to continue and finish his argument.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, happy International Women's Day to all of us in the House of Commons. We have now made history. As of October 2020, there are 100 women to celebrate in our Parliament across all party lines.

Today I want to celebrate the Daughters of the Vote. It was only four years ago that Daughters of the Vote first occupied the Centre Block chamber in person. They are in Ottawa virtually now. Let us celebrate across party lines the hon. member for Nunavut, who was among Daughters of the Vote just four years ago and now sits in this place and does this chamber such honour.

I want to celebrate our colleague, the first woman Minister of Finance. I am celebrating that a minister of finance is, at long last, a woman. Now I also want to celebrate some former colleagues. I want to celebrate my friend the Hon. Pat Carney, who served as a cabinet minister, negotiated the first Atlantic accord, negotiated the first free trade agreement and is now one of my constituents.

I thank them all. Let us hold each other up and give Daughters of the Vote a future to look forward to, one with more women in the House.

An hon. member: Hear, hear!

*Statements by Members***NOVA SCOTIA ELECTION**

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pride to offer congratulations to Nova Scotia's new premier, the MLA for Timberlea-Prospect, Iain Rankin. I thank former premier Stephen McNeil, who stewarded the province so well from 2013 to 2021.

Premier Rankin and his new cabinet were sworn in on February 23 by Lieutenant Governor Arthur J. LeBlanc. I have every confidence Premier Rankin will guide Nova Scotia well through these challenging times into a bright future ahead.

In an address after swearing his oath of office, Premier Rankin said, "We are writing a new chapter for sure, but it is one that reflects and respects our past." During his first full day as Nova Scotia's 29th premier, he announced a brand new initiative as part of the province's commitment to climate change action, supporting jobs in a renewable future.

I send my best wishes to Premier Rankin and his team. I know they will do Nova Scotia proud.

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NATIONAL ENGINEERING MONTH

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this month we are celebrating National Engineering Month across the country. It is an opportunity for young Canadians to learn about the exciting, fun and rewarding world of careers in engineering.

[*Translation*]

I graduated from the Université de Sherbrooke and am proud of the years I spent in environmental engineering and urban infrastructure before getting into politics.

I thank Engineers Canada for bestowing on me the designation of "Fellow".

With its immense natural resources, Canada is a country under construction, a land of opportunity for engineers. On this March 8, I especially want to acknowledge the women who have chosen to become engineers. With their accomplishments and determination, these women are building a better and more egalitarian Canada.

[*English*]

This week, we have a great opportunity to showcase the achievements of women and men in engineering and to share their successes and accomplishments.

[*Translation*]

Let us celebrate National Engineering Month across the country.

The Speaker: I would like to remind members that it is better to wear headsets. The sound is better for the interpreters, and everyone else, both online and in the House, can hear them better. We all want to hear what members have to say. That is a brief reminder for those continuing.

The hon. member for Brampton South.

● (1405)

[*English*]**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY**

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, happy International Women's Day. Today we celebrate the contributions of all women, especially entrepreneurs and leaders within our communities.

In my riding of Brampton South, I would like to thank women driving the feminist recovery. They are the small business owners, such as Mary from Cristina's Tortina Shop and Dipinder from Freshii; Parveen Rashid, Swati Thakur, Balbir Malhi, Maninder and Mandeep, who are doing charity work in Brampton; Melloney Campbell from StartUp Peel; and many more, such as Suzy Godefroy from the Downtown Brampton BIA, which has helped Brampton businesses throughout the pandemic.

Today we celebrate women like them, but we must continue to dismantle the barriers for women and work together. Initiatives such as GBA+, pay equity and a women's independence strategy will encourage the economic participation of women in the workforce. Together, we can uplift women within our communities and further Canada's journey toward gender equality.

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[*Translation*]**HEALTH CARE WORKERS**

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity on International Women's Day to thank our health care workers and to remind the self-proclaimed feminist Prime Minister that 82% of health care workers are women.

When the Prime Minister refuses to increase health transfers in the midst of a health crisis, it is more than just Quebec and the provinces that he is turning his back on. It is not François Legault he is saying no to; he is in fact saying no to all the nurses who have been making huge sacrifices for a year now to prop up our health care system. He is refusing to give them the financial resources needed to get some backup, which would finally enable them to take a break. In practical terms, he is refusing to ensure that the staff working at seniors' residences and long-term care centres have the resources needed to guarantee conditions worthy of their dedication. He is also treating doctors and all other health care professionals who save lives on the front lines as low-priority considerations.

As we grapple with the worst pandemic in a century, I invite the Prime Minister to think of these women today and to finally increase health transfers.

Statements by Members

MEDAL AWARDED BY MP FOR BOURASSA

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, International Women's Day and this year's theme #FeministRecovery give me the opportunity to honour eight exceptional women from my riding. I am awarding the Bourassa MP's Medal for the fourth consecutive year, this time highlighting the tremendous work being done by these women under normal circumstances and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I want to thank the hon. Senator Marie-Françoise Mégie, the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and my constituents in Bourassa for their participation.

The medal recipients are Maceline Alexandre Auguste, Jamal Awada, Leonarda Bonadonna, Stéphanie Germain, Arianne Hopkins, Maude Royal, Linda Therrien and Nancy Wiseman.

I invite my colleagues to please join me in extending heartfelt congratulations to these eight extraordinary women.

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[English]

HOUSING

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at the end of February, I was able to host an online town hall in my riding of Saskatoon West on the issue of affordable housing. The town hall was attended by our shadow minister for housing, along with a panel of local experts and a good number of constituents from all backgrounds.

Through my previous work as a home builder, and my wife's involvement with the Bridge on 20th Fellowship Centre for 20 years, giving a hand up to those who need it is something I take seriously. Helping everyone get an adequate roof over their head is a critical first step in addressing other challenges, such as drug addiction.

Unfortunately, the Liberal rapid housing initiative, as we learned from the experts and constituents who attended my town hall, falls far short of the real need. Saskatoon was left out of the initial phase of the program entirely, which forced individual projects to compete and undercut each other for the remaining money, with requests being nearly 10 times the available funding.

I will continue to listen to my constituents and fight for the affordable housing that Saskatoon needs. I only hope the Liberal government heeds this call.

* * *

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today on International Women's Day, we celebrate the accomplishments and leadership of women in Canada and around the world, and we recommit ourselves to moving forward to a future in which everyone has an equal chance to succeed. We know that when we invest in women's organizations and equality-seeking organizations, we are helping to build a stronger and fairer Canada.

Recently, I announced almost \$1 million in combined funding for two organizations in the great riding of Charlottetown, the P.E.I. Coalition for Women in Government and the Women's Network.

This funding will help these organizations to continue to advance gender equality, which lifts up all Islanders. I send congratulations and thanks to Sweta Daboo and Jillian Kilfoil for their leadership.

Since 2015, our government has invested over \$4 million in P.E.I. to empower a strong and vibrant women's movement. As we continue to navigate this pandemic, I am proud to be part of a government committed to an inclusive recovery that advances gender equality and supports those who need it most.

* * *

● (1410)

WOMEN LEADERS IN TORONTO—DANFORTH SMALL BUSINESS

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, happy International Women's Day. Our main streets have been hard hit over this pandemic, but women in my community have been at the forefront of standing up for small businesses and for strong, vibrant streets.

Most of my local BIAs are led by women and have women in leadership positions, such Jennifer Lay at the Riverside BIA, Christiane Tetreault at the Leslieville BIA, Tasneem Bandukwala at the Gerrard India Bazaar BIA, Dawn Chapman at Gerrard and Coxwell, Susan Puff for Broadview Danforth BIA, Mary Fragedakis for GreekTown BIA, and Tracey Kish and Clorraine Dennie for the Pape Village BIA. We just lost a tiger for our small businesses and BIAs with the East Chinatown Chamber of Commerce having lost Valerie Mah, a real dynamo for our community.

I thank all of these women for all the work they do to support our small businesses every year and especially in this past year.

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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mr. Ted Falk (Provencher, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is International Women's Day, and the theme is "Choose to challenge".

Brave survivors of online sexual exploitation are doing exactly that. Survivor Victoria Galy recently told the ethics committee that "Pornhub has become my human trafficker, and they have been relentless in doing so."

Statements by Members

Over 100 survivors of sexual exploitation and hundreds of non-governmental organizations are calling on the federal government to initiate a full criminal investigation of Canadian-based MindGeek, Pornhub's parent company. In recent years, MindGeek has received international attention due to the real exploitation of women and minors featured in some of its published content. Many of these practices are prohibited under existing Criminal Code provisions, yet charges have never been laid. This lack of enforcement is shameful.

Every Canadian, every woman, every girl deserves the full protection of the law. On International Women's Day, we affirm the rights of all women and girls to live free from violence and exploitation.

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LONG-TERM CARE HOMES

Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today marks the sombre one-year anniversary of COVID-19's claiming its first life in Canada, a resident of Lynn Valley Care Centre in north Vancouver. Since then, over 14,000 more seniors have perished due to the virus in long-term care centres, representing over two-thirds of the total COVID-19 deaths in Canada, and undoubtedly the biggest calamity of this pandemic.

This has hit very close to home, with west Vancouver's Capilano Long Term Care Home tragically experiencing one of the deadliest outbreaks in British Columbia this past winter.

With all long-term care patients and workers now vaccinated in B.C. and enough vaccines on the way for all eligible Canadians to get their first dose by early summer, we can look forward to better days ahead, but in the process, we must not forget the many neighbours and loved ones we have lost along the way and remember the tireless work of our health care professionals and front-line workers who have sheltered us from the worst of this pandemic.

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[*Translation*]

LOCAL BUSINESSES

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today, the riding of Richmond—Arthabaska, like many other areas of Quebec, became an orange zone. That means that many local businesses, such as restaurants and cultural institutions, can finally reopen their doors.

I want to take this opportunity to remind everyone of the importance of supporting them and buying local. These businesses are the heart of our communities. They are the soul of our city centres and municipalities. They need our support now more than ever to ensure their survival.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank all front-line workers. Whether they work in the health care, food, public safety or transportation industry, they have been playing an essential role since the beginning of the pandemic.

Speaking personally and on behalf of all Canadians, I want to sincerely thank them for their outstanding contribution.

• (1415)

[*English*]

COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, recently the hon. member for Niagara Falls and I co-hosted a virtual town hall with my constituents of the North Okanagan—Shuswap.

We heard that Marcia operates a bed and breakfast and has been left behind by the government's faulty programs.

Cheryl works with a small non-profit that has also been left out of relief programs.

Tyler started producing hand sanitizer when Canada had none last year, but Tyler and his employees were left out when the government spent \$252 million on Chinese sanitizer, and Tyler and other producers will be hit by another excise tax hike in April.

Monica works at a marina that is going to suffer because the government is jacking up costs and licensing fees for boaters.

These are more than stories; these are people left behind by the government. These people and all Canadians deserve better. They deserve a Conservative government that will work with them to secure our future.

* * *

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is International Women's Day, a day to celebrate women and girls, but today is also a day to fight. COVID-19 has had very serious consequences for women around the world. In Alberta we have not seen women's unemployment rates so high since the 1980s. In Canada, even after 50 years of promises, women still do not have the national child care program recommended by the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, and around the world girls are leaving school at alarming rates, crippling their future and making them vulnerable to early marriage and sexual violence.

As a woman who has fought for equality for women and girls my whole life, both in Canada and around the world, I will celebrate today; as a woman who has benefited from the leadership and strength of those who have come before me, I will celebrate today; and as a woman who has seen the power and the potential in my daughter and in all young women, I will celebrate today.

However, I will also fight.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on this International Women's Day, I want to recognize the tremendous effort and sacrifices female workers have made during the pandemic. I say “female workers” because all of today's front-line professions are female dominated.

A total of 82% of our caregivers are women. They are the backbone of our health care network and are saving lives. A total of 78% of our teachers are women. Every day they are coming up with new ways of educating and supporting our children during this difficult time. The majority of day care workers who care for young children are also women.

It is primarily women who are on the front line in the fight against the pandemic. They are the ones who have been putting themselves at risk from the beginning for our children, parents and grandparents.

Ladies, on behalf of the Bloc Québécois, I want to sincerely thank you. Happy International Women's Day.

* * *

[English]

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Ms. Nelly Shin (Port Moody—Coquitlam, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today we celebrate the contributions of women across Canada. With the advocacy of the Famous Five, Canadian women won their rightful status as persons in 1929 and voted for the first time in 1916. We have made some progress, but when it comes to violence against women, under the current Liberal government we are far behind.

There is still no government action on the report on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. The Prime Minister failed to acknowledge the systematic rape of Uighur women as genocide in Xinjiang by refusing to show up and vote on the motion. Women have been sexually assaulted at government quarantine sites, yet the minister continues to assert that these sites will keep Canadians safe and has failed to shut them down. In 2018 ombudsperson Walbourne informed the Minister of National Defence of a sexual misconduct complaint against General Vance, but the minister failed to act and the Prime Minister continues to cover up for the minister.

On behalf of the traumatized women who have yet to see justice, I would like to ask the Prime Minister when he will stop gaslighting women and start protecting them.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I had a hard time deciding how to pay tribute to my sisters on this International Women's Day.

I owe so much to so many women in my life. With the year we have had, I think it is important to focus on the contributions of women, all the women who, since the pandemic hit, have cared for

our communities in every possible way. From mothers to doctors, from teachers to nurses, from PSWs to cashiers, millions of Canadian women have stepped up and innovated.

I would like this women's day to be the start of some serious contemplation about how we should change the way these women, for whom caring for others is a way of life, are compensated and recognized by society. There can be no post-COVID recovery without a female-focused recovery.

[English]

If I may say so, happy Commonwealth Day.

ORAL QUESTIONS

● (1420)

[English]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when allegations surfaced about Gen. Vance, the minister of defence said, multiple times, that he was shocked to learn about them.

We know this is not true, because he had known for three years and he did nothing. It is obvious the minister never intended to act on this misconduct, and instead Liberals actually threatened members of the armed forces in order to keep them quiet.

The question is, why? Why was the minister of defence more interested in protecting his battle buddy than the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I disagree with the member's assertions.

I disagree with the testimony that Mr. Walbourne provided to the committee and look forward to setting the record straight when the opportunity comes to speak at the committee.

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one is either part of the investigation or part of the cover-up. There is no middle ground.

The minister chose to turn a blind eye, and he helped cover it up. I believed the ombudsman when he said that he tried to show the minister evidence, and the minister said, “No, I don't want to see it.”

Rather than protecting the very men and women he was supposed to be serving, the minister was more concerned with optics and keeping dirty little secrets.

Does the minister of defence realize he has failed to do his job? He has lost credibility, and he has lost trust.

Oral Questions

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said, any allegations that were ever brought forward were immediately put forward to the proper authorities. In fact, the very next day after informing me of the concerns, the former ombudsman was contacted by the Privy Council Office to begin an investigation. There was no evidence that the ombudsman relayed this to the original complainant despite repeated follow-ups by senior officials.

As I stated, I look forward to an opportunity to speak at committee once again.

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in November 2017, the Prime Minister said in an interview that when there are questions of sexual misconduct, many times Liberals know but say nothing.

It is 2021, and it is still happening. The Liberal minister of defence knew. He said nothing. Privy Council members knew. They said nothing. Liberal PMO staff knew. They apparently said nothing.

Today, on International Women's Day, it would be nice if the Prime Minister would stop defending the Liberals who knew about these allegations and said and did nothing.

Will he do that?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we have stated, we have no tolerance for misconduct.

No politician should ever be part of any type of investigation. Any time allegations were brought forward, they were always provided to the appropriate authorities so that an independent investigation could be conducted.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the national defence ombudsman met with the Minister of National Defence three years ago, on March 1, 2018, and told him about sexual harassment allegations against the chief of the defence staff.

In committee, the minister first stated that he was not aware of the allegations, but the ombudsman quickly contradicted him. The minister even refused to look at the evidence presented. Where is his courage? Where is his sense of responsibility?

Why did the Minister of National Defence act so dishonourably?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I completely disagree with the member's assertions. Any time an allegation was brought to my attention, it was always brought forward. No politician should ever be part of an investigation. It should always be done independently. That is why these allegations were immediately brought forward to the Privy Council Office: so that an independent investigation could be conducted. I disagree with the testimony provided by the former ombudsman and look forward to showing up at committee to set the record straight.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is no question that for three years the minister and the Prime Minister have been silent. For three years they have done absolutely nothing to resolve this situation. Today, what is the Prime Minister doing? He is defending his minister; and who is he blaming? He is blaming the ombudsman. What a disgraceful attitude.

How can a self-proclaimed feminist treat a sexual assault case with such little courage?

• (1425)

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are not going to take any lessons from the opposition when it comes to our actions in support of gender rights. We were the first government to have a prime minister who appointed a 50% female cabinet. The ministry of defence brought forward the Declaration of Victims Rights.

We have taken action when it comes to gender rights and we will continue to do so. We will not take any lessons from the previous government.

* * *

[*Translation*]

HEALTH

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, again last week, Quebec and the provinces asked the government to increase health transfers. The Prime Minister told them he would think about it after the pandemic. How many times do we have to go over this? We are in a health crisis. There need to be investments in health.

This needs to be done during the crisis, not after. There is a fire to put out. Everyone but the Liberals understands that.

When will they listen to reason and transfer money for health?

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have been there for the provinces and territories every step of the way.

[*English*]

We have made historic investments in the provinces and territories, pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, such as \$19 billion in safe restart money, \$2 billion for safe schools, purchasing all the personal protective equipment, funding the purchase of a vaccine acquisition, funding research and being there regarding outbreaks in long-term care. We will continue to be there for the provinces and territories as we get through this pandemic together.

*Oral Questions**[Translation]*

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this government claims to be feminist. Eighty-two per cent of care-givers are women. The government is abandoning these women by refusing to increase health transfers. The government basically told them that they were on their own during the first wave. Now it is saying the same thing during the second wave.

Now that vaccines are finally starting to arrive, these same women will be doing the vaccinating, and the burden is on them.

When will the government recognize their sacrifice and help them by increasing health transfers?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said repeatedly, we will be there for the provinces and territories as we have been all along. In fact, when we talk about gender equality today, it is important to remember that not only did we support immediate responses in long-term care, and support provinces and territories and the extraordinary expenses they faced as a result of the pandemic, but we also topped up the wages for the provinces' and territories' essential workers, who are often women.

We were there for the provinces and territories before the pandemic, we have been there throughout this historic health crisis and we will be there as we recover.

* * *

*[Translation]***NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it takes a lot of courage to file a complaint about sexual misconduct, but that is exactly what a woman in the Canadian Forces did. That complaint made it all the way to the desk of the minister of defence, but he did nothing about it.

What will the Prime Minister do to protect women in the Canadian Forces?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have absolutely no tolerance for misconduct. Our government brought in the Declaration of Victims Rights. Currently, we have Justice Fish reviewing the military justice system. We actually have an independent panel currently trying to deal with systemic racism and gender bias. We will continue this work. This is the work that we started as a government. We need to continue this so that we can prevent situations like this from happening at all.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it takes incredible courage to come forward with a complaint about sexual misconduct. That is exactly what a woman did in the Canadian Forces. That complaint made it all the way to the desk of the defence minister, who did nothing about it. That sends a message to all women in the Canadian Forces that they will not be listened to and that they are not safe. That is wrong. This does not stop with the defence minister: This goes all the way to the Prime Minister.

What will the Prime Minister do to make sure women in the Canadian Forces are safe?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I disagree with the member's assertions. Our government has absolutely no tolerance for this type of inappropriate sexual behaviour. As I have said, any allegations that were brought forward were always taken to the appropriate authorities. No politician or elected official should ever be involved in any type of investigation. These should be done independently so that there is confidence in the process. We will always support those who come forward.

● (1430)

[Translation]

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is International Women's Day, a day when we celebrate strong women who had the courage to break barriers and inspire the generations that followed them.

Women in our Canadian Armed Forces have the right to proudly serve alongside men as their equals. However, when the Minister of National Defence was informed of serious allegations of sexual misconduct at the highest level, he did not take action. How will he repair the harm he has done?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I disagree with the member's assertions. There is a lot more work that needs to be done, but the assertions that the member made are absolutely wrong. Any time information is brought forward, it is always taken to the appropriate authorities, but I agree with the member that a lot more work needs to be done to root this out. This is going to take a significant effort. It is an effort that should have started a long time ago, before our government was elected. We are going to continue that work because we believe in it. We have to get this done, and we will.

[Translation]

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, for three years, the Minister of National Defence ignored serious allegations against the former Canadian Armed Forces general.

Now another senior officer is being accused. A whistle-blower received threats. No action was taken, and the abusive behaviour was allowed to continue.

What will the minister do now to ensure that the Canadian Armed Forces are free from harassment?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I completely agree with the member on where we need to take action so we can have an inclusive environment. We have done considerable work, but we have a lot more work to do. We actually passed the declaration of victims rights bill, which, by the way, died on the Order Paper with the previous government. We have currently a review of the military justice system on how we can move forward. SMRC is also moving forward. We are currently looking at what type of independence needs to be provided. We have an independent panel on systemic racism and gender bias.

I am looking forward to those recommendations so we can continue the progress that we have already started, because our women deserve to have an inclusive place in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when faced with serious allegations of sexual misconduct within the top ranks of the Canadian Forces, the Prime Minister and the defence minister failed to act. Now a whistleblower has been threatened to secure his silence. Senior officers who may themselves be complicit remain in key positions within the chain of command.

Victims and whistle-blowers must be able to come forward without fear of reprisal. How will the defence minister protect victims and ensure that those who may stand accused will not interfere to protect themselves?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we want survivors to come forward. We want them to be able to put forward their allegations. They will be heard. They will be protected. At no time did any staff member in my office ever speak with any of the callers. Any insinuation that any political staff ever reached out to the caller is absolutely false.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, people who have security clearances are thoroughly investigated for issues that might compromise them, like affairs, potential criminal behaviour and other actions that could open them up to external influence or blackmail.

In 2018, the ombudsman offered the defence minister evidence of sexual misconduct by his chief of the defence staff, but he refused it. Last week, he claimed he did not know it existed, but clearly it did. His own staff flagged it.

Did the minister tell the relevant security services that he knew of potentially compromising evidence against his own chief of the defence staff?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, I disagree with the assertions that the member has made. I disagree with the testimony that the former ombudsman has made. Any allegations brought forward were immediately taken to the appropriate authorities, in this case, because it is a Governor in Council appointment we were talking about, to the Privy Council, and immediate action was taken.

In the former ombudsman's own testimony, the Privy Council Office contacted him the very next day. That is what action is about. We will always take this very seriously because we need to create an inclusive environment. That is exactly what our govern-

ment and I have been working toward in the Canadian Armed Forces from day one.

● (1435)

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister himself is the top authority. In security clearance vetting, people are asked about their families, about their previous jobs and previous addresses. They are asked about “parallel relationships” as code for extramarital affairs. Changing circumstances reports are issued for security purposes about divorces and financial transactions. The minister knows all this, and security services need detailed information on everyone who has a clearance.

When the minister was made aware of evidence of sexual misconduct by his chief of the defence staff, did he tell the security services?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a former police officer and a former member of the Canadian Armed Forces, absolutely, first, know exactly where to go, and that is exactly where we went. We went to the Privy Council, which is in charge of Governor in Council appointments, to take a look at any type of allegation. I could not agree more. However, we also have to realize that the former chief of the defence staff was appointed by the previous government. Those are the things that we need to get to the bottom of. We will be looking at a review to see what actually happened there.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what is clear is that the Liberals are all just talk. They are all just total hypocrites when it comes to listening and believing women. He had all the power and all the facts. He had the tools and it was his duty to investigate. The ombudsman says that after talking with him, the minister cancelled seven meetings. His work was “guttled”, “hostile” and “toxic”. He says there was a “hit job”, “a cover-up” to get rid of him, and months later he resigned in frustration.

Why did the Liberals actually use all their tools to silence victims and force out a whistle-blower to protect their buddies?

The Speaker: Before going to the minister, I want to remind hon. members that calling other members names is not allowed. It is not parliamentary language. This is just a reminder, and I am sure it will sink in.

The hon. minister.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I stated earlier, I disagree with the former ombudsman's testimony. I look forward to—in fact I welcome—an opportunity to go and speak at the next committee meeting.

When it comes to the horrible situation some of our women have been forced into, as I stated, we want our survivors to come forward and they will be protected, but we have a lot more work to do. We will continue to do that to ensure that we create an inclusive environment for everyone to be able to serve in the Canadian Armed Forces.

* * *

[Translation]

HEALTH

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, two weeks ago, the Prime Minister said that he was addressing the glitches with the mandatory hotel quarantine. “Glitches” is an understatement.

The situation is getting chaotic, even dangerous. The government is incapable of ensuring the safety of the people it is responsible for. Things are so bad that people are saying they would rather pay a fine and suffer the consequences than stay in a hotel under these conditions.

Can the Prime Minister tell us how many people chose to pay a fine instead of quarantining in a hotel?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada has some of the strongest protective measures at the border to prevent the importation of COVID-19. We continue to work to add layers of protection to ensure that we understand who is carrying the virus, how infections are entering the country and, as we see the rise of variants of concern, how the virus is shifting and shaping. We will continue to ensure that travellers are safe when they enter Canada and that Canadians are safe as well.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Mr. Speaker, here is another example of the government's mismanagement of the hotel quarantine process.

The rules apply to travellers arriving by plane, but not to those arriving by land. The upshot is that people are flying to Burlington and then taking a bus across the border to avoid the mandatory hotel quarantine. These measures are supposed to limit non-essential travel by all means of transportation.

Why are non-essential travellers not all subject to the same rules? It would make sense for them to be, would it not?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from the Bloc Québécois knows full well that we have some of the strictest measures in the world. There are measures designed for air travel, of course, but there are also additional measures for people travelling by land.

Would the Bloc Québécois prefer that we not have any measures and stop screening travellers at our air and land borders? Is that what she is saying?

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I do not understand, because soon we are going to hear that tourists are skipping quarantine by crossing the border at Roxham Road.

Oral Questions

The whole saga around hotel quarantines is pathetic. What we wanted the government to do was to manage the return of travellers at Christmas in order to prevent the COVID-19 variants from entering Canada. That was at Christmas. It took until February for the government to act, and by then, the variants were already in our schools. Two weeks later, everyone had already figured out how to skirt the rules by crossing the border any way except by air.

Why is the federal government always dropping the ball?

• (1440)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I understand that the Bloc Québécois members are quite happy that they were asking so many questions at Christmas. They probably asked questions before, and they will probably ask more questions after. That is their job.

Meanwhile, we are taking action. We have taken some of the toughest measures in the world at our border for air and land crossings to guard against COVID-19 and protect all Canadians.

I understand from their criticisms that perhaps the Bloc members would prefer not to have such strict measures, but we are committed to those measures.

* * *

[English]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the public has just learned that in February a senior naval officer in the Canadian Armed Forces alerted the Liberal defence minister's office to an allegation of sexual misconduct against the chief of the defence staff, Art McDonald. In response, it is alleged that he was told to report his concern elsewhere. Since then, the senior naval officer has received anonymous phone calls threatening his military career.

Is the government investigating this shocking report of intimidation, and why is the defence minister failing to protect whistleblowers and victims of sexual harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces? Is that not his duty?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, any allegations that were brought forward were immediately reported to the appropriate authorities. In this case, a complaint of misconduct was received by the switchboard and immediately relayed to an official in the Department of National Defence. At no time did any staff in my office speak with the caller. Any insinuation that any political staff ever reached out to this caller is false.

We want people to come forward. They will be sent to the appropriate authorities so that any allegations can be investigated.

Oral Questions

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the last Parliament, the status of women committee studied the treatment of women in the Canadian Armed Forces. Witnesses said that their concerns were ignored and that after reporting sexual misconduct within the Canadian Armed Forces, they faced retaliation from their superiors. Women were passed over for promotions, and some even saw the reports being handled by those who were accused of misconduct in the first place. The government knew about issues occurring.

Where was the action, and what has the government done to deal with these concerns?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I could not agree with the member more. More needs to be done in the Canadian Armed Forces, and that is exactly what our government started doing. More importantly, we actually got the declaration of victim rights bill passed. This was very important, because it actually died on the Order Paper with the previous government. We are also currently reviewing the military justice system with Justice Fish, so we can look at changes to be even more responsive. We want to ensure we give survivors the opportunity to come forward so they can be heard, so that allegations can be investigated, ensuring that no retributions can ever come on them as well.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the status of women recommended in 2019 that the government implement all 10 recommendations of the 2015 Deschamps report, “External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces”. The chief of the defence staff responded by launching Operation Honour, but, as we have seen, even the top ranks of our military remain plagued by sexual misconduct.

How could Operation Honour be effective if the Minister of National Defence ignores reports about sexual misconduct at the highest levels of the armed forces?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I completely disagree with the member's assertions, as I stated. I look forward to going to committee and welcome my opportunity to speak there.

We take every allegation seriously. There is a lot more work that needs to be done. Great work has been done by Dr. Preston within the SMRC, where military justice is being currently reviewed as well. More importantly, we actually have an independent panel made up of former serving members this is going to review systemic racism, including gender bias.

A lot more work is going to happen and we have a lot more work to do. Everything is currently on the table so that we can actually make changes. This is the progress we have started. We are not going to stop until we have—

The Speaker: The member for London—Fanshawe.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on International Women's Day it is important to acknowledge the fact that women who report sexual harassment and violence are often not listened to or taken seriously, making it hard for them to come forward. The Liberal government has proven through recent incidents that it is a part of this problem. The Minister of Na-

tional Defence refused to even hear allegations against a top member of our armed forces, and the Prime Minister's Office knew about these allegations and did nothing.

How can the Prime Minister expect women to be confident in coming forward when the government itself refuses to show leadership?

• (1445)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I stated, I look forward to going to committee to set the record straight when it comes to the former ombudsman's testimony. We do have a lot more work to do. Progress has been made with having a Declaration of Victims Rights and a review of the military justice system.

We are looking at other opportunities so we can create greater independence as well. We are going to build on the work we have done. A lot more work needs to be done and a lot more review needs to be done. We need to make sure that we work harder to create an inclusive environment for all members of the Canadian Armed Forces, especially women.

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INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last Thursday we heard very sad news that another indigenous woman had been murdered in the city of Winnipeg. She was loved and cherished by her family, community and friends. I send my love and sympathies. Government inaction is costing the lives of women, girls and 2SLGBTQ2IA individuals. Her life mattered and her life was of value.

How many more sisters have to be stolen before the government finally implements the 231 calls for justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls?

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I extend my deepest condolences to the family of the individual the member referenced. Our hearts are with the survivors and families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and two-spirited and gender-diverse people.

Oral Questions

In response to the first-ever national public inquiry on the ongoing national tragedy, our government is working with all provincial and territorial governments, as well as with indigenous leaders, survivors and families, to develop a national action plan that sets a clear road map to ensure that indigenous women and girls and two-spirited and gender-diverse people are safe.

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WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this International Women's Day comes after a long year of combatting COVID. Women have been at the forefront of the pandemic's impact. As we move forward toward recovery, can the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality update the House on how the recent launch of the feminist response and recovery fund would provide support to essential organizations working on the front lines to ensure the safety and security of women?

Ms. Gudie Hutchings (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for her advocacy and hard work on women's issues.

Canada's recovery from the pandemic depends on ensuring that Canadian women are working and safe. The \$100-million feminist response and recovery fund will support local, regional and national efforts to end violence against women and girls, improve their economic security and increase their participation in decision-making roles.

Our government is investing in women's and equity-seeking organizations because it is one of the best ways to advance gender equality. We have a strong track record of supporting the women's movement, and we are continuing that support when they need it the most.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 2015, the then chief of the defence staff, General Vance, launched Operation Honour with the mandate to address and eliminate sexual misconduct within the military. Now we learn that allegations of sexual misconduct against General Vance were brought to the minister's and Prime Minister's attention in 2018, and they actively chose to ignore them.

With today being International Women's Day, why should women place their trust in the Prime Minister when he deliberately ignores sexual misconduct within the military at the highest ranks?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said, any allegations that were brought to our attention were always taken to the appropriate authorities, with absolutely no tolerance for this type of behaviour. No elected official should ever be part of an investigation. In this very case, after we were informed, the former ombudsman was contacted by the Privy Council the very next day so that an investigation could begin. There is no evidence that the ombudsman relayed the original infor-

mation, despite repeated follow-ups by senior officials. We take this very seriously.

Our government has taken every step to make sure we create a greater opportunity for women in the Canadian Armed Forces. We need to create an inclusive environment for all women in the Canadian Armed Forces.

● (1450)

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 2018 at the status of women committee, the minister said, "inappropriate sexual behaviour of any kind is completely unacceptable and will not be tolerated in the Canadian Armed Forces." Now we know that those were just words and nothing more. It is clear that the Prime Minister likes to say he stands up for women, but when it actually comes down to standing up for women, the government frequently and consistently turns its back on women.

How many more women need to come forward before the Prime Minister takes sexual misconduct seriously?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we want all survivors to have the confidence to come forward so they can be heard and protected and to make sure their allegations can be investigated.

When it comes to the actions of our government, we will take no lessons from the previous government. Bill C-77, the declaration of victims rights, died on the Order Paper in the previous government, but we passed it. Plus, SMRC currently provides 24/7 support to anyone for these types of matters anywhere in the world.

We will continue this work. We know we have a lot more work to do, but we will not stop or rest until we have zero tolerance.

* * *

PUBLIC SERVICES AND PROCUREMENT

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today Pfizer told Parliament that the original contract the Liberals signed with them had no vaccines scheduled to be delivered in Canada until sometime in 2021, even though other countries were receiving them in December 2020. We also found out that it was not until late November, after the issue became a political hot potato, that the Liberals went back to Pfizer to renegotiate.

It appears the Liberals negotiated a position for Canada that had us at least two months behind other countries. Why?

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, is the opposition upset that our government was able to accelerate vaccine deliveries? We received doses sooner and were among the first countries to begin vaccinations in December. Will we hear next that they are upset we are receiving an additional 1.5 million doses in March, earlier than planned, to bring us to 8 million doses for this quarter?

We will keep bringing vaccines into this country for Canadians.

Oral Questions

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today Pfizer told Parliament that unlike what happened in other developed economies, the Liberals did not negotiate for December deliveries of vaccines in the original contracts. In fact, they did not even bother to ask Pfizer for December deliveries until late November. This cost Canadians lives and jobs and left our country more vulnerable to the spread of variants.

Can the minister confirm what Pfizer said today? Did the Liberals use tax dollars to pay a premium to get a photo op on a tarmac, only to be followed by months without the Pfizer vaccine?

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wish the hon. member a very happy International Women's Day.

I would like to correct the record. We were able to accelerate vaccine deliveries because of our strong relationship with Pfizer. Indeed, it was because of that relationship that it has committed to another 1.5 million doses in March, with an additional three million doses, to bring us up to 36.5 million doses for Canadians prior to the end of June and 117.9 million doses prior to the end of September.

* * *

[Translation]

PENSIONS

Ms. Andr anne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, seniors are most affected by COVID-19 but have received the least support from the federal government. It is even worse for women, who are more likely to live in precarious circumstances after age 65.

That is why the Bloc Qu b cois is calling for a \$110-a-month increase to the old age security pension for seniors 65 and over, as we think of our mothers and grandmothers in particular.

Will the government acknowledge that the pandemic is hard on seniors, especially women, and will it increase this pension?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what the Bloc motion today fails to recognize is the full range of challenges that seniors face and that we have been supporting seniors with direct financial support and enhanced programs.

Our government recognizes the pressures on older seniors. As seniors age, their financial security often decreases and their needs increase. That is why our government recognizes this need and will help address it by increasing old age security by 10% for seniors aged 75 and up.

We have taken significant actions to support seniors, especially during COVID-19. We will always stand with seniors.

• (1455)

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the pension should be increased at the age of 65, not 75.

Seniors are the people who have endured the longest and strictest lockdowns. They are affected the most by rising prices. They are

clearly affected the most by the virus. They are affected the most by isolation, which hurts their mental health and accelerates cognitive decline in the most fragile individuals.

During the election campaign, the government promised to increase old age security. Its promise to seniors was inadequate, but now they are getting nothing. When will the government finally increase this pension starting at the age of 65?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, many Canadians have faced significant challenges due to COVID-19, and to support seniors, our government issued special one-time payments for those who receive OAS, GIS and the GST credit. Altogether, we have provided over \$1,500 for a low-income senior couple, all tax free. We will continue to support seniors and all Canadians during this pandemic. We remain committed to increasing old age security by 10% for seniors aged 75 and up.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in March 2018 the military ombudsman met with the defence minister to confidentially advise him of an allegation made against the head of the Canadian military. The minister refused to look at the evidence and the meeting ended. The next day the Prime Minister's department asked the ombudsman to divulge the details of the case. He refused to break his word and tendered his resignation. Three years later the matter became public, yet the minister feigned surprise.

Who was the minister trying to protect: himself or the Prime Minister?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, no elected official should ever be part of an investigation. That is why I immediately informed the PCO, which is in charge of Governor in Council appointments, to take up this matter, and it immediately contacted the ombudsman, whose job it is to investigate allegations. I look forward to going to committee to testify there once again.

Oral Questions

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Defence has been complicit in covering up allegations of sexual harassment against the former chief of the defence staff. It is appalling that on International Women's Day 2021, our women in uniform are afraid to speak out against sexual misconduct and inappropriate behaviour, all under the watch of our feminist Prime Minister. What happened to honour? What happened to ministerial accountability?

Will the minister take responsibility and admit to participating in this cover-up?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have stated, we have always taken every allegation seriously. No elected official should ever be part of an investigation. That is why it was immediately reported to the appropriate authorities, in this case the Privy Council Office, which is charge of Governor in Council appointments, so that it could follow up with the ombudsman, whose job it is to look at allegations, and that is exactly what was done. I look forward to testifying at committee at the earliest opportunity.

* * *

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the government's agenda for legislation in Parliament this week, we see that its priorities include ensuring that it can have an election and ensuring that convicted criminals have it easier. What is missing is the Canada-U.K. trade deal, ensuring free trade with one of our most important and largest trading partners. The government missed one deadline already and had to sign a temporary agreement. The next deadline is just weeks away.

What is the plan, or will we need to sign a temporary temporary agreement?

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud of the Canada-U.K. trade continuity agreement. We have worked with the United Kingdom so that we can provide predictability for Canadian exporters and Canadian businesses. That is what they get right now with the continuity agreement. I am looking forward to working with my hon. colleague and all members on all sides of the House to make sure that this important agreement gets passed and continues to provide the tariff reduction rates and the continuity that our businesses so need at this time.

* * *

• (1500)

[Translation]

WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when we asked Canadians to stay at home to limit the spread of COVID-19, we recognized that home was not a safe place for everyone. Today, as we celebrate International Women's Day, it is important to recognize that the fight continues.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality tell us what our government has done to sup-

port victims and survivors of gender-based violence during COVID-19, particularly in Quebec?

Ms. Gudie Hutchings (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we took swift action to help women and children fleeing violence by granting up to \$100 million to women's shelters and other organizations.

In Quebec, we are providing over \$8 million for groups that offer shelter to women and victims of sexual assault. We provided funding to over 200 groups in Quebec, including the Montreal Sexual Assault Centre and Auberge Madeleine. Let us put an end to fear and violence.

* * *

[English]

HEALTH

Ms. Lianne Rood (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister said that international farm workers arriving on flights would be exempt from hotel quarantine until March 15, but now we are hearing from farmers from the Prairies and the Maritimes that the Liberal government is forcing workers to quarantine in Toronto hotels before they proceed to farms. Left hand, right hand. As the largest number of farm workers is due to arrive now, will the minister do the right thing and give farmers certainty about getting workers straight to their farms without delay?

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the provinces, territories and indeed my ministerial colleagues for working so hard to ensure the arrival of temporary foreign workers so they can do their important work for Canadians in a safe manner. This is an all-hands-on-deck approach whereby we are making sure that temporary foreign workers have a safe place to quarantine and have supports from the provinces, territories, and indeed the farmers, and of course the federal government will continue that hard work.

* * *

JUSTICE

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Mr. Speaker, citizens across Canada, including constituents in my riding, have been writing me to express their horror at the Senate amendments to Bill C-7. Canadians affected with mental illness want hope, not death. Why is the government opening the door for their untimely death rather than providing legal protection and hope?

Hon. David Lametti (Minister of Justice, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Senate reviewed the bill and did its homework by proposing very thoughtful amendments to the bill, and we have responded.

Oral Questions

Mental illness is a very serious illness. It is an illness. It needs to be treated as an illness. It was always going to be looked at in the second stage of the bill. We are going to continue to do that, but this time within the frame of the Senate amendments.

* * *

HEALTH

Hon. Alice Wong (Richmond Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is International Women's Day, the day we should be celebrating the achievements of women across Canada. Instead, we read headlines about women being the victims of sexual assault in government-mandated quarantine facilities. When will the government reverse its practice of turning a blind eye to sexual assault? When will it take steps to protect our vulnerable women in government-sanctioned quarantine facilities?

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, every woman deserves to live a life free of violence and harassment. Our government takes these allegations very seriously. They are being fully investigated, and we have put into place processes to ensure this does not happen again.

* * *

● (1505)

COVID-19 EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, happy International Women's Day.

From the beginning of COVID-19, our government has been doing everything we can to keep Canadians healthy, safe and supported. However, many workers continue to face challenges in these uncertain times, particularly when they are laid off in the middle of a pandemic. Last week, I met with employees of Stanfield's garment factory here in Truro after they suddenly received layoff notices. Many of them are women who have worked there for decades. As their MP, I am very concerned.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion please provide an update on our government's extension of EI benefits that will help hard-working Canadians like my constituents—

The Speaker: The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to keeping Canadians safe and supported during the pandemic. That is why we introduced Bill C-24, which extends the number of weeks available under EI regular benefits. With some workers beginning to exhaust their benefits in late March, this bill will ensure that Canadians have the support they need.

We will be debating Bill C-24 this afternoon. It is a straightforward bill that all members have had before them since February 25. I hope all parties recognize that the allotted time for debate is sufficient and send this bill to committee for further study this week so we can get Canadians the support they need.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, humanity is facing one of the biggest ethical issues of our time to ensure equitable distribution of vaccines everywhere in the world. If we do not get this right, 30% more people will die, Canadians will be exposed to more dangerous variants and our global economic recovery will be delayed by years. Now, when the world needs Canada to step up and support the waiving of intellectual property rights so that poor countries can access vaccines, the Liberals have sided with big pharma once again. Will the government vote to waive IP rules this week?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of International Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member mentioned, equitable access to vaccines is the top priority for our government. In fact, I am pleased to note that COVAX, over the past couple of weeks, has delivered millions of vaccines to dozens of countries in the developing world. It is a good-news story that vaccines are being distributed right around the world.

When it comes to intellectual property, we have been very open to this conversation and have been open to hearing from the proponents of this proposal since the very beginning.

* * *

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, terrible news: Another indigenous person has been killed in the course of a wellness check; another member of the Tla-o-qui-aht Nation, the same nation to which Chantel Moore belonged when she was killed by the Edmundston, New Brunswick, police. The killing over the last weekend in February was on Meares Island on the traditional territory of the indigenous people of the Tla-o-qui-aht Nation. That nation issued a statement pointing out so tragically that there have been more members killed in wellness checks by police and RCMP than have died from COVID.

When will the minister take responsibility? When will this government call an inquiry and end the threat that wellness checks pose to Canadians, indigenous and non-indigenous?

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I share the member's sadness and concern about this tragedy, and our thoughts are with the community.

In situations such as this, it is absolutely essential that there be a timely, transparent and independent investigation in order to provide answers to the many difficult questions that the people of that community quite rightly have.

We welcome and support the appointment of an indigenous civilian monitor for the first time to help oversee that investigation, and he will have full access to the investigation. We will continue to monitor this situation, and we are working with the RCMP and police right across the country to find a better response to these tragic situations and to help keep people safe.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—FINANCIAL SITUATION OF THE ELDERLY

The House resumed from February 25 consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: It being 3:07 p.m., pursuant to an order made on Monday, January 25, the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion of the member for Shefford relating to Business of Supply.

Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

• (1525)

The Speaker: On Thursday, February 25, the House leaders of the recognized parties informed me that they were satisfied that the new electronic voting system is ready to be used. Accordingly, I would like to take this opportunity to share some information that members may find useful on the new process for the taking of recorded divisions.

Voting is one of the most fundamental rights of a member of Parliament. The ability of members to participate fully in this process is of the utmost importance. This first hybrid vote using the electronic voting system marks another adaptation of our normal practices and procedures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Translation]

As per the terms of the special order, votes will continue to take place as per the usual process for those in the chamber. Members present in the House must stay in their seat for the duration of the voting period and should not vote via the electronic system.

[English]

For members participating remotely, the new process will be as follows.

Members will receive notifications informing them of the upcoming vote. Once the vote starts, they will have 10 minutes to cast a vote via the electronic system, indicating whether they are for, are against, or are abstaining from voting on the motion.

Members will then be required to take a photo to validate their identity and submit their vote.

Members may change their vote during the 10-minute period, but all attempts must be completed before the end of the voting period for the vote to be recorded.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

After the in-person vote is completed, members may continue to vote via the electronic system for the remainder of the voting period. During this time, votes cast via the system will be displayed on the broadcast feed and no points of order or interventions are permitted during this period.

When the House resumes its business, I will invite any members who encountered technical difficulties to identify themselves using the “raised hand” feature to cast their vote.

[English]

In accordance with the motion adopted on February 22, 2021, I will then entertain any concerns raised by a House officer of a recognized party regarding the visual identity of a member voting remotely, where a possible issue has been indicated by the system. It is the responsibility of members to be ready to respond should concern be raised about their photo, failing which, as per the terms of the motion, the vote will not be recorded.

Once these steps are completed, the table will then compile the results of the vote and the Clerk will announce the final results to the House.

IT ambassadors are available before, during and after a vote to assist members if they encounter difficulties with the system or for any technical matter related to the virtual sitting.

It remains the responsibility of members to ensure that they have adequate connectivity to fully participate in the parliamentary proceedings and that they fully complete all steps of the voting process.

[Translation]

Finally, decorum remains an important part of any sitting of the House, whether members are participating in person or virtually. I would ask that members continue to demonstrate respect for the dignity of the House when participating or intervening in proceedings, including being judicious in the backgrounds they choose and their attire.

• (1530)

[English]

I would like to thank members for their participation in the simulations and for their feedback regarding the electronic voting system. As we continue to learn and adapt to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, I am continually impressed by the innovation, creativity and resilience of members and their staff, as well as the administration employees who support us as we serve our constituents through this difficult period.

We will now proceed to the taking of the first recorded division using the new electronic voting system.

• (1545)

[Translation]

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

*Business of Supply**(Division No. 62)*

YEAS

Members

| | |
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| Abouttaif | Aitchison |
| Albas | Alleslev |
| Allison | Angus |
| Arnold | Ashton |
| Atwin | Bachrach |
| Baldinelli | Barlow |
| Barrett | Barsalou-Duval |
| Beaulieu | Benzen |
| Bergen | Bergeron |
| Berthold | Bérubé |
| Bezan | Blaikie |
| Blanchet | Blanchette-Joncas |
| Blaney (North Island—Powell River) | Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis) |
| Block | Boudrias |
| Boulerice | Bragdon |
| Brassard | Brunelle-Duceppe |
| Calkins | Cannings |
| Carrie | Chabot |
| Champoux | Charbonneau |
| Chiu | Chong |
| Collins | Cooper |
| Cumming | Dalton |
| Dancho | Davidson |
| Davies | DeBellefeuille |
| Deltell | d'Entremont |
| Desbiens | Desilets |
| Diotte | Doherty |
| Dowdall | Dreeshen |
| Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry) | Duval |
| Epp | Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster) |
| Falk (Provencher) | Fast |
| Findlay (South Surrey—White Rock) | Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk) |
| Fortin | Gallant |
| Garrison | Gaudreau |
| Gazan | Généreux |
| Genuis | Gill |
| Gladu | Godin |
| Gourde | Gray |
| Green | Hallan |
| Harder | Harris |
| Hoback | Hughes |
| Jansen | Jeneroux |
| Johns | Julian |
| Kelly | Kent |
| Kitchen | Kmiec |
| Kram | Kurek |
| Kusie | Kwan |
| Lake | Larouche |
| Lawrence | Lehoux |
| Lemire | Lewis (Essex) |
| Liepert | Lloyd |
| Lobb | Lukiwski |
| MacGregor | MacKenzie |
| Maguire | Manly |
| Marcil | Martel |
| Masse | Mathysen |
| May (Saanic—Gulf Islands) | Mazier |
| McCauley (Edmonton West) | McDonald |
| McLean | McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo) |
| McLeod (Northwest Territories) | McPherson |
| Melillo | Michaud |
| Moore | Morantz |
| Morrison | Motz |
| Nater | Normandin |
| O'Toole | Patzer |
| Paul-Hus | Pauzé |
| Perron | Plamondon |
| Qaqqaq | Ratansi |

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|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Rayes | Redekopp |
| Reid | Rempel Garner |
| Richards | Rogers |
| Rood | Ruff |
| Sahota (Calgary Skyview) | Sangha |
| Saroya | Savard-Tremblay |
| Scheer | Schmale |
| Seeback | Shields |
| Shin | Shipley |
| Simard | Singh |
| Sloan | Soroka |
| Stanton | Steinley |
| Ste-Marie | Strahl |
| Stubbs | Sweet |
| Thériault | Therrien |
| Tochor | Trudel |
| Uppal | Van Popta |
| Vecchio | Vidal |
| Viersen | Vignola |
| Vis | Wagantall |
| Warkentin | Waugh |
| Webber | Williamson |
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NAYS

Members

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Alghabra | Amos |
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| Bains | Baker |
| Battiste | Beech |
| Bendayan | Bennett |
| Bessette | Bibeau |
| Bittle | Blair |
| Blois | Bratina |
| Brière | Carr |
| Casey | Chagger |
| Champagne | Chen |
| Cormier | Dabrusin |
| Damoff | Dhaliwal |
| Dhillon | Dong |
| Drouin | Dubourg |
| Duclos | Duguid |
| Duncan (Etobicoke North) | Dzerowicz |
| Easter | Ehsassi |
| El-Khoury | Ellis |
| Erskine-Smith | Fergus |
| Fillmore | Finnigan |
| Fisher | Fonseca |
| Fortier | Fragiskatos |
| Fraser | Freeland |
| Garneau | Gerretsen |
| Gould | Guilbeault |
| Hajdu | Hardie |
| Holland | Housefather |
| Hussen | Hutchings |
| Iacono | Ien |
| Jaczek | Joly |
| Jordan | Jowhari |
| Kelloway | Khalid |
| Khera | Koutrakis |
| Kusmierczyk | Lalonde |
| Lambropoulos | Lametti |
| Lamoureux | Lattanzio |
| Lauzon | Lebouthillier |
| Lefebvre | Lightbound |
| Long | Longfield |
| Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga) | MacAtlay (Cardigan) |
| MacKinnon (Gatineau) | Maloney |
| Martinez Ferrada | May (Cambridge) |

Government Orders

McCrimmon
McKay
McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)
Mendicino
Monsef
Murray
O’Connell
O’Regan
Powlowski
Regan
Rodriguez
Sahota (Brampton North)
Sajjan
Samson
Scarpaleggia
Schulte
Sgro
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Schiefke
Serré
Shanahan
Sidhu (Brampton East)
Simms
Spengemann
Tassi
Turnbull
van Koeverden
Vandenbeld
Virani
Wilkinson
Young
Zann

Besette
Bittle
Blair
Blanchette-Joncas
Blois
Boulerice
Brière
Cannings
Casey
Chagger
Champoux
Chen
Cormier
Damoff
DeBellefeuille
Desilets
Dhillon
Drouin
Duclos
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dzerowicz
Ehsassi
Ellis
Fergus
Finnigan
Fonseca
Fortin
Fraser
Fry
Garrison
Gazan
Gill
Green
Hajdu
Harris
Housefather
Hussen
Iacono
Jaczek
Joly
Jordan
Julian
Khalid
Koutrakis
Kwan
Lambropoulos
Lamoureux
Lattanzio
Lebouthillier
Lemire
Long
Lotis (Kitchener—Conestoga)
MacGregor
Maloney
Marcil
Masse
May (Cambridge)
McCrimmon
McGuinty
McKenna
McLeod (Northwest Territories)
Mendès
Michaud
Monsef
Murray
Normandin
Oliphant
Pauzé
Petipas Taylor
Powlowski
Qualtrough
Regan
Rodriguez

Bibeau
Blaikie
Blanchet
Blaney (North Island—Powell River)
Boudrias
Bratina
Brunelle-Duceppe
Carr
Chabot
Champagne
Charbonneau
Collins
Dabrusin
Davies
Desbiens
Dhaliwal
Dong
Dubourg
Duguid
Duvall
Easter
El-Khoury
Erskine-Smith
Fillmore
Fisher
Fortier
Fragiskatos
Freeland
Garneau
Gaudreau
Gerretsen
Gould
Guilbeault
Hardie
Holland
Hughes
Hutchings
Ien
Johns
Jones
Jowhari
Kelloway
Khera
Kusmierczyk
Lalonde
Lametti
Larouche
Lauzon
Lefebvre
Lightbound
Longfield
MacAulay (Cardigan)
MacKinnon (Gatineau)
Manly
Martinez Ferrada
Mathysen
May (Saanich—Gulf Islands)
McDonald
McKay
McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)
McPherson
Mendicino
Miller
Morrissey
Ng
O’Connell
O’Regan
Perron
Plamondon
Qaqqaq
Ratansi
Robillard
Rogers

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

* * *

ECONOMIC STATEMENT IMPLEMENTATION ACT, 2020

The House resumed from February 26 consideration of the motion that Bill C-14, An Act to implement certain provisions of the economic statement tabled in Parliament on November 30, 2020 and other measures, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: Pursuant to an order made on Monday, January 25, the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at second reading stage of Bill C-14.

● (1600)

[*English*]

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(*Division No. 63*)

YEAS

Members

| | |
|----------------|----------------|
| Alghabra | Amos |
| Anand | Anandasangaree |
| Angus | Arseneault |
| Arya | Ashton |
| Atwin | Bachrach |
| Badawey | Bagnell |
| Bains | Baker |
| Barsalou-Duval | Battiste |
| Beaulieu | Beech |
| Bendayan | Bennett |
| Bergeron | Bérubé |

Government Orders

| | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Romanado | Sahota (Brampton North) | Schmale | Seeback |
| Saini | Sajjan | Shields | Shin |
| Saks | Samson | Shiple | Sloan |
| Sangha | Sarai | Soroka | Stanton |
| Savard-Tremblay | Scarpaleggia | Steinley | Strahl |
| Schiefke | Schulte | Stubbs | Sweet |
| Serré | Sgro | Tochor | Uppal |
| Shanahan | Sheehan | Van Popta | Vecchio |
| Sidhu (Brampton East) | Sidhu (Brampton South) | Vidal | Viersen |
| Simard | Simms | Vis | Wagantall |
| Singh | Sorbara | Warkentin | Waugh |
| Spengemann | Ste-Marie | Webber | Williamson |
| Tabbara | Tassi | Wong | Yurdiga |
| Thériault | Therrien | Zimmer— 119 | |
| Trudeau | Trudel | | |
| Turnbull | Van Bynen | | |
| van Koeverden | Vandal | | |
| Vandenbeld | Vaughan | | |
| Vignola | Virani | | |
| Weiler | Wilkinson | | |
| Wilson-Raybould | Yip | | |
| Young | Zahid | | |
| Zann | Zuberi— 214 | | |

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Finance.

(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

The Speaker: In the past year, the employees of the House of Commons administration helped set the stage so that members of Parliament could meet a challenge like no other: continuing their work during the global pandemic. Thanks to the talents and dedication of the men and women across the entire organization, the House has been able to conduct its business on behalf of Canadians, even if we cannot be together in person for the time being. I am very proud of this.

Today, for the first time, members were able either to vote in person or to submit their vote through the electronic voting system. This solution offers the House another secure and reliable way to conduct its business over the next few months despite the constraints of the pandemic.

[*Translation*]

Over the past few months, the House of Commons has demonstrated that it can adapt to temporary constraints imposed by the pandemic. One day soon, I hope, we will come together in person in the House to continue our work on behalf of Canadians.

[*English*]

In the meantime, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the employees of the House administration. They have worked, and continue to work, tirelessly to ensure that we can work for our constituents. We could not have done this without them.

Hon. Mark Holland: Mr. Speaker, I want to take a moment, with your indulgence, to extend on behalf of all members of Parliament and all Canadians a massive thanks to the House administration. What we just saw in the last vote, with not a single technical error, was an absolutely flawless execution of an incredibly difficult task. We were able to watch for months as the House administration not only helped us in this incredible change, but dealt with the adaptations as a result of COVID across the board. We are deeply in their debt, every day, for all the ways in which they serve us.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank the members of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs for their extraordinary work in getting us to this point.

NAYS

Members

| | |
|--|--|
| Aboultaif | Aitchison |
| Albas | Alleslev |
| Allison | Arnold |
| Baldinelli | Barlow |
| Barrett | Benzen |
| Bergen | Berthold |
| Bezan | Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis) |
| Block | Bragdon |
| Brassard | Calkins |
| Carrie | Chiu |
| Chong | Cooper |
| Cumming | Dalton |
| Dancho | Davidson |
| Deltell | d'Entremont |
| Diotte | Doherty |
| Dowdall | Dreeshen |
| Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry) | Epp |
| Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster) | Falk (Provencher) |
| Fast | Findlay (South Surrey—White Rock) |
| Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk) | Gallant |
| Généreux | Genuis |
| Godin | Gourde |
| Gray | Hallan |
| Harder | Hoback |
| Jansen | Jeneroux |
| Kelly | Kent |
| Kitchen | Kmieciak |
| Kram | Kurek |
| Kusie | Lake |
| Lawrence | Lehoux |
| Lewis (Essex) | Liepert |
| Lloyd | Lobb |
| Lukivski | MacKenzie |
| Maguire | Martel |
| Mazier | McCauley (Edmonton West) |
| McLean | McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo) |
| Melillo | Moore |
| Morantz | Morrison |
| Motz | Nater |
| O'Toole | Patzer |
| Paul-Hus | Poillievre |
| Rayes | Redekopp |
| Reid | Rempel Garner |
| Richards | Rood |
| Ruff | Sahota (Calgary Skyview) |
| Saroya | Scheer |

Lastly, I want to thank my colleagues, the whips for the Bloc, the Conservatives and the New Democrats, who were extraordinary to work with through this. This was all able to be achieved through unanimous consent, which is no small thing.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Greg Fergus (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and to the Minister of Digital Government, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I apologize for not raising this immediately, but I failed to get your attention and did not want to interrupt the votes.

My point of order arises from question period. Mr. Speaker, you rose to remind members about the importance of using parliamentary language, and some unparliamentary language was used by the member for Lakeland. I have sat in the House with the member, who is a vigorous debater and an honourable member, and I would like to offer her an opportunity to withdraw the unparliamentary word. I remind all members to heed your advice to stay well within the bounds of acceptable language in the House.

The Speaker: The hon. member is not in a position to respond at this time, but what we will do is wait, if she wants to respond later.

Again, I want to remind hon. members that we can debate ideas but we do not want to call each other names, on one side or the other.

The hon. member for Sarnia—Lambton.

ELECTRONIC VOTING APP

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order with respect to the vote. The voting application showed that I was on the app. I was ready to vote for Bill C-14 and would have voted against it, but it did not give me the opportunity to vote at all. I see the vote has been counted, so I ask you to investigate that for the future.

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for pointing that out. We will look into it, on a technical basis, to find out exactly what happened.

I want to remind all members to please raise their hand if that comes up to make sure their vote is counted.

The hon. member for Richmond Centre has a point of order.

● (1605)

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, all of us, probably including those in the public, heard someone on the government side swearing. He forgot to mute himself. That is not parliamentary, whether someone is in the House or in public, and I want to draw the Speaker's attention to it. The member should apologize.

The Speaker: I did not hear it, but does the hon. member who used unparliamentary language while their microphone was off want to apologize?

Could the hon. member for Richmond Centre identify who it was?

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, no, I could not.

Routine Proceedings

The Speaker: I will leave it to the honour of the member, whichever side they are on. I thank the hon. member for bringing that up.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wish a happy International Women's Day to my hon. colleagues and every woman in this great country.

I would like to begin my remarks with some gratitude. I will speak about where we are at with respect to the status of women and put forward an invitation for my colleagues in wrapping up.

This day provides us all an opportunity to be grateful and to give thanks to those who have come before us, who have paved the way for the rest of us, who fought the fights we cannot imagine and who were much lonelier than we could ever comprehend in those fights; those who never gave up; those who persisted; and those who believed in each and every single one of us.

The Senate of Canada is close to gender balance. For the first time ever, there are 100 strong women in the House of Commons, and each of us got here because someone or many believed in us. Today we thank them.

I would like to thank our teams, including my own, and the great women and feminists in my own family. This year, we owe great thanks to the women on the front lines of the fight against COVID, the essential workers: health care workers, personal support workers, nurses, technicians, administrators, cleaning staff, teachers, child care workers and charitable sector workers, including those working to support those fleeing violence and abuse.

We thank the moms who have had to take on many extra responsibilities; the sisters, aunts and grandmothers who are struggling and helping to keep it all together for others; and community leaders and women in politics in all orders of government. We appreciate them. They are holding it all together for all of us.

I also think it is important that on a day like today to acknowledge the women for whom the mere act of survival is a heroic act. These are the women stuck in abusive relationships right now, doing everything they can to keep their kids safe and looking for a way out, and the women living with mental health challenges or caring for those who are struggling. We see them, we hear them and we will do everything we can to support them.

Routine Proceedings

There are also great women who are not here with us this International Women's Day. They are great women we all grieve but have not had a chance to come together collectively to remember. These are women like Sister Ruth Hennessey in Peterborough—Kawartha, women like my own grandmother and mothers who have lost their battle to cancer and now leave behind young ones. We see them and remember them, and our job is to do everything we can to make the world a better place for their daughters and granddaughters.

It is well documented that women have been hit hardest by COVID, with jobs lost, unpaid care responsibilities and increases in gender-based violence. Of course, they have been on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic.

The path ahead will be a difficult one. The path ahead will require all of us to work together in solidarity like never before. However, I am hopeful and optimistic about the status of women in Canada, first and foremost because we are counting women in ways we have never done before, with disaggregated gender data.

Canada has the best intersectional feminist response in its COVID measures. We also have a gendered budget. There are more women at the table now than ever before. A national housing strategy exists, and because of it, when we told Canadians to stay home, a million families had a safe and affordable roof over their heads.

The child poverty rate was cut by 40% before the pandemic because of the child benefit. We were able to provide additional supports to families when they needed it most during the pandemic. About 40,000 child care spaces were created in our first mandate, and we are looking forward to building a child care system that is universal and worthy of our children and our parents.

• (1610)

This International Women's Day we also have an opportunity to benefit from the \$100-million feminist response and recovery fund. That money is available for partners who want to make sure women are safe and healthy and to improve their workforce participation. As we speak, and until tomorrow, the largest virtual feminist gathering that we know of is happening this International Women's Day: the Feminist Response and Recovery Summit. The Government of Canada is hosting it. It is meant to be the beginning of many conversations to ensure that women's voices are shaping their futures.

The finance minister and the associate finance minister have announced their action task force on women's economic participation. Also, our Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry has announced that 1,000 companies have signed up to our 50-30 challenge to ensure greater diversity on our corporate boards.

We are currently seeking nominations of women of impact in communities across the country. I encourage Canadians to nominate women they believe in. We have a response coming forward on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, and we are working to implement our anti-racism strategy.

[*Translation*]

COVID-19 is the worst public health crisis in history. It has highlighted fundamental flaws in our society that disproportionately affect people who are already vulnerable.

Women have been hit by heavy job losses. During this crisis, many women courageously served on the front lines in our communities. They carried the burden of providing unpaid care at home. This International Women's Day, we salute the women on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19.

We acknowledge all the ways that women, particularly racialized women, have been hit hardest by the pandemic. We welcome applications to our \$100-million feminist response and recovery fund.

Our government will continue to work with strong feminists to create one million jobs and to improve health and safety outcomes for all women.

• (1615)

[*English*]

There has never been a more important time for our country to come together in a team Canada approach. Our daughters are counting on us, as are my nieces, including little Leila, who taught me French because my tutor has care responsibilities at home. They are looking to us.

I urge all my hon. colleagues to work together and seize the opportunities that have come with the social reckoning upon us. Let us work together to ensure that we close the gender wage gap, to ensure that our women are safe in every workplace and to ensure that the vaccine rollout is done equitably so that someday we can hold our loved ones close again and tell the stories of how an unprecedented pandemic allowed us to build back better.

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise in the House today to mark International Women's Day.

Women's Day was first celebrated in 1911. In 1975, the United Nations passed a resolution declaring March 8 as International Women's Day. This is a day when we reflect on the progress we have made toward women's equality both here in Canada and around the world.

Just a few months ago, we were recognizing the 50th anniversary of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women. We discussed how vital this report was at highlighting many of the inequalities that women were still facing in society and how the government responded to them. However, as I said in my speech, working toward equality in Canada is never done. We need to continue to build on what has been done and work toward building a better future for the women yet to come.

Routine Proceedings

As a female member of Parliament in the Conservative Party of Canada, I am proud of our continued advocacy and our long history of supporting women across our country. Not only was it under a Conservative government that a woman's right to vote was recognized, but women play a vital and leading role in our party today.

However, I have been disheartened by the continued lack of action by the Liberal government. The Liberal government says that it stands up for women. It wants to eliminate gender disparity and end violence against women, yet these sentiments appear to be nothing more than just words from the government. The Liberal Party added to its platform that it would develop and release a national action plan to combat gender-based violence, yet there is nothing.

One in three women and girls in Canada will face some sort of gender-based violence in their lifetime. With the ongoing pandemic, the detrimental effects of COVID and the restrictions that have largely confined us to our homes over the past year have resulted in women who are in abusive relationships being stuck in their homes with their abusers. This is heartbreaking to hear about. It is concerning that women continue to face this sort of degrading and brutalizing crime, both mentally and physically. No person should ever be subjected to that sort of treatment.

As the Conservative shadow minister for women and gender equality, I want to help contribute to the discussion about gender-based violence and work with my caucus toward developing policies that we can use to help eradicate gender-based violence in Canada. This is why for the past several months I have been meeting with organizations and individuals across Canada who work with and help individuals escape this abusive life.

The pandemic has also highlighted many of the inequalities that still exist in our society today. At the status of women committee, we have been hearing from witnesses that women are disproportionately represented in the numbers of people unemployed, not only because they work predominately in industries that have been hit the hardest, such as the retail and hospitality industries, but also because with children staying home from school or elderly parents who are at high risk of catching COVID, many women have left the workforce to take on the role of at-home caregiver. While people have started going back into the workforce, many women have chosen to remain at home.

We have heard from many witnesses how this is a concerning trend. Women play a vital and very important role in our economy and the risk of women not returning to the workforce can set women's advancement back decades. One of the advancements at risk is pay equity, an issue that was a major pillar in the first International Women's Day and in the royal commission.

Just the other day, the status of women committee was reviewing the implementation of the Pay Equity Act and had the Minister of Labour appear before committee. My Conservative colleagues and I were consistently asking the minister why it had taken so long to implement. We pointed to the fact that it was the Liberals' legislation, which even the PBO confirmed could have been implemented faster. The only response from the Minister of Labour on why it was taking over three years, with a minimum of another three years, to fully implement it was to not rush it.

• (1620)

Taking over three years to implement is not rushing; it is delaying. The government and the Prime Minister like to say that they stand up for women, but when it comes to actually standing up for and representing women, the government frequently and consistently turns its back on women.

Today, on International Women's Day and every day, Canada's Conservatives will continue to call on the Liberal government to take real, meaningful action to support women across Canada as we focus on securing our future. I know that under a Conservative government, led by the member for Durham, Canadian women will not only be well represented but heard by us and will see real action on the issues that matter the most.

I wish all women in Canada and across the world a happy International Women's Day.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, a year ago, we were taking turns speaking in the House to mark March 8. It was a March 8 like any other, as our political parties took turns praising the work women do and the achievements that have been made. It was a March 8 like any other, with all the parties proclaiming themselves as feminists.

A year later, everything has changed in Canada, in Quebec and around the world. Men and women, but especially women, are at serious risk of losing 25 years' worth of gains for women's rights. The coronavirus has impacted the lives of women more than anyone else. Over the past year of this pandemic, women have given and received more than their fair share.

What have women given? They have cared for seniors in long-term care homes and in our hospitals, providing front-line care, up close with the enemy, day after day.

Eighty-two percent of health workers are women. We have relied on those women and we are relying on them now because the vaccine will not administer itself. Once again it will be women leading the charge. They have given their time. Balancing work and family has shifted to balancing telework and family. Who takes care of the children at home during a lockdown? The mental burden and invisible work have only increased for them.

They have given and gotten more than their fair share. But what is it that they got for their efforts? Again and again they got paid less than men, and women in federally regulated jobs have still not gotten pay equity. Senior women got an extra old age security cheque, a single cheque to cover the increased cost of groceries and delivery. The young people delivering the purchases want a tip and seniors want to give them that tip. They also want to contribute to the economic recovery and assert their gray power.

Routine Proceedings

What these women got in spades this year was slaps to the face and brazen insults. It is important to acknowledge that. There was a 40% increase in cases of domestic violence. That is some serious indexing. Our way of thanking women this year was to subject them to almost unprecedented violence. Unable to get out of the house, they are stuck at home with the man who is holding the belt, clenching his fist and raising his voice.

What women got this year has seldom been seen before. The result is an increase in femicide. For all they have given, they deserve to be thanked. For all they have gotten, they deserve our apologies and, more importantly, they deserve seeing us take action. They deserve seeing us get to work. They deserve seeing us increase health care transfers because they are working on the front lines and, without the necessary funding, they will be the ones who will be over-worked, the ones who will have to work the infamous mandatory overtime, the ones who are underpaid.

Senior women deserve to have decent living conditions and enough buying power to be able to make ends meet at the end of the month and stop having to choose between toilet paper and paper towels. Seniors deserve to have a good life. I do not think that is too much to ask.

Women's shelters have been there for women. They have done crucial, essential work, and they deserve more support. Violence will not end the day the last person is vaccinated. Shelters need predictable, long-term support.

Unemployed women need a system that meets their needs. Even now, in 2021, it is too hard for them to qualify. Unemployed women who are sick need sickness benefits that last longer than 15 weeks so they can take the time to take care of themselves with compassion and without having to worry as much.

Women deserve more than sorrys and thank yous. The recovery is about to start, and, at long last, women deserve a female-focused recovery. We will not recover from this pandemic without women and their leadership. Everyone knows that, but I refuse to go back to the old normal if it means living in a society where women are second-class, underpaid citizens, a society with programs that do not meet women's needs and are out of touch with reality.

● (1625)

We can make next March 8 as different from this one as this one is from last March 8. That means we have to listen to women, so let us listen to women.

[*English*]

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I also want to wish all women a happy International Women's Day. In particular I salute all my female colleagues who were elected to this chamber since 2019 and in the years prior to that who have helped break down barriers for us all.

Of course, it goes without saying that we need more women in this House. Last Friday, I had the opportunity to address the delegates of Daughters of the Vote. This program brings young women from all over the country to fill every seat in the House, and although they had to complete this program virtually this year, there were 338 representatives who filled those seats. They are 338 in-

credible women excited about politics and excited to make change to improve the lives of all women in Canada. I spoke to some of the daughters and they told me that they wanted to eradicate barriers to women's full economic, social and political participation in society by fully enacting pay equity, creating an affordable national universal child care program, building an adequate amount of safe affordable housing, addressing violence against women and rejecting all restrictions on women's reproductive rights, and improving the lives of indigenous women and girls by enacting all of the calls for justice and addressing the specific challenges faced by women of colour and members of the LGBTQI2S+ and disability communities.

Members should make no mistake: these barriers are real and significant. We cannot accept virtue signalling while doing little to break down these barriers. A piecemeal approach is no longer acceptable. Less than a third of MPs in this chamber in 2021 are women, and, frankly, the number of women of colour, members from the LGBTQI2S+ and the disability communities is embarrassingly low. That is why it is so important in my role as the NDP critic for women and gender equality, but also as an MP, to share with young women what it is to have this job, to be frank about the hurdles, to be supportive and to be there to answer those all-important questions. The only way we will have more women fill these seats in the House and to ensure that women have a real opportunity to join us here is to support and encourage all women mentally, emotionally and especially financially.

A part of that support, and a part that I love, is to talk to women who are interested in government from all different groups and backgrounds and ages, and last week I got to speak to nine-year-old Sophia. I went to university with her mother far too many years ago. Sophia started to learn about politics in school, and she wanted to do more research on her own, so she and her mother went online, and that is when her mother realized that I was elected, so her mom reached out to tell me about Sophia. I got to speak to her, and I was thrilled to do so.

At first, Sophia's questions were very familiar. They were ones that I receive often. They include questions like, "What got you involved in politics?", "How do you become an MP?" and "What do you most like about the job?" We talked about that job of being an MP: the hard days, the good days, the successes and the losses. Then, Sophia asked me if I get nervous when people disagreed with me, because she does. I told her that I do sometimes, especially when I was younger, but the more I do this job and the more people I help, the more I know that the work I do is meaningful and the less nervous I get. I also take comfort in the fact that I am not alone, that I have incredible colleagues who share my ideals and beliefs who stand with me, and equally importantly, I am not alone because I stand on the shoulders of giants, women who have fought for the chance to speak, to be heard or have influence. They have fought for their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters and daughters to have a fair chance.

I told Sophia that standing up for what we believe in is not always easy. Political courage is not easy, especially when some people are not respectful, kind or open-minded, and often women are put down more when they stand up, simply because they are women, and even more so if they are women of colour, lesbian women, transgendered women, indigenous women or women living with disabilities. Women are silenced, but I told Sophia that one of the many things I love about my job is that I am there to fight for her to be heard, and in turn in the future she will have to fight for other women to be heard. As a woman, I must be well and thoroughly researched, and I have to be absolute in the proof I have to support what I believe in. I have to be better, stronger, louder and more just, but when I know I am right, I have to stand up, especially as a woman.

• (1630)

Sophia took a little time to process that. Then she asked why women do not have the same opportunities as men and why progress is so slow. I told her that change is slow because too often those in positions of power have shied away from making those hard choices, or they genuinely believed they were not the right choices at the time. Again, that is where having proof, researching one's ideas, listening to all sides and remaining open-minded must always be at the centre of one's choices. We talked about the supports that can make life better for women and the choices made by those in power that could give women the same opportunities as men. We talked about universal affordable child care, pay equity, violence against women, affordable housing, clean drinking water and justice for indigenous people. We talked about the importance of women have a true choice, to have access to all services and to be able to have that power of choice.

Sophia's final question was how she could help make a change, so I knew she was hooked. I am so excited to see what she will do as she grows up. Sophia will help to make that progress we are too slow to make now. Whether the change she makes is at her school, with her friends and family, in her community or an environmental or political group, I know she will make change. When she sees more women in the House of Commons voicing the concerns of women fighting for equality, universal child care, affordable housing and pay equity, when she sees more women being able to stand up and speak their truth and have the courage to make those tough choices, and when she sees how they succeed, I believe she will not be nervous when she is challenged, but will stand up, use her voice and will succeed because she will not be alone.

• (1635)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I am seeking unanimous consent to reply to the minister's statement.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Does the hon. member have unanimous consent to reply?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. member for Fredericton.

• (1640)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, GP): Madam Speaker, it is always an honour to speak in the House of Commons. The magnitude

Routine Proceedings

of this reality is not lost on me, especially today on International Women's Day, a day when we celebrate and advocate for women's rights around the world. I wish I could simply deliver pleasantries, highlight the work of some incredible women and wish all present a happy International Women's Day, but based on the real experiences of women across the country and around the globe that would not be enough.

I would like to begin by exploring some of the history of the women's rights movement. It is rooted in struggle and conflict, intertwined with colonialism and racism. Before the suffragettes, colonists arrived in North America and deliberately tore apart the fabric of the matriarchal leadership of the first peoples of this land. The intergenerational trauma of these acts continues to ripple through indigenous communities today.

International Women's Day can be traced back to 1908, when thousands of working women in New York City marched to protest their working conditions. These women worked at low wages with no protection and regularly experienced sexual harassment and abuse. This uprising continued for more than a year, leading to National Woman's Day in the U.S. in 1909.

At an international conference of working women in 1910, the idea for an international movement advocating universal suffrage was born. The day took on a truly revolutionary form in Russia in 1917, in a country exhausted by war, widespread food shortages and escalating popular protests. Russian women demanded and gained the right to vote in 1917 as a direct consequence of the March protest.

Suffragettes in the U.K., and their counterparts in the U.S. and Canada, looked to Russia as an example. White women in Canada were enfranchised in 1918, but this right would not be extended to women of colour or indigenous women until decades later.

We have yet to fully embrace the layers of intersectionality in feminism and tear down the many ways women continue to be oppressed. The pandemic has plainly demonstrated how race, gender, class, disability and immigration status intersect and compound risk, resulting in worse health outcomes, increased rates of domestic violence and greater economic struggle.

International Women's Day remains steeped in the fight for all women's rights. I think about the women facing violence in their homes. I addressed the House regarding gender-based violence on February 25. That same day, a woman from my home province was murdered by her intimate partner. In Quebec, five women were killed by their partners in just one month.

Routine Proceedings

The government has put money into supporting shelters and services for women fleeing domestic violence, but it is not enough. I think about the survivors of sexual assault being retraumatized and stigmatized, again and again, by a court system that was designed to protect property. Bill C-3 will finally require judges to receive sensitivity training on sexual assault, which is a step forward, but our judicial system is so deeply flawed that this is not enough.

I think of Chantel Moore and of Joyce Echaquan. These women's final moments on earth were spent facing down racism and misogyny. Our policing and health systems let them down. We let them down.

The government has initiated an anti-racism secretariat, but it seems to be operating quietly behind closed doors. This is not enough. I am discouraged by the failings of our systems, reinforced by almost every statistic and by almost every headline. I am discouraged that I hold a seat of power, yet I often feel powerless to right what remains so very wrong.

I look to what brings me hope. I think of my sisters, my friends and the women I work with. Through their trauma, I see their strength. I see their resilience. This year they have given birth without their loved ones present. They have loved and supported family members in mental health crises. They have taken in their adult children who could no longer support themselves financially. They have bravely served, overrepresented on the front lines of this pandemic. They have left abusive jobs, they have left abusive relationships and they stand strong but not unscathed. What I need from the government is leadership that sees their resilience and meets it with equal force.

International Women's Day has always been as much about struggle and solidarity as it is about celebration. Today, for women across the country, the struggle is real. With some direct action perhaps next year we will have more to celebrate.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I wish to inform the House that because of the deferred recorded divisions and ministerial statements, Government Orders will be extended by 61 minutes.

[Translation]

Order. It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Regina—Lewvan, Air Transportation; the hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable, Finance; the hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, Telecommunications.

* * *

[English]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Madam Speaker, happy International Women's Day.

I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fourth report of the Standing Committee on International Trade in relation to Bill C-18, an act to implement the agreement on trade

continuity between Canada and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The committee has studied the bill and has decided to report the bill back to the House without amendments.

[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the third report of the Standing Committee on Official Languages in relation to the motion adopted on Thursday, February 18 regarding support to educational institutions providing official language instruction.

Mr. Peter Julian: Madam Speaker, I wish you a happy International Women's Day.

There have been discussions among the parties, and if you seek it, you will find unanimous consent for the following motion: That, notwithstanding any Standing or Special Order or usual practice of the House, Bill C-5, An Act to amend the Bills of Exchange Act, the Interpretation Act and the Canada Labour Code concerning a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, be deemed concurred in at the report stage; that the House continue to sit beyond the ordinary hour of daily adjournment for the purpose of considering Bill C-5 at third reading; that, when no further member rises to speak or at 12 a.m., whichever is earlier, the Speaker shall interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith and successively every question necessary to dispose of the said stage of the said bill; that, if a recorded division is requested, it shall stand deferred until the conclusion of Oral Questions tomorrow, March 9; and that the House shall adjourn to the next sitting day.

[English]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): All those opposed to the hon. member moving the motion will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

PETITIONS

HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have five petitions to present today. The first is particularly pertinent in light of International Women's Day. It draws the attention of the House to the horrific violence against Uighur women that is taking place as part of the genocide happening in China as we speak. Members of the Canada-Uighur Parliamentary Friendship Group were particularly struck and moved last week by the story of a survivor. We know that this campaign of genocide includes forced abortion, forced sterilization, forced insertion of IUDs, and sexual violence. The petitioners call on the House and the government to recognize that Uighurs in China have been and are being subjected to genocide. It also calls for the use of the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act, or Magnitsky act, to sanction those who are responsible for these heinous crimes.

• (1645)

CONVERSION THERAPY

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the second petition is with respect to Bill C-6. The petitioners want to express that they support efforts to ban conversion therapy. They are, however, concerned by the definition of conversion therapy that is used by the bill. They note that certain drafting problems in the bill in fact define as conversion therapy things that have never been called conversion therapy and do not align with any existing definition of it. The petitioners call on the House to ban coercive, degrading practices that are designed to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, and to amend Bill C-6 to fix the definition of conversion therapy, thus banning conversion therapy without banning voluntary counselling or criminalizing conversions, and to allow parents to speak with their own children about sexuality and gender and to set house rules about sex and relationships.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the third petition is about the carbon tax. It highlights the significant economic challenges that have been created and exacerbated by the government's decision to increase the carbon tax. It announced that increase in the middle of a pandemic. The petitioners call on the government to repeal the decision to increase the federal carbon tax to \$170 per tonne and to have the carbon tax shown as a separate expense when buying products so that citizens are aware of exactly how much money they are paying in carbon tax at a given time.

HUMAN ORGAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the fourth petition is about Bill S-204. It is in support of the Senate bill that would make it a criminal offence for a person to go abroad to receive an organ if there has not been consent. It seeks to combat the horrific practice of forced organ harvesting and trafficking, and also would create a provision whereby someone could be deemed inadmissible to Canada for their involvement in forced organ harvesting and trafficking.

Routine Proceedings

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE IN DYING

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, my fifth and final petition raises significant concerns about Bill C-7. It objects to how the bill would remove a 10-day reflection period. The petitioners are also deeply concerned about the fact that the government is now trying, through a Senate amendment, to legalize suicide facilitation and euthanasia for those facing mental health challenges. I am sure they would want to highlight to the House that our focus should be on helping people with mental health challenges find recovery, not facilitate their death. I commend all five of these petitions to the consideration of all members.

FALUN GONG

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Madam Speaker, today I am tabling three petitions. The first petition calls on the federal government to apply Magnitsky act sanctions on Chinese Communist Party officials who for over two decades have persecuted Falun Gong practitioners.

SEX SELECTION

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Madam Speaker, the second petition I am tabling today highlights the lack of legal restrictions on sex-selective abortions. It is a situation domestic health care professionals and international bodies such as the UN recognize as discriminatory toward women and girls. The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to pass a Criminal Code amendment prohibiting sex-selective abortion.

FARMERS' PROTESTS IN INDIA

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Madam Speaker, third, I table over eight individual petitions on the ongoing protests in the Punjab and Haryana regions of India. My constituents are concerned for the safety of Indian farmers protesting changes that affect their livelihoods. They call on the federal government to condemn the use of violence and reaffirm Canada's international support for the fundamental freedoms of expression and assembly. Without farmers we do not have food. We do not have a future.

CONVERSION THERAPY

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Madam Speaker, the petition I am presenting today is on behalf of individuals who are concerned about the legislation before the House on conversion therapy, Bill C-6.

The petitioners are concerned that conversion therapy has historically referred to coercive, degrading actions that seek to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, which are wrong and should be banned; however, Bill C-6 defines conversion therapy as:

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...a practice, treatment or service designed to change a person's sexual orientation to heterosexual, to change a person's gender identity or gender expression to cisgender or to repress or reduce non-heterosexual attraction or sexual behaviours or non-cisgender gender expression.

The petitioners indicate that this broad definition wrongly applies the label “conversion therapy” to a broad range of practices, including counsel from parents, teachers and counsellors encouraging children to reduce sexual behaviour in general.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to take the following actions to address this situation: ban coercive, degrading practices that are designed to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity; ensure that no law discriminates against Canadians by limiting the services they can receive based on sexual orientation or gender identity; allow parents to speak with their own children about sexuality and gender, and to set out house rules about sex and relationships; allow free and open conversations about sexuality and sexual behaviour; and finally, avoid criminalizing professional and religious counselling voluntarily requested and consented to by Canadians.

• (1650)

GUARANTEED LIVABLE INCOME

Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Madam Speaker, it is a privilege to table this petition today on International Women's Day.

A guaranteed livable income, or a GLI, is a powerful equity policy. It is one of the calls to action in the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls inquiry report. A GLI would replace the current patchwork of income supports with a universal benefit that would be progressively taxed back based on income. It would reduce poverty and reduce demand on social services, health care and law enforcement. It would ensure a financial safety net for all Canadians through major economic shifts, pandemics, national disasters or industry automation.

For these and many other reasons, the petitioners from Nanaimo—Ladysmith who initiated this petition are calling upon the Government of Canada to implement a guaranteed livable income for all Canadians.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would ask that all questions be allowed to stand at this time.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Before we go to Government Orders, I would like to wish everyone a happy International Women's Day. It is a very important day for all women.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, Lib.) moved that Bill C-24, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act (additional regular benefits), the Canada Recovery Benefits Act (restriction on eligibility) and another Act in response to COVID-19, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

She said: Madam Speaker, happy International Women's Day. I would like to start by seeking unanimous consent to share my time with the member for Windsor—Tecumseh.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Does the hon. member have unanimous consent to share her time?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): It is agreed and so ordered.

The hon. minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Madam Speaker, I am pleased to be present today virtually to speak to Bill C-24. I want to acknowledge that I am joining members from the traditional territory of the Musqueam and the Tsawwassen First Nation.

[Translation]

The bill before us today makes significant changes to the Employment Insurance Act, the Canada Recovery Benefits Act and the Customs Act so that we can continue to support Canadians.

[English]

I cannot stress enough the importance of the timely passage of this legislation. It is straightforward with just 11 clauses, and it is designed to help Canadians in response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, our government has been there for workers. We have provided them with the support they need to stay healthy and safe, and to pay their bills. Our first emergency measure, the Canada emergency response benefit, was introduced in March 2020 and helped more than eight million Canadians avoid catastrophic income loss.

[Translation]

We then made changes to this historic measure and provided support to students through the Canada emergency student benefit and to people living with disabilities through a one-time payment.

*Government Orders**[English]*

This is not to mention the more than five million Canadian employees who have had their jobs supported through the Canada emergency wage subsidy and the 842,660 businesses that have accessed the Canada emergency business account, both of which protect jobs through this crisis. This kind of government action has helped buffer the worse economic impacts in Canada.

Last summer and fall, we laid out a plan to continue to support Canada's workforce through the ongoing pandemic. We transitioned from the CERB to a simplified EI program and then introduced a suite of recovery benefits to provide income support to workers whose employment continues to be impacted by COVID-19.

At the time, we said that we would monitor labour market conditions and make adjustments as needed. We are still very much in a time of crisis. Restrictions are still being implemented across the country to slow the spread of the virus and its variants.

- (1655)

[Translation]

Canadians always need support when they lose their jobs, when their hours of work are cut or when they must stay home because they are sick or have to look after their children. Today's bill reflects that reality.

[English]

We have assessed the current labour market and are following through on our commitment to continue providing certainty for workers. On March 28, many Canadians could be faced with delayed benefits if we do not take action this week with Bill C-24. If passed quickly, this bill would increase the maximum number of available weeks of EI regular benefits and Canadians will not face a gap in receiving the support they continue to need right now.

In parallel to this bill, we are making increases through regulations to the number of weeks available under the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery caregiving benefit and the Canada recovery sickness benefit, and to secure job protected leave under the Canada Labour Code. We are increasing the number of weeks available under the Canada recovery benefit and the Canada recovery caregiving benefit from 26 to 38 weeks each, and are increasing the number of weeks available through the Canada recovery sickness benefit from two to four weeks.

As of February 28, two and a half million Canadians have accessed one of these three benefits. These additional weeks offer the certainty workers need in a difficult time and in an uncertain labour market. To be clear, Canadians receiving recovery benefits will not see any disruptions in their benefits, but I cannot make the same guarantee with respect to Canadians on EI who face the same pending end to their benefits. It is up to this House to ensure that Canadians on EI do not face a benefit disruption.

Let me now discuss the amendments to the Employment Insurance Act in more detail. Bill C-24 would amend the Employment Insurance Act to increase the number of weeks that workers can claim in EI regular benefits. Workers would be eligible for up to a maximum of 50 weeks for claims established between September 27, 2020, and September 25, 2021.

[Translation]

This will make it possible for millions of Canadians to continue receiving support while still having access to the essential resources and tools provided by the EI program to help them return to the labour market.

[English]

Such resources include working while on claim, which allows workers to keep part of their EI benefits and all the earnings from their job. This is an especially important tool right now, as many workers are facing reduced work hours.

The work-sharing program is another tool available through the EI system that helps workers and employers that are facing layoffs because of a decline in production or operations. By redistributing available work through a voluntary reduction in the hours worked by all employees within one or more work units, employers can retain a full workforce on a reduced work week rather than laying off part of their workforce. This keeps workers on the job, maintaining skills and working habits, and avoids the uncertainties that come with full unemployment.

Keeping workers attached to the labour market will be key to Canada's successful economic recovery.

[Translation]

Canada's labour market is also changing quickly because of the pandemic. This new reality has revealed the need to supplement skills and to provide more training for workers. That is another good reason to expand access to the EI program. A Canadian who is out of work can access courses and training programs while receiving employment insurance benefits.

[English]

We know that Canadians want to work. Evidence from last year's labour market data clearly shows that when there is work available, Canadians take these jobs.

I also want to highlight that as part of this legislation, self-employed workers participating in the EI program would be able to temporarily access EI special benefits with an earning threshold of \$5,000 compared to the previously set threshold of \$7,555. Self-employed workers have also been hit hard by the pandemic and need this extra support.

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[Translation]

I would like to talk about the issue of travellers returning to Canada and access to the Canada recovery benefits. We have always been clear that these benefits, the Canada recovery sickness benefit in particular, were created to provide Canadians the possibility of taking paid sick leave when they cannot do so through their employer.

• (1700)

[English]

These benefits were never intended for travellers who are quarantining after non-essential travel, nor were they meant to incentivize or encourage Canadians to not follow public health advice or international travel guidelines. No one should be vacationing abroad right now.

The amendments to the Canada Recovery Benefits Act and the Customs Act proposed in Bill C-24 would make Canadians who travel for non-essential reasons ineligible for recovery benefits. However, Canadians who travel internationally for medical treatment considered necessary by a medical practitioner, or to accompany such a person as an attendant, will remain eligible for recovery benefits, as will Canadians who travel internationally for essential reasons and must self-isolate upon their return to Canada.

[Translation]

These eligibility rules will be applied retroactively to October 2, 2020. That is when the Canada recovery benefit was created, after the Canada Recovery Benefits Act received royal assent.

As I said earlier, we are still in the midst of a crisis. We will continue to assess the labour market and we will be there for workers during this difficult time.

[English]

Let me close by restating the importance of passing this legislation in a timely manner. The bill has been in the hands of all members since February 23, and all parties have said that the bill is straightforward and necessary. I am happy to join this debate and look forward to moving it to committee swiftly for examination and further review. I urge all parties to move this bill along as quickly as possible. Canadians are depending on us.

[Translation]

We have worked together in the past and we brought in key measures to help millions of workers.

[English]

I urge all members to support this very important piece of legislation.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Madam Speaker, the hon. minister mentioned that she cannot stress enough the timely passage of this bill. I do hear her on that.

She also mentioned there are labour market conditions her department has been monitoring since September, but likely before that, since the government instituted the CERB and the EI changes. The original bill was to provide that six months or 26 weeks of coverage, which would come to the end of March, as she mentioned.

My question is as follows. We knew the second wave was coming. We knew there would be labour market devastation from the second wave. The minister mentioned she provided this to us at the end of February. Why was it not provided sooner, at the end of January?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Madam Speaker, when we put in place Bill C-4 at the end of September 2020, we built in the regulatory ability to increase the number of weeks on recovery caregiver and sickness benefits. Obviously we did know at the time that if we wanted to increase the number of weeks available on EI, it would have to be done through regulation.

We believe we have given sufficient time. We have been very clear with our intention to continue to support Canadians along this journey. I just hope the member is with me on the necessity to pass this legislation quickly. With 11 clauses, I am sure we can do this together.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Madam Speaker, the minister is right to say that several emergency measures have been brought in, that they expired and we had to renew them, as is the case for the bill before us.

How does the minister foresee things going as of September 2021?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question. Our government has always supported workers. We do not know what September will bring, but we will continue to be there for workers.

We will continue to improve the EI system. The more flexible measures we added last September will expire in September 2021. I am currently assessing the situation so that we can take the necessary action to modernize our EI system. I know that a House committee is studying the EI system, and we will continue to monitor the job market, the vaccine rollout and the unemployment rate. We will continue to be there for workers and to do whatever it takes to keep Canadians safe and healthy.

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• (1705)

[English]

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, this very House and this very Parliament has twice called for the EI sickness benefit to be extended to 50 weeks. The Liberals committed to extending the benefit in the last campaign. This is not the first time the Employment Insurance Act is being amended in this Parliament, yet there is nothing in this about extending the EI sick benefit. We know there are a lot of sick Canadians who need that help. We know that as “long COVID” develops, there are a lot of people falling through the cracks. The EI sickness benefit would be the easiest way for them to be able to access a benefit while they are unable to work.

Why is it not there, and when is the government going to get this done?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Madam Speaker, as the member knows, and I thank him for his camaraderie on this really important file, two things are happening right now in EI. We are proposing immediate temporary changes to the EI regular benefit system to allow for an increased number of weeks for regular EI benefit recipients. This particular legislation is very straightforward, with one single, surgical goal.

In addition, we are looking to September. I am looking to fulfill my mandate commitment to improve and modernize the EI system. We know we will be doubling the recovery sickness benefits through regulations. We wanted to be very surgical and precise in this legislation, but I know HUMA is studying EI and I am happy to have those conversations. As the member acknowledged, we are committed to increasing the number of weeks on EI sickness benefits, but we want to really make sure of a comprehensive reconception of what EI should be for workers of 2021, and that is what we are doing.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. minister for providing an opportunity to speak to this important legislation today.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that I am speaking from the traditional and ancestral lands of the Three Fires confederacy, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa and the Potawatomi.

I am delighted to speak today in support of Bill C-24. If passed, this proposed legislation would temporarily increase the maximum number of weeks of employment insurance regular benefits available. It would also make returning international travellers ineligible to receive support from any of the Canada recovery benefits for the period of their mandatory quarantine or isolation.

We do not know how long this pandemic will last. What we do know is Canadians need support for as long as it does last. We need to adopt this legislation to provide Canadians with the support they need. Soon some workers could begin to exhaust their benefits. We need to act now to make sure they continue to receive the income support they need as Canada's economy and labour force continue to recover.

[Translation]

Through this bill, we would increase the maximum number of weeks of EI regular benefits to 50 weeks for claims established between September 27, 2020, and September 25, 2021.

In addition, self-employed workers who have opted in to the EI program to access special benefits would be able to use a 2020 earnings threshold of \$5,000, compared to the previous threshold of \$7,555. This change would be retroactive to claims established as of January 3, 2021, and would apply until September 25, 2021.

We are not stopping there. We have also promised to introduce regulatory amendments to increase the number of weeks of benefits available for the three economic recovery benefits. That is what we are doing with this bill, and I will expand on that.

We will increase the maximum number of weeks available under the Canada recovery benefit and the Canada recovery caregiving benefit from 26 weeks to 38 weeks. We will increase the number of weeks available under the Canada recovery sickness benefit from two weeks to four.

These measures are important. They take a huge amount of financial stress off workers, give them some of the financial certainty they need and help them continue to provide for their families.

• (1710)

[English]

The amendments we are proposing today to the Canada Recovery Benefits Act and the Customs Act would also prevent international travellers who need to quarantine or isolate upon their return to Canada from being eligible for any one of the three recovery benefits during their mandatory quarantine or isolation.

The changes to the employment insurance program and the introduction of the recovery benefits last fall were necessary and had to be put in place quickly to support workers and help them get through this difficult period. The changes we are proposing today address an important issue. They would apply to everyone who has had to quarantine or isolate under the Quarantine Act upon their return to Canada, as of October 2, 2020.

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I must mention that individuals who are required to quarantine or isolate because they travelled internationally for medically necessary treatment or needed to accompany someone receiving such treatment could still receive benefits. As well, individuals who need to isolate but would otherwise have been exempt from the mandatory quarantine requirements under the Quarantine Act, such as truck drivers, would remain eligible for the benefits.

Canadians from across the country have been making sacrifices and efforts since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Government of Canada has been there to support them from the beginning.

It all started with measures such as the Canada emergency response benefit, the Canada emergency wage subsidy and the Canada emergency student benefit. We provided extra support for families through an increased Canada child benefit, as well as extra one-time payments for seniors and for persons with disabilities. We stepped up and took action to make sure that no one was left behind.

We also created thousands of jobs and training opportunities for youth and ensured that the not-for-profit sector was supported so that organizations could continue to provide assistance to their communities. Moreover, we created the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery sickness benefit and the Canada recovery caregiving benefit.

We have been there since day one, and since day one, Canadians have been making sacrifices. We will continue to be there for them to make sure that they are all treated in fairness.

[*Translation*]

It has been almost a year since this pandemic began. With the second wave, public health guidelines and the emergence of new variants, we are all living under a cloud of uncertainty. We do not have control over the pandemic, but we do have control over the measures we can put in place to support Canadians.

Let us provide them with assurances that no matter what the future holds, their government will not let them down. I appeal to the goodwill of all my colleagues and hope that everyone will support the changes we are proposing today.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Madam Speaker, as the member for Windsor—Tecumseh well knows, the supplementary unemployment benefits for auto workers have not been addressed yet. He has had several pieces of correspondence from me and from others that have not been answered yet, and we do not see a resolution on those concerns in Bill C-24. I would ask him to respond to those issues and tell auto workers in his region, my region of Essex County and across this country when the SUBs issue is going to be dealt with, because tax season is upon us.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Madam Speaker, as my hon. colleague knows, I have been in regular communication with workers in the automotive and manufacturing sectors and across multiple sectors on many issues important to them, including the SUBs, the supplementary unemployment benefits.

We have committed to modernizing EI. We have committed to increasing, for example, sickness benefits to 26 weeks. We have committed to looking at all of these issues, and in fact there is a study currently taking place in the HUMA committee that is looking holistically at the entire EI system.

However, the focus today is on addressing the urgent fact that EI benefits will cease for many workers by the end of this month. I would ask the member to come together in the spirit of collaboration, as we did in the fall when we passed Bill C-4, to protect workers and their families across all sectors. This really is an urgent matter, and it requires our focus today.

● (1715)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Madam Speaker, all of this financial help to keep workers attached to the workforce is necessary at this time, and the exception for people going across the border for medical treatment is certainly welcome, but is the cost of maintaining initiatives for workers through the different program funding that is taking place the reason the minister is cancelling the funding of services for Canadians living with print-related disabilities like blindness, dyslexia, Parkinson's disease and cerebral palsy? Is that why the funding for those services is being cut? Is it so the government can fund other things?

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Madam Speaker, since taking office, our government has brought disability inclusion to the forefront and has made historic advances in ensuring that persons with disabilities have the support they need to succeed. We have developed an overarching strategy to increase access to accessible books in Canada, including a transition strategy toward the goal of books being born accessible. We are committed to embracing the potential of new technology and inclusive production practices and we will continue working with the disability community every step of the way to find the right solutions.

As we continue our work on Canada's economic recovery, it is important to also emphasize that we are set to share and update, in short order, key supports for persons with disabilities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, as everyone knows, Bill C-24 supports vulnerable workers who have lost their jobs during the pandemic.

When we talk about vulnerable people, it is hard not to talk about seniors. We talked about seniors this afternoon and voted on a Bloc Québécois motion to increase old age security by \$110 a month.

Why the heck did the government vote against that? It is seniors who are suffering the most, who are dying the most in this crisis and who are isolated. On top of that, the cost of groceries has gone up.

How can the government tell Canadian seniors that it will not increase their pensions? It is astounding.

What does my hon. colleague think?

[*English*]

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Madam Speaker, absolutely, we have to look after our seniors and make sure they have the supports that are necessary, especially throughout this pandemic, but also beyond the pandemic.

However, today is really about the urgent fact that we have to pass Bill C-24 in order to address the potential interruption in supports for workers across all age brackets in Canada. The laser focus and the urgency today is on passing Bill C-24 to make sure we prevent the interruption of supports for all workers and all Canadians across all age brackets.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Madam Speaker, I ask for unanimous consent to share my time with the hon. member for Carleton.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Does the hon. member have unanimous consent to share her time with the hon. member for Carleton?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

• (1720)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Speaker, today the House of Commons is debating Bill C-24. There are two key components of the legislation.

First, the legislation would increase the maximum number of weeks available to workers through EI up to a maximum of 50 weeks for claims that are established between September 27, 2020, and September 25, 2021. This is up from 26 weeks, which was established in legislation passed by the House earlier in the fall. The legislation is essentially an extension of pandemic emergency support benefits for Canadians because there are no jobs available to them.

Second, the legislation would fix the Liberal-caused loophole in the Canada recovery sickness benefit for international leisure travellers. In the previous legislation from this past fall, Canadians could claim this benefit for their quarantine weeks when they returned from vacation, which does not seem very ethical. The official opposition brought attention to this issue back in December and January and called for an immediate change. Here we are, in the third month of 2021, and we are finally debating the needed changes to the September 2020 legislation.

The Conservatives support getting help to Canadians in need, whose jobs have been eliminated as a result of government-mandated restrictions and closures in response to the pandemic. However, we are disappointed that once again the Liberal response to the pan-

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demic in this bill and in the minister's speech resoundingly fail to put forward a worker-led, jobs-first economic recovery plan for a post-pandemic Canada. It really would have been timely to do so today, given that this week marks the one-year anniversary since the World Health Organization declared a worldwide pandemic, lockdowns began in Canada and life changed dramatically for all of us.

Since that time, 12 very long months ago, the statistics of unemployment have been staggering. Since the end of CERB in September and the implementation of the new EI and the CRB, over three million Canadians have accessed the EI supports, with over 2.3 million Canadians currently receiving EI benefits as of mid-February. Over one million Canadians have been on the CRB since the end of September. Therefore, over three million Canadians remain out of work. It is very important to recognize that there is a sunset clause in these direct payments to Canadians, and that is September 25, which is about seven months from now.

My questions are these. What comes after that? Is the Liberal government suggesting that Canadians will no longer require government supports by the end of September? Will there be a transition period to help Canadians get back to work or is the government planning to cut off Canadians and their families come September, without providing a pathway or support to help them re-enter the workforce? Has the government examined what the impact to wages and the job market will be when three million Canadians attempt to re-enter the labour market? A lot of questions have not been answered in the minister's speech or in the legislation.

The end of September for these programs also coincides with the Liberal promise to vaccinate everyone who wants a one by the end of September. Here is the problem. Even if we do achieve that vaccination goal by the end of September, we know that jobs will not miraculously return overnight. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business has said that between 71,000 and 220,000 small businesses will close permanently, which will eliminate between one million and three million jobs from the Canadian job market.

In 2020, 58,000 small businesses officially closed and in the end, whenever that will be, CFIB suspects that one out of six Canadian businesses, that is small, medium and large businesses, will close, with an estimated one in five to close in Alberta. For Canadians who are not sure what that means, they should walk down the street, look at six businesses and eliminate one of them, and keep doing that as they continue to walk down the street. That would be truly devastating for the economy and for Canada.

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In Canada, the data has been clear that there are very uneven impacts of the pandemic. Men are rejoining the workforce in greater numbers as women are leaving the labour market altogether. In fact, labour force participation for women has been set back 30 years. It has not been this bad for women since before I was born.

Regarding newcomers, people may remember that in the fall the Liberals triumphantly said that they would bring in over 401,000 new permanent residents in Canada this year, which is more immigrants into Canada than any single year in our history. They argued it would help our economic recovery, which it might. However, numbers just released saw that Canada lost 4% of its permanent residents last year. They just packed up and left Canada, possibly for good, because there were no opportunities here for them. Canadians should know that in a regular year, our permanent residents grow by 3%. Therefore, this is really a 7% setback.

Immigrants are giving up on the Canadian dream. Women and young people have fewer and fewer opportunities. It would seem that Canada is no longer a place for small business entrepreneurship. It really does not take an economist to realize that it will likely take years, perhaps a decade or more, before new businesses are created to replace the ones we have lost.

• (1725)

After a year, the government's only plan thus far is to further extend emergency supports. Therefore, my issue with Bill C-24 is that it is not a jobs recovery plan. It is yet another band-aid.

The Prime Minister recently promised in the House of Commons that the government would bring back opportunities, but he has failed to tell Canadians exactly how he will do that and, in particular, how he will do that given that the top developed nations in the world are racing to be some of the first to recover and to relaunch their economies. Fierce world economic competition is imminent.

The U.S. has pledged to fully vaccinate its population by the end of May. The United Kingdom has said that it would be fully reopened by June 21 because of its successful vaccine rollout strategies. It has made that commitment to its people. Meanwhile, in Canada, our vaccine rollout has been hovering around 50th in the world and, as a result, we will be slower to recover. We are in danger of being locked out and left behind of the international COVID-19 economic recovery and the jobs to be found therein.

More than that, there is the very odd fact that Canada has spent more per capita than any other G7 country, yet has achieved the worst unemployment outcomes as well as the worst vaccine rollout, as I have said, and also suffers from the lowest business confidence right now. We are spending more and getting less, which really seems to be the Canadian Liberal way these days. It does not bode well for the future. Nor does it provide Canadians with confidence that the Prime Minister and his Liberal government have the competency to really turn the ship around.

I would like to touch on something beyond the job losses and the economic devastation, because the stakes really are very high that we get this right.

Following a year of isolation due to the lockdown and restrictions, we know that the mental health of Canadians has been deeply

impacted. People are deeply suffering. I speak to my constituents on a regular basis and people are really beginning to hurt. It is palpable in my community as I am sure it is for all members of Parliament in their communities. Being kept inside away from the people and activities we love is really difficult for any amount of time let alone 12 months.

What I find most frustrating is that the Liberal government has not offered a solution or strategy to Canadians on how we get out of this. We are all praying for the vaccines to be delivered as soon as possible, but the Prime Minister said that the bulk of it may not get here until the end of September. He continues to make this promise, but that is seven long months away. More than that, and this is the really shocking part to me, the Liberal government has not even committed to reopening our economy even if we do achieve 70% vaccination rates in Canada, which seems to be understood is what we need for herd immunity. To be clear, the Liberals have yet to promise that if we get people vaccinated by September, as they have promised on several occasions, that things will go back to normal. In fact, they have made every effort to avoid making that commitment. Meanwhile, other countries are delivering plans, promises and deadlines to their people.

Canadians have been left to guess when there will be a full economic reopening and a full dismantling of these restrictions. People really do need to understand that no promise or commitment has been made. As of right now, there is no end in sight for Canadians and the Liberal government has failed to make this commitment, and I am not sure why.

The government has yet to give these thresholds, indicators or measures as to when we can return to normal and get our lives back. As I said, other countries are providing that certainty to their people. Why have the Liberals failed to ensure widespread use and implementation of all tools available, like rapid tests, therapeutics and, of course, vaccines? We have heard about these things for a year, yet they are not in widespread use. I know that the Liberal government is happy to blame the provinces, but the fact remains that the federal Liberal government is supposed to be Canada's leader in this crisis. Therefore, I do not accept that excuse. In my view, the Liberals should be moving heaven and earth to ensure that tools like this are commonplace by now. Instead, we are being told to sit tight for a minimum of another seven months.

What I do know is that Canadians need hope, which is something I hear every single day. They need to know when we will get out of this hell, and I do not use that word lightly. That is what this is for people. Hope is something that will help people. It will give them the strength to push through for another seven months. God help us if we are in this for longer. We need hope, a plan, indicators and communication. There has been nothing, and I cannot put this in stronger terms. People are suffering immeasurably. Years from now we will be looking back on this data and seeing the economic and mental devastation that it has caused. I am not the only one saying this. Social science experts across the country are saying this as well.

Parents have been telling me about their children, their—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The time is up, but the hon. member will be able to add to her comments during questions and comments.

Questions and comments, the hon. parliament secretary to the government House leader.

• (1730)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I disagree with so many things my colleague said, but I am afraid I will not be allowed the time to express that. Hopefully I will be able to address them a little later in more detail.

The question I have for the member is this. Does she actually support the legislation? This legislation is there to support a great number of Canadians. We just witnessed the Conservatives vote against support packages in Bill C-14. Does the Conservative Party support this legislation? If Conservatives do support the legislation, will they recognize the urgency and start allowing government bills to pass?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Speaker, I will note that the member did not dispute any of my claims or the claim that his Liberal government had not provided an end date or any hope or commitment for Canadians.

I will refer him to the parents who tell me their little children are depressed, or the wives whose husbands have been laid off and whose self-confidence has plummeted to dangerous levels or the elderly who have been emotional with me on the phone, saying they do not want to spend their last few months or years on this Earth alone in a room. Family businesses have closed, people's entire life's work is gone and there is nothing they can do about it.

I did not hear anything from the member about those comments.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to have Winnipeg members of Parliament playing such a prominent role in the debate.

One of the things that is an issue in our home province of Manitoba is kids who are graduating out of care and had been encouraged to apply for CERB even though they may not have met the eligibility criteria. They are among many low-income Canadians who were encouraged to apply and did so in good faith, not realizing

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that they did not meet the criteria and do not have the money to pay it back.

That is why the NDP has joined many in civil society calling for a low-income CERB repayment amnesty. It is one of the things we thought might have been in the bill, considering that we are coming up on the end of the tax year. There is not a lot of time left for these folks who do not have the money anyway. It is not like the government is going to get this money back. It is not going to help the bottom line. It is just going to further ruin the lives of people who are already in a very tough spot.

I wonder if the member has given some thought to the idea of a low-income CERB repayment amnesty. What is the position of her party in that regard?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Speaker, it certainly is nice to see Winnipeggers up today.

I understand where the member is coming from. I really feel there is this loss of hope, this despair. People do not have a choice. They have no power. There is nothing they can do when their businesses are closing. There is nothing they can do when their children are depressed. They have no other options today. We are all powerless to the whims and decisions of our governments, which is, of course, led by the federal Liberal government and the Prime Minister.

When people feel this powerless for this long, they lose hope, they lose the strength to keep fighting and, frankly, they lose the will to live. I have heard that first-hand. I am sure the member has heard similar things from his constituents.

Mrs. Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): Madam Speaker, the member mentioned that people seeking PR has dropped dramatically.

Over the weekend, I received a desperate plea to help someone who has been working hard to become a Canadian. He was basically begging me. He asked me to put myself in his situation. He was getting absolutely no response back from Service Canada. He started this back in 2019. He has had to reapply every time for visas, which he cannot afford to do. He says that he is so worried that his visa and his wife's and son's visas will expire. His son will have to leave school and he and his wife will have to leave their jobs. He will lose his licence and will not even be able to drop his son off at school.

I wonder if you could speak to how we got in this situation. Since we do not have any vaccines and we have no end in sight, what are we going to do?

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to remind the member that she is to address all questions and comments through the Chair.

A brief answer from the member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Madam Speaker, when I was the critic for immigration, I saw the vast mistreatment and the lack of dignity for new immigrants and newcomers.

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Again, the Prime Minister and the Liberals have provided no strategy and no plan on how to reopen our economy, how to return to our free lives, other than vaccinations, maybe by September, and maybe that is when we will reopen.

However, it has been a year. I firmly believe Canadians deserve more than a maybe seven months from now. As a Canadian and as a parliamentarian, representing nearly 100,000 people, I urge the Liberal government to bring forward a plan to reopen the economy, to bring back jobs and bring back life and living.

It is time for a plan. It is time for hope.

● (1735)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Kildonan—St. Paul for an excellent speech that will be very difficult for me to follow.

Here are the hard facts. While it is important to provide interim support for people who are jobless during COVID, what people really want are paycheques. This is all against the backdrop of an unemployment rate that is by far the highest in the G7. It is higher than the rates of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany and Japan.

The government has tried, since these data points have come out, to claim that unemployment rates no longer matter and that we should look at some other statistics that it has cooked up. The problem is that since the Prime Minister took office, he has said, on 49 occasions in the House of Commons, that the unemployment rate is precisely the measure we should look at to determine how our job market is working. However, right now it is not working.

There are 850,000 more people unemployed today than there were in February 2020. Interestingly, the government brags that Canada has secured a larger recovery of the lost jobs in percentage terms than other countries. That is, of course, the result of the fact that we lost more jobs in the first place and had more to gain back. Even with the minimal recovery we have had of jobs, we still have a higher rate of unemployed than our competitors.

It is getting worse. The most recent monthly data showed the loss of another 200,000 jobs in the same month that the United States gained jobs. The leading indicators of what job losses are to come are even worse. According to the largest association of small businesses in Canada, the CFIB, between 70,000 and 220,000 business owners in Canada are thinking of closing their businesses for good. This is between 7% and 21% of all businesses in the country. If they were to close, we would lose between one million and three million jobs, a catastrophic outcome for our economy.

Forget the fact that other countries are roaring back, recovering and putting their people back to work, and that foreign workers are getting paycheques while ours are getting credit card debts. Let us stop talking about stats and start talking about people, because a job, though it means a paycheque, means so much more than that. It means the pride, purpose and independence of getting up in the morning and taking control of one's life. People who lose jobs lose this pride and independence, and the data shows that their mental health suffers dramatically. According to a study by the University of Calgary, the suicide rate rises by two percentage points for every

one percentage point increase in unemployment. People take their lives when they lose their jobs.

Since the pandemic began, we have had a 50% increase in opioid overdoses in Alberta and Ontario. In British Columbia, 911 operators reported a surge in phone calls from family members and loved ones who are begging for a paramedic to come and rescue someone who has overdosed, usually on opioids. This is the result of depriving people of work. It is good and necessary to provide interim income for those people, but it is not the ultimate resolution to their problem, which is that they do not have a job and do not know how they are going to pay the bills in the long run.

● (1740)

This is not just because of COVID. The whole world is facing COVID, yet all the other G7 countries have lower unemployment than Canada. This is the result of a government policy that has systematically destroyed employment in this country for four years.

The government has blocked the energy east pipeline, which would have delivered a million barrels of western oil to eastern refineries, creating jobs for energy workers out west, refinery workers out east, steelworkers in central Canada and trades workers everywhere across the land. It vetoed the northern gateway pipeline and therefore deprived dozens of first nations communities of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars' worth of agreements to share revenue, money that would have paid for schools, hospitals and job training for the youth.

It has imposed job-killing taxes that have driven employers out of Canada and into the United States. Right now, Canadians have \$800 billion more invested outside of Canada than foreigners have invested in Canada. Why is that? It is because right now Canada is not the place to invest to get things done. In Canada it takes 170 days longer to get a building permit for a pipeline, business park, factory, warehouse or any other economic infrastructure in this country than it does in the United States. In fact, we are ranked 34 out of 35 OECD nations for the delays associated with getting approval from government to build anything.

Our first nations communities are forced to send their own revenues to Ottawa and then apply to get some of them back, rather than being allowed to harvest the revenues directly from their own economic activities. Leading first nations entrepreneurs talk about how long it takes for bureaucrats and politicians to sign off on commercial and other development activities on first nations lands, preventing them from giving paycheques and purpose and pride of a job to their own people.

When immigrants come to Canada and seek out the chance to work in the fields for which they were trained, they are prevented by professional bodies and other occupational licensing regulators from getting a permit to work and are not told what they have to do to get one. Therefore, we have doctors earning minimum wage, architects who are unemployed and mechanics who are stuck only changing oil and tires when they could be running a full service mechanical operation and earning six figures. These people deserve the paycheques for which they were trained, but because of the bureaucracy of our permit-driven economy they are prevented.

The government should put paycheques first. The federal government should set the goal and drive all other levels of government toward it to be the fastest place on planet earth to get a building permit for any kind of economic project, to allow first nations people to approve their own economic developments and to welcome home ownership for their people. We should allow first nations communities to keep more of the revenue from these projects.

We should repeal Bill C-69, the no new pipelines bill, so we can actually deliver our oil to market and get full world prices. We should end the offshore shipping ban off the northwest coast of British Columbia so that our energy producers can get world prices as well.

We should reduce the tens of billions of dollars of regulatory red tape costs that hold back businesses and force them to spend their time serving bureaucrats rather than hiring workers and serving customers. We should knock down interprovincial trade barriers so that Canadians can buy and sell goods from one another rather than importing and enriching foreign businesses abroad. We should reform our tax system so that it rewards work, savings and investment, and allows people to climb the income ladder rather than being penalized for each extra dollar they earn.

Right now we should be encouraging municipalities to make it easier for new and long-term vacant office space to be repurposed for housing for people who desperately need it. Here in Canada, despite having one of the most sparsely populated countries on earth, we have among the highest real estate costs for people trying to find a home.

• (1745)

These are all actions we could take right now to get—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the comments by the member for Carleton today, and I took note of one comment he made right after rattling off a whole bunch of stats. He said, “Let us stop talking about stats and start talking about people.” That is really good advice, because the reality is, which the member goes on about a lot, that our approach to dealing with COVID-19 was different from the U.S.’s approach. As a result, we do have an unemployment rate that is 2% higher than that of the U.S. At the end of 2020, ours was 8.8% and the U.S.’s was 6.7%.

When it comes to people, another very interesting thing the member never mentions is the fact that the fatality rate as a result of

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COVID is about a third in Canada than what it is in the States. About 506 people per million have died in Canada as a result of COVID. In the States, 1,298 people out of a million have died as a result of COVID.

Yes, let us talk about people; this is about people. The approach this government took is much different from the approach our neighbours to the south took, and I do not think that is a surprise to anybody.

My question for the member is very simple. What percentage would have been acceptable to him in order to save the number of people we saved?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Speaker, that self-righteous member did not save anyone. In fact, he and his government left the borders open for months after the military warned them to close borders to keep COVID out. They invited 2,000 people from the most affected region of China to come in after they were warned by the military. They then were the slowest among the G7 to get rapid testing, which would have helped us safely open our economy and protect people’s lives. Now we are in last place in the G7 for vaccination rates.

I think we have all had enough of hearing government members claim that the reason they have destroyed so many livelihoods is they were busy protecting lives. They were not protecting people’s lives. If they were, we would not have the worst vaccination rate in the G7 today and we would be competing with countries like—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Elmwood—Transcona.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, in his remarks, the member said that Canadians want paycheques and want to be able to work. I agree with him. It has been a difficult time for that obviously, and there has been a need to support them through these challenging times.

However, it is because of the truth of that statement that in many cases where there have been pilot projects for a guaranteed annual income, it has been shown to have a negligible impact on workforce participation. People do want to work when they can work, even if they have income support. However, what we find is that some of the serious mental health consequences the member mentioned are mitigated when they know they have a guaranteed income to back them up. We know that usually people do not participate in the workforce because they are caring for family or pursuing some kind of education or training that later helps them participate in the workforce and contribute to the economy. Of course, a guaranteed annual income is there for people who may want to work but simply cannot because they are living with a disability or something else prevents them.

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Why does the member so often express opposition to the idea of a guaranteed annual income?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Speaker, NDP members cannot tell us how they would pay for this. They say this money would fall out of airplanes into people's hands, but they do not tell us from where that money would come.

There is no study, actually, that has simulated what the effect would be on people's health and well-being of raising their taxes by seven or eight points on the GST to pay for the scheme he describes. If he can come up with an explanation for where he will get the money, then I will look at the proposal and judge it on its merits. It is just that so far all we get are dreamland promises that cash will fall from the heavens, with no idea where it is going to come from. The previous proposals that have come forward by, for example, the provincial Liberal government in Ontario would have actually hurt working-class people and disproportionately given money to families that are well off at the expense of working-class families.

We need to work through all those details before we can talk about just dumping money out of airplanes into people's hands, because as we know, money comes from people who earned it in the first place.

• (1750)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Madam Speaker, I seek the unanimous consent of the House to share my time with the hon. member for La Prairie.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Does the hon. member have the consent of the House?

Seeing no opposition, I grant the request.

The hon. member for Thérèse-De Blainville.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Speaker, the crisis we are going through today has hit hard. The numbers speak volumes. In barely three months, at the beginning of the crisis, the unemployment rate hit 13%. In March 2020, 167,000 women were laid off compared to 96,100 men. This crisis has been especially devastating to women, who saw their unemployment rate spike from February 2020 to December 2020, from 37% to 48%. In January, the number of long-term unemployed hit a new record at somewhere around 512,000. Still today, the market is far from being stabilized in a number of sectors including restaurants, hotels, tourism, arts and culture, aerospace, and so on.

At the beginning of the crisis, several emergency measures were adopted. Why? Because the current EI system is not equipped to respond. We are in favour of Bill C-24, which increases the number of weeks of regular EI benefits to 50 weeks. However, do we have a choice? The answer is: not really. The employment insurance system as we know it today failed to protect workers in times of crisis, but also in normal times. The current crisis revealed of the cracks in the employment insurance system.

We know that the coverage rate is just barely 40% and a little less for women. Many workers, including contract workers, part-time and casual workers and self-employed workers, are excluded

from the program. Seasonal workers experience long gap periods, or periods between two periods of employment where they are without income. The government also tried to mitigate those impacts with pilot projects that were extended but never improved upon to put an end to the EI spring gap once and for all. There are also women who are on maternity or parental leave who are not eligible for regular benefits if they lose their job after they return to work.

All that to say that there are many examples to show that a comprehensive reform of the employment insurance system is necessary, and soon. On my initiative, the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, of which I am a member, began work on this necessary review of the EI system. I want to thank my committee colleagues for agreeing to make this study a priority. There was a lot of interest in this study and there are many witnesses who want to share their ideas about changes that should be made and solutions that should be implemented.

Need I remind members that the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion was given the mandate of modernizing the program? Need I remind members that, in the last parliament, the minister was also given the mandate of reforming the EI program? What has been done in the past five years? Nothing. The government, through the President of the Treasury Board, even had to acknowledge last spring that the reform of the program had been put off for too long.

I would say that the time has come. Time is running out because what are we going to do when the temporary measures end? The status quo is not acceptable. The time has come to plan for changes to EI that will be structural, foreseeable and sustainable so that the objective of the program is once again to be a safety net for workers.

Furthermore, I would be remiss if I did not raise the issue of sickness benefits and the injustice that workers are suffering today. Why do we think it is acceptable that a person with cancer has only 15 weeks of sickness benefits? The Bloc Québécois has spoken several times about this issue. A motion was moved in the House and passed unanimously. A bill was also introduced. We are asking for 50 weeks of sickness benefits for sick workers and we are still waiting for the government to take concrete action on this.

• (1755)

The reason the EI system needs to be reformed is that, pandemic aside, the job market has undergone a number of changes in recent years, and these changes make a review of the program necessary. I will talk about a few of these changes.

The fact is that the number of workers earning minimum wage is going up. According to Statistics Canada, the proportion of minimum wage workers grew from 5.2% to 10.4% between 1998 and 2018. One in six workers make minimum wage. According to one study, just 45% of workers earning \$15 an hour or less are covered by the EI program. If this trend continues, more and more workers will fall through the cracks. Furthermore, there are many factors that make it hard for workers to find a job after being laid off, such as their age, sex, race and immigration status. These workers therefore need more time to find work. The system must account for this reality and give workers the resources they need to overcome these challenges.

The job market has also seen an increase in the number of self-employed workers in recent years. Statistics Canada reports that approximately 15% of workers in 2019 were self-employed.

At the risk of repeating myself, I would say that solutions are out there, solutions that focus on eligibility criteria, qualifying hours, qualifying weeks, regional unemployment rates and the income replacement rate.

I urge the minister and the government to listen to what various groups are recommending and to start overhauling the system now.

In conclusion, if there is one thing I would like people to take away from my speech, it is this: The government clearly had to take action by means of this bill. That is why we support the bill before us. However, the government also needs to work on a long-term vision, because the crisis has exposed the many flaws in the EI program and the gaps that existed long before the pandemic. Great crisis brings great opportunity. The government should seize this opportunity to reform the system and ensure, once and for all, that all workers have access to a true 21st-century EI system.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Madam Speaker, my colleague offered some suggestions for improving the EI program.

Can she tell us more about that and explain why this reform is important so that we can better understand what this is about?

● (1800)

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

I will not give a crash course on employment insurance. That is not my objective.

It is no coincidence that the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities is going to conduct a study on this topic. This will not be the first time that a study is carried out to review the employment insurance program. It is important. The EI program is a social safety net that seeks to protect workers in case of job loss. Since it was implemented in the early 1970s, the program's coverage has grown more restricted rather than broader.

The current program is not adapted to today's labour market, and even less so in periods of crisis. Workers are falling through the cracks. That is why we need to implement emergency measures. These measures, however, are only temporary. What will happen on

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September 21, 2021? The priority is to expand the program's eligibility criteria to make it more inclusive.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, earlier, we heard government representatives say that the bill sought to implement urgent and targeted reforms.

However, a major flaw in this bill is the fact that it does not provide for additional weeks of employment insurance sickness benefits. We know that there is an urgent need in that regard and that the House of Commons has twice called for the EI sickness benefit to be extended to 50 weeks.

I would like to hear what the member thinks about that, and I would like to know whether the Bloc Québécois would include such a measure in this bill.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Speaker, technically, incorporating this change into the bill would have been simple, because we would have amended many of the same sections. We understand that it is not the same thing for the government, and that this bill comes in response to an emergency.

However, some people are feeling the urgency because they are no longer getting anything or will not get anything in the short term. We must therefore act quickly and refer this bill to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. The government can still take action on this issue.

I would remind the House that the government committed to increasing EI sickness benefits. The Bloc Québécois had a motion passed in the House calling on the government to provide benefits for 50 weeks. We now expect the government to follow through on that commitment in its upcoming budget or through legislation. These EI sickness benefits are absolutely necessary, which is obvious when we look at the people who are affected.

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her speech. She always has something useful to say when it comes to EI.

Today is International Women's Day. As my colleague is aware, women are overrepresented when we look at poverty indicators, especially in terms of wages and minimum wage jobs in Quebec and Canada.

What measures could be put in place to help achieve the equality that everyone dreams of and is talking about today?

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

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The problem is that we spotlight these injustices and inequalities on March 8 and then forget about them the very next day. There are ways to fix these problems. One way is a federal pay equity law, which Canada still does not have.

I have a recommendation for the government as it prepares to introduce its next budget: carry out a rigorous gender-based analysis—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Order. The hon. member for La Prairie.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Madam Speaker, Bill C-24 has two main parts. The first extends the employment insurance benefit period to 50 weeks. My colleague from Thérèse-De Blainville explained that well.

The second makes tourists who travel south or anywhere around the world ineligible for the \$1,000 benefit for people who have to quarantine. I would like to focus on this second part and confirm for anyone still wondering that we will support Bill C-24.

The word that comes to mind in a conversation about denying tourists and vacationers the \$1,000 they might otherwise have collected is “finally”. We finally have a bill that puts an end to that ridiculous situation. If we look back at what happened, everything started last September with the unanimous passage of Bill C-4, which gave people with COVID-19 or in mandatory isolation \$500 per week for two weeks, for a total of \$1,000, to make up for lost income. Those people were doing what was best for society by self-isolating so as not to put public health at risk.

Bill C-4 came into force on October 2, and the problems started after that. If we look at what happened next, we got nothing but equivocation from this government, which has been flying on autopilot since the beginning of this pandemic. Actually, it is not even flying on autopilot, because that would require having a system in place. This government has been flying blind from the start, and I do not know how it can tell where it is going. We are waving flags to warn the government about the challenges ahead. However, this government is neither active nor proactive, but passive.

In a serious crisis like this, we need leadership and a government that is firing on all cylinders. In the past, great crises have produced great leaders. For example, the Great Depression gave us John Maynard Keynes, one of the greatest economists in history, who completely changed our way of viewing life in society.

In a crisis like this, the government should have been vigilant. In other words, when this legislation came into force, the government should have monitored what was happening with the \$1,000 benefit to see whether it was being used properly and ensure that there were no issues. That is what governing is all about. The government should have been monitoring its actions and their consequences, but it did not.

Émile de Girardin said that governing means looking ahead. Unfortunately, this government is flying blind, as I was saying. Unfortunately, it is woefully lacking in foresight. If it had been vigilant, it could have protected the economy better. If it had been vigilant, it could have protected public health better. If it had been vigilant, it could have saved more jobs. If it had been vigilant, it could have

saved more lives. That is what we must not forget about this government's unfortunate perpetual inertia.

I am not saying that as a member of an opposition party that thinks it can do better. Unfortunately, I am only noting that what seemed like a good idea at first later proved to be a very bad idea. With the emergence of variants like the U.K. variant, the government should have closed the borders promptly. Instead, the government waited and gave sanctimonious lectures, asking people to stay home and not travel anywhere.

● (1805)

The government told people that it would be best if they did not go abroad, but, if they did, it would give them \$1,000 so they could spend two weeks at home when they got back. There was a contradiction in this message. The government should have been vigilant, noticed the contradiction and fixed it. Instead, journalists pointed it out on December 31. Journalists were the ones to point out that there was a problem.

We then saw the leader of the government claim that the Liberals had just realized there was a problem and that they had decided to end it as of January 3.

The Bloc Québécois immediately gave its unconditional support to the government. Actually, there was one condition. We promised the Liberals that if they wanted to move forward, we would do so quickly. Our only condition was that the measure was to be retroactive to October 2. As for the rest, we agreed with them, because we felt that it was important and that we needed to act quickly.

We did not get anything resembling a bill until January 20, when the government deked à la Mario Lemieux and almost, but not really, gave us something. Once we were able to get a look at the bill, we immediately noticed that it was not retroactive to January 3. We asked to rework the bill and make it retroactive to October 2.

The government panicked and immediately pulled back. For nearly two months, the opposition parties called on the government to bring its bill back. I know; I was there. I am my party's House leader, and I could see that the other parties wanted to help the government. I rose today and said that we supported the bill. It did not take long.

I told the government that we would go along with it if the bill were made retroactive to October 2, if it were done right. It took nearly two months for the bill to make a reappearance.

This bill fixes a mistake that was made. The government has often said that all of the parties were in agreement. Indeed, the parties have agreed on the principle of the bill from the beginning, but we do not manage the public service. If the Liberals do not want to govern, they should step aside.

The Bloc Québécois wants the government to be able to move forward, but carefully. In times of crisis, it is important to remain vigilant. Unfortunately, the government did not do that.

If we are in favour of this bill, it is because it should have been passed days ago, if not sooner. However, this will do. It is fine. We agree.

I would like to stress one thing. We have moved motions about this before, and my esteemed colleague spoke about them earlier. It is extremely inhumane to grant 15 weeks of EI benefits to someone who is fighting for their life, when people in other circumstances are given 50 weeks. It is unconscionable that this is accepted and tolerated when it means that, rather than focusing exclusively on healing and recovery, people who have been struck down with a serious illness that prevents them from working also have to worry about making ends meet. That does not make any sense.

Those who are listening to me speak know that I am right. If I were to speak one-on-one to my colleagues in the House about this, I cannot imagine that any of them would say that 15 weeks of EI benefits are enough for someone who is suffering from cancer and undergoing treatment. That does not make any sense at all.

All that is needed to remedy the situation is to amend this bill. That would remedy the situation until September 25, 2021. Then, if we wanted to make the change permanent, the solution would be to vote in favour of Bill C-265, which was introduced by the valiant Bloc Québécois member for Salaberry—Suroît.

We need to change history. We need to show some humanity. We need to be good.

• (1810)

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his speech. There is a reason he was nominated as one of the best orators in the House. We just saw another excellent example of that.

Today was a dark day in Parliament. I consider it a black day. In fact, it was black and white. We voted to increase old age security. I believe that seniors have been affected the most by this crisis. They are the ones who have suffered the most deaths and have been the most affected by the pandemic. The cost of groceries has increased, and this has affected seniors especially. We voted today on a Bloc motion to increase old age security by \$110 a month. It was passed by the House, but the government voted against it. I would like to hear my colleague's comments on that.

What does he think of the Liberal government voting against increasing OAS for the most vulnerable people in this crisis?

• (1815)

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Speaker, I salute my colleague.

He is absolutely right. I cannot explain something I do not understand. The Conservatives, the NDP and the Green Party voted for the motion. It is incomprehensible that the government and members of the Liberal Party did not automatically vote to increase benefits for the people most affected by the pandemic. Once the pandemic is over, when Liberal members are out for a walk and cross paths with seniors, I dare them to look those seniors in the eye and

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tell them that, as Liberals, they voted against something that would have helped them. We will see how they feel.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague from La Prairie for his speech.

He spoke about the government's procrastination. I think he gave a good summary of the facts. This bill was hastily drafted in January but it did not completely remedy the problem. As the great René Lévesque would say, two wrongs do not make a right.

My colleague gave us an account of what happened because history tends to repeat itself. Bill C-4 was also hastily passed because the government had prorogued Parliament. With Bill C-4, \$17 billion would be spent by December 31, 2020.

Can our colleague tell us whether he thinks the government's approach is providing certainty and what he thinks of its style of governance?

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Speaker, we look at what the government is doing. News flash: The Bloc Québécois will never govern except in a sovereign Quebec. Maybe we will still be in politics and maybe we will govern. We shall see. However, we will never govern here. That is why we are trying to be and are, in my opinion, a constructive opposition.

It gives me no pleasure to talk about what I am seeing across the way. I am not happy to say that. I would have liked to say the opposite. I would have liked to say, "Congratulations, the government acted intelligently."

If there was a party that collaborated in the beginning, it was the Bloc Québécois, as the Leader of the Government in the House can confirm. It felt like the government was saying that we were on a plane in flight that it was in the middle of building and it was asking us for help. It was something like that, even though it may not have described it that way. That is when we pooled our ideas. We had discussions and determined that we needed to protect our people. It was important. We needed to be good. We had no choice but to be good. We had to try to anticipate, be vigilant and proactive.

All I can say is that I am saddened by what I am seeing. I would have liked to praise the government's response to such a crucial, important and difficult situation, but it unfortunately does not deserve my compliments.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, here we again find ourselves debating some of the financial measures necessary to help Canadians cope with what has inarguably been one of the most difficult public health and economic challenges of our time.

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Even though there is nothing objectionable about the measures proposed in the bill, I think it is missing a really important and significant opportunity to make some much-needed headway on issues that Canadians are facing that are part and parcel of the employment insurance system, for which there is well-established general support in the House of Commons.

I am going to speak to that very shortly, but I also want to recognize that when we talk about the pandemic and its effects, we all know, as has been said many times today on International Women's Day, that it has had a disproportionately negative effect on women across the country for all sorts of reasons, including because they do a disproportionate amount of the caregiving work in families. We have seen women step back from the workforce and gone above and beyond the simple amount that might have resulted from the job losses in the economy. This is because they are shouldering the brunt of a lot of the care work that has been required, particularly when schools are closed and access to child care has been difficult. That has had a disproportionate impact on the ability of women to participate in the workforce. These are things that we need to be mindful of not only as we move toward a recovery, but also as we discuss the measures in this bill and the measures that are not in the bill and ought to have been included.

In this bill we see an extension of the EI regular benefits to 50 weeks, which makes sense. We know that the economic consequences of the pandemic are far from over and that people who required exceptional financial support are in many cases going to continue to require that kind of extended support.

It is curious to note that the 50 weeks of EI was not matched in the government's announcement for extensions of the Canada recovery benefit and other like benefits up to the 50-week mark. That raises some questions about how long the government is anticipating these economic circumstances to last. At some point, it would be nice to hear why the government did not see fit to extend the Canada recovery benefit up to 50 weeks starting now, because that failure leaves Canadians who are dependent on that benefit to wonder whether or not that help will be there for them when the next round of extensions runs out.

The other thing this bill does is to end Canadians' ability to use the Canada recovery sickness benefit, or what could have been known as the "sick day" program, to self-isolate upon their return from non-essential travel. That was not really foreseen when this benefit was established. It is something that would not have happened had the government gone ahead with what the New Democrats believe is really the right way to do this, which is to legislate 10 paid sick days for workers across the country. The federal government is not able to do that for over 80% of workers in the workforce. As I am sure all members know, most workers fall under provincial jurisdiction, but the government could have shown leadership by doing that within the federal sphere. It could have made headway by sitting down with provincial premiers and pushing very hard on this matter as an appropriate way to make sure that Canadians have the resources they need to be able to stay home and protect their co-workers and communities from COVID-19. It is regrettable that we have not seen that degree of leadership. It would have been better, and much harder to abuse the way the Canada re-

covery sickness benefit was abused in allowing people to stay home after non-essential travel.

● (1820)

I think it is important to beseech any Canadians who may be listening to follow those travel advisories and to stay home if they do not have an essential reason for travel. I say this particularly in light of the fact that it seems, as we have known for some time, that the government has taken a while getting around to it despite the widespread support within Parliament to change this program and prevent Canadians from using it in that way. If Canadians are going to embark on any ill-advised travel, they really should do their homework, understand that the rules can change very quickly and build that as best they can into their travel plans, and if they feel there is any important uncertainty in their plans they cannot resolve, they should make the choice to stay home.

I want to talk a bit now about what is missing from this package of reforms, because there are some things that are. I have to say, and I am going to be honest, that I was a little frustrated and, in fact, outraged by some comments by the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion and her parliamentary secretary, who said the idea of this bill was just to deal with some urgent matters.

I put it to them that they should talk to Canadians who are suffering from cancer and are at the end of their 15 weeks of EI sickness benefits. They should go ahead and talk to people who have had COVID and it is not leaving them. Maybe these people are not in hospital or in intensive care, but they have recurring symptoms, a condition that is coming to be known as "long COVID". They are not able to look for work because they go through periodic episodes of chronic fatigue and other symptoms, such as trouble breathing. It is occurring often enough that they know they are not going to be able to hold down a job, but their EI sickness benefits are done and there is no other program. Not all private insurers recognize long COVID because it is a relatively new condition and these people do not have the resources they need to be able to look after their families and themselves and maintain their financial wherewithal while dealing with a serious sickness. The answer for those people, as it was for 15 weeks, would be an extended EI sickness benefit.

I put it to members that the urgency is absolutely there. The Liberals said simple and urgent reforms. There is nothing simpler than changing the number of benefit weeks in the Employment Insurance Act. There is nothing simpler than that. All that has to be done is change "15" to "50" and it is done. One could not ask for simpler legislative reform if one tried. The idea that this is not simple is false. The idea that it is not urgent is false. The idea that it is not related to the pandemic is false. There is absolutely no good reason whatsoever to have omitted this.

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The politics of the situation do not stand in the way either. Twice this very House of Commons during this Parliament called on the government to extend the EI sickness benefit from 15 weeks to 50 weeks, once by majority vote on a motion and the second time by unanimous consent, which is to say that nobody out of the 338 members elected to this House objected. If they had, that motion would not have passed. It was done twice. Once by majority and once by unanimous consent, the House called on the government to extend the EI sickness benefit to 50 weeks. Is this something the government has a principled objection to? Apparently not, because the government itself committed to extending the EI sickness benefit in its last campaign.

It did not go far enough. It did not commit to 50 weeks, but to 26 weeks. It has had ample occasions to make good on that election commitment in the context of the House of Commons' wanting it go even further than its own election commitment. The Liberals are the laggards when it comes to extending the EI sickness benefit. They are the ones who want the smallest extension, and yet they will not even extend the benefits to the amount they themselves promised, despite Canada and Canadians going through an enormously difficult time at a time when the EI sickness benefit could be an important tool to help keep sick Canadians going financially for a little longer.

We are seeing an acknowledgement of those difficult circumstances with an extension of up to 50 weeks of the regular benefit. That is the right thing to do, but it is also the right thing to do when it comes to the EI sickness benefit, and we have not had anything approaching an adequate explanation as to why the government is so dead set opposed to getting this done.

• (1825)

I do not know if the Liberals just want to campaign on it again: "It worked well the first time, so let's keep it around for another election commitment". I do not know if it is in keeping with another theme I have discerned in my time negotiating with the Liberal government across the table during the pandemic, which is that the Liberals are very reticent to do anything that would be of benefit beyond the pandemic.

There are some problems with the sick-day benefit, which I will talk about shortly, and all of these stem from the fact that the government is resisting making sick days permanent. It wants a benefit that will die with the pandemic rather than have something that will go on past it as a permanent and positive change for Canadian workers. We are seeing the same thing here with the EI sick benefit, which really ought to be extended permanently. This is not my opinion but the unanimous opinion of the House of Commons, so let us not say this is somehow just a partisan issue or something like that.

Unfortunately, there are not a lot of charitable explanations that could draw. Maybe the Liberals want to keep it for an election commitment. Maybe they just do not want any good, permanent changes emerging from the pandemic. I suspect we will never get a Liberal to admit that on the record, but, fine, let them put a good reason on the record, because the research on the EI sick benefit is in, the politics are favourable to getting it done, and the circumstances make it as urgent as any of the reforms in the bill before us,

and yet it continues not to be done. It is incredibly frustrating to see the government pass up yet another opportunity to make this simple and urgent change to the employment insurance regime.

Another thing that really ought to be in here as we approach the end of the tax year is a low-income CERB repayment amnesty. We know that right now the government is asking a lot of people to pay back their CERB payments who do not have the money, because they were living in poverty before the pandemic. They were told in good faith, sometimes by representatives of the federal government itself, including some members in the chamber, and sometimes by administrators at the provincial level that they should be applying for CERB. We know that happened in Manitoba in some cases with kids graduating out of care. These are people who were told by people in various positions of authority that they ought to go ahead and apply for CERB, and they did. They were supported for a time, and that money is spent. It did not get shunted off into a tax haven. It was not spent on international shares in some kind of multinational company. It was spent here in the local economy supporting people who live on the margins and face some of the most economically difficult challenges as anyone in the country does, and they do not have the money to pay it back.

Let us not kid ourselves that somehow there is a big wad of cash out there, and all the government has to do is to demand it from the poor and it is going to help the bottom line. The fact of the matter is that the money is not there, and the only thing the government is going to accomplish by insisting on getting that money back is to make it even harder for folks who are already struggling with poverty to get back on their feet. I do not see what the benefit is. I do not think there is any justice in that, and I do not think there is any financial or economic benefit to Canadians from that, frankly, and certainly not in the short term and, I would argue, not in the long term either. We are making it more difficult for people to get back on their feet and to contribute in whatever way they can to the economy, which does not benefit us and ends up costing us more in the long run. However, we do not see any mention of that here. It is a real disappointment and, again, it fails to seize upon an urgent issue as we near the end of the tax year and the deadline that so many have been told they have to meet to make those repayments they quite clearly cannot afford to make.

In the time I have left, I will talk about two more issues.

One issue is the Canada recovery sickness benefit, or the 10 sick days. I spoke a little about this and I think I made it clear that we are of the view that 10 sick days should be legislated and made a right for every Canadian worker, regardless of whether they have a collective agreement or not, regardless of whether they have a generous employer or not, regardless of whether they work in a federally or provincially regulated workplace.

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● (1830)

Canada should be able to get to the point where every worker is entitled to 10 paid sick days, whatever the reason, whether it is COVID-19 or something else. In this time, it is imperative that people be able to call in sick to work. That is why we pushed so hard to try to get 10 sick days.

We have this program, and it has seen less uptake than was projected. Partly that is because people cannot take their sick days one day at a time. As people wake up with some symptoms and do not want to go into work for fear of infecting their colleagues, they decide that maybe they are going to take a day off work. However, not only can they not take it a day at a time: They have to miss at least two and a half days, or 50% of their normal work time in a week, in order to take the benefit. If they take that day and their test comes back rather quickly, they could be back at work before they qualify for the sick time, in which case we have not helped them at all to take time off work to protect the health of their colleagues and their community.

That means people may well make the choice. They cannot afford to have a test result come back the next day, because then they would have to go back to work and would have had a day that they did not get paid for. If they are only getting by as it is, they cannot afford to do that too many times before they find themselves in financial difficulties, so it is important that people be able to take it one day at a time.

We know that some people are making more than \$100 a day, but they still need all of what they make in order to meet their bills at the end of the month. That is true even for people who are not living extravagantly. This is not a program that offers full wage replacement in the way that employers who are required by law to give sick days to their employees are expected to provide full wage replacement.

We continue to have these deficiencies in the program. We are missing an opportunity to try to address those deficiencies. We are only addressing the one, which was that it was left wide open for non-essential travellers to claim it. It is good to be fixing one problem, but it is really missing an opportunity to get to the real meat of the issue that is preventing this program from being the success we need it to be in order to protect public health and in order for it to be a proper stepping stone to those 10 days of paid sick leave that New Democrats believe every worker should be entitled to, pandemic or not.

The other thing is harder to address in legislation, but I think this is the moment to ask. If there are any legislative barriers or issues that are leading to this problem, they lie in the fact that there are many Canadians who have exhausted all of their EI regular benefits. We have been hearing about them. I have written the government about this issue, and it has come up in question period. Those are the benefits that we are extending up to 50 weeks now.

These people still have open claims that would allow them to claim, for instance, a sickness benefit or another kind of EI special benefit. They have open claims, and people cannot close those claims without losing those potential benefit weeks. They are being told by the CRA that they cannot get the Canada recovery benefit and that they should go talk to Service Canada. They go to talk to

Service Canada, which says their regular benefits are exhausted, so that should allow them to be able to apply for the benefit with the CRA. These people go back to the CRA, which says their claim is still open, so they have to talk to Service Canada. Finally, people just get fed up of being bounced around and call their MP.

This is not the way to be helping people in an emergency. They need access to these benefits, and it is up to the government to sort it out. If there is a problem with the fact that the CRA does not understand that people can have exhausted their regular benefits and do not want to close a claim in case they get sick and need to access the sickness benefit, or in case they want to use other kinds of EI special benefits, this is something that government should be able to figure out on its own. It should not be up to individual Canadians who are facing a financial crisis to spend days, weeks or months running around, chasing different people and departments, getting their MP involved, trying to figure out how they can get access to what is supposed to be an emergency benefit in difficult times. Give me a break.

What we need is some political leadership, for sure. If there is some kind of legislative change that needs to be made in order to end this infuriating problem that Canadians are facing, now is the time to do it. Let us get it done. The need is urgent. Let us make it simple.

I look forward to questions and comments.

● (1835)

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for a very comprehensive overview of some of the real opportunities and challenges within the current employment insurance system and, of course, the emergency benefits with the CERB that were put in place to address some of those things.

What the member did not touch on in terms of reform of the employment insurance program is contract workers. We saw that there were mechanisms for CERB, but the EI program does not really address contract workers and people who are precariously employed, yet we have certainly found that they are in need of that kind of insurance backstop during the pandemic.

I am wondering if the member could give us any thoughts on how or if that is an aspect that EI should be looking at addressing.

● (1840)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for raising this long-standing problem with the employment insurance system. We can debate the reasons and virtues of this, but more and more people in the Canadian workforce, and in the global workforce more generally, are not working the kind of nine-to-five jobs of the past, and we do not have an employment insurance system that recognizes that.

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Earlier, a Conservative colleague of hers was quick to try to shoot down one of the big solutions that has been put on the table, based on some misleading claims about how a guaranteed annual income might be funded and how it might be rolled out. One of the ways that people are talking about addressing this issue is moving toward some kind of guaranteed annual income system.

This would do a lot for many marginalized people, including people living with disabilities and seniors who have inadequate pension income, but it would also do a lot for Canadians who are participating, whenever they can, in a workforce that does not provide a lot of steady employment in the way that we are used to thinking of it, which is a nine-to-five, 40-hour-a-week job. That would help them take more risks. We have heard from advocates of guaranteed annual income some of the benefits to entrepreneurialism that exist when people know that, within a certain limit, they can try and fail without losing their shirt.

That is one of the directions we need to be looking in quite seriously as we move into the future, to make sure that we have an income support program that can capture everyone, so we are not continually having the kinds of debates that we have been having throughout the pandemic. These are the debates about all the different people who are falling through the cracks and who really do need that assistance, and about how we would all be better off if they got that assistance because they are going to spend that money in the local economy. That is the direction we need to be looking.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I often listen to New Democratic members of Parliament provide comment on how government is just not doing enough and that we need to do more, it would seem, in every aspect of society.

I suspect that some of these so-called permanent changes the member is advocating for would have been that much more difficult to pass through the House of Commons today. I would at least speculate that is a possibility. Maybe the member could provide some comment in regard to that.

We have had NDP administration for the Province of Manitoba, as the member knows, for 15 or more years in the last 20 or so years. A lot of the changes that the member is advocating for need to be put in place provincially to cover a larger percentage of the workforce. Why have the provincial governments of the past 20 years in Manitoba let down our workers to the degree they have?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Madam Speaker, it is a good question. No government is perfect, of course. I have long maintained that the NDP governments in Manitoba, under Doer and then under Selinger, ought to have passed anti-scab legislation. It was a disappointment to me that they did not, and I look forward to a future NDP government in Manitoba doing that. This is just one example. Likewise, I would like to see us get paid sick days there.

However, I do think it is better when we can get there as a country. Let us not pretend that Canadian provinces do not compete for investment. It would be better if we were to do this all together.

There has been a moment in the pandemic where, with appropriate federal leadership, we could have tried to move to a position

where provinces were all instituting 10 legislated sick days at a time. This would have prevented the kind of interprovincial competition that too often gets in the way of progress for workers in any one particular jurisdiction. Therefore, it was a real disappointment for me to see the federal government take a pass on that.

In respect to other measures that would have made it more difficult for this law to pass quickly, I disagree. In fact, a majority of the House of Commons, and then a unanimous House of Commons, called for a 50-week EI sickness benefit. Therefore, there is no reason at all to think that changing the number in the legislation, from 15 to 50, would have caused one iota of delay. It is a very simple change. It has been called for by the House unanimously, and I cannot fathom why it is not in here.

• (1845)

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Madam Speaker, my colleague from Elmwood—Transcona outlined a lot of the important things we should have learned during the pandemic, that we should be looking ahead to the future, not just within the pandemic. He talked about the government not putting the 50-week period for EI sickness benefits in the legislation and bringing forward a paid sick leave benefit that was very difficult to use and not useful. When we are in a pandemic, we want people who are sick to stay home, not risk their lives and the lives of others.

Could the member expand on that? Does he have some idea on why the government has gone against the will of the House of Commons, why it has gone against its own campaign promises and not brought in these measures?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Madam Speaker, I would like to take the opportunity to talk a bit about the folks I have heard from across the country who are experiencing long-term symptoms of COVID. This is not unique to Canada. It is happening all over the world. People who appear to have recovered from their COVID infection then get different kinds of recurring symptoms. They can be quite debilitating. They are not very predictable. They get in the way of people holding down a job.

In some other countries, they are starting to begin work by assembling professionals together in clinics to try to get a better handle on this condition and understand better how it works, but also to legitimize the condition so it can be recognized by insurance companies, for example, which have also been resisting recognition of this.

The EI sick benefit right now is the best way to accommodate these folks and ensure their new, novel and debilitating condition does not become the cause of their financial ruin. I am mystified as to why that is not in here, given the widespread political support that measure already enjoys in the House of Commons.

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Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Madam Speaker, I agree with so many of the points that the member made in his comprehensive speech. This was a time when we could have been working on some permanent programs rather than this continued patchwork we are dealing with. So many people have fallen through the cracks during COVID-19 as well as many businesses. I am really happy to see the NDP and some Liberal members supporting the guaranteed livable income. The Green Party has been promoting this since 2006. Economic studies show that it will increase employment and increase economic activity. It makes for a great sickness benefit program as well if it is done properly. We could have a system available so when people do not work, they still get their cheque.

Could the hon. member comment on some of these things?

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Madam Speaker, I look at all the debates we have had in the House over the last year or so. We can talk about CERB and all the constituencies we have been trying to help, whether its workers who are trying to access their SUB plan, or moms struggling to access benefits for maternity leave, or seniors who could not handle the additional costs of the pandemic or people living with disabilities. All the people falling through the cracks could have been captured by a more universal approach like the kind we were advocating for earlier in the pandemic. All the time that has been spent trying to close those cracks, and not comprehensively because we have not succeeded, could have been spent fixing other problems.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada and to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to speak to Bill C-24, yet another important piece of legislation designed as a direct result of the coronavirus. I would like to approach this debate in terms of what I have been listening to throughout the afternoon.

My colleague from Kildonan-St. Paul made reference to the idea of hope, while other Conservative members were quite harsh in their criticism, saying, "Where is the plan?" I want to address both of those issues and how this legislation fits in so well.

Virtually from day one, the Prime Minister, cabinet and government as a whole indicated that we were going to be there for Canadians and we would have their backs. We wanted to support Canadians throughout our great nation in making sure that we could minimize the negative impact of the coronavirus. We have been working on that seven days a week, 24 hours a day, in one way or another. I am sure I am not alone: Members of Parliament from all sides of the House are deeply engaged within our constituencies and caucuses with regard to the coronavirus, what is taking place in our communities and what we need to do as a government to minimize the damage.

The Conservative Party talks a lot about the plan, asking where the plan is, and the issue of hope. I have had the opportunity over the past 12 months to comment on the plan that we talk about consistently. There is no list of one to 1,050 thoughts, ideas, dates and so forth. That type of document does not exist, except in the minds of many of my Conservative friends. We have worked very closely with many different stakeholders, provinces, indigenous leaders, territories, different levels of government, school divisions, municipi-

palities, unions and so many others, including small, medium and large businesses, to understand the impact that the coronavirus is having on our society and economy.

The programs that we have developed have done an excellent job of making sure that we minimize the negative impacts of the coronavirus, and have put Canada in a great position not only to build back, but build back better, as many of my colleagues will talk about.

Look at the legislation that we have today. Members will say that I am a government member and I am just saying good stuff because I am obligated to say good stuff. I would like to provide a couple of quotes specifically on this bill.

The Canadian Labour Congress released a statement that said:

Canada's unions welcome the extension to income supports announced by the federal government today as a necessary step towards providing further financial security to those who need it.

The release also stated:

It's good to see the federal government fulfill its promise to take care of workers with these measures, including extending the duration of the federal sickness benefit for those who aren't covered through their workplace.... The provinces must step up and offer workers universal paid sick leave.

● (1850)

That is what the CLC has pointed out. I put it to my friend from Elmwood—Transcona that we can talk all we want, but there is nothing that Ottawa could do that would meet the full standards of the NDP. If we extended something to 30 weeks, NDP members would say that we should do 35 weeks. If we did 35 weeks, they would say to do 40 weeks. It is endless in terms of what they would want to see.

If my colleague from Spadina—Fort York who talks about housing could do a comparison between NDP policies and what we have done as a government, we will find that in the last five years, the Government of Canada has far exceeded anything that the NDP could have ever created, even in their minds, yet they still say that there is not enough, even though it is tenfold in terms of the numbers they were talking about.

That is why I put to my friend the question. He himself recognized that when we talk about some of these permanent changes, and hopefully someday we will get to that point, the fact is that governments of different levels all have an important place in this debate. When we see what has taken place during the pandemic and we see the Minister of Labour sitting down with her provincial counterparts, I believe that there is merit in having that debate continue, and hopefully we will see the provinces there. Often it is a province that will take an action that will ultimately see other provinces and even the national government move forward.

Government Orders

On the issue of sick leave, we are, although somewhat temporarily, taking action. It is being recognized, but it is a relatively small percentage of the workforce. I am hopeful that provinces will see what we are doing, and maybe this will assist us going forward when we talk about building back better. I would like to see our workers treated far better than they were in the last 20 or 30 years, and we need to see more co-operation among provinces.

It was interesting that the National Council for the Unemployed also provided comment in regard to this bill, and they are calling on Parliament to swiftly pass the legislation. The council stated, “This extension is important for the thousands of families struggling to get through this crisis. Their fate is now in the hands of parliamentarians. Our message to them is simple: Every citizen has the right to emerge from this crisis with dignity. All of us will be stronger and more united. We must therefore adopt this bill.”

I asked a very simple question of the member for Kildonan—St. Paul: Will she support this legislation? What is the Conservative Party's position on this legislation? Members can read for themselves. There was an absolute non-answer coming from the member, yet the appeal to pass this bill goes beyond Liberal members of Parliament. That is because, as I am sure the House knows, Liberal members of Parliament are constantly working with stakeholders, in particular their constituents, in taking ideas and bringing them back to Ottawa to help us deal with the policies that are necessary in order to implement what is going to help Canadians. We recognize that, and I believe other political entities inside the House also recognize the importance of passing this bill, as does the National Council for the Unemployed.

We are all familiar with Unifor. I would like to share the message that came from Dave Cassidy, the Unifor national skilled trades chairperson for local 444. He wrote, “The expansion of EI coverage is critical to the workers and families of Windsor and Essex, and I urge all parties to come together to ensure swift passage of this important legislation.” He called for all parties to work together and move quickly to support and pass Bill C-24.

● (1855)

Part of the problem is that the legislative agenda is fairly substantial. There has been a great need, because of the pandemic, to bring forward legislation that is necessary for us to support Canadian individuals and businesses. When we brought in legislation, at times, especially earlier on during the pandemic, there was a high sense of co-operation coming from opposition parties. However, when it comes to my Conservative friends today, nothing could be further from co-operation. I would argue that they are being a very destructive force on the floor of the House of Commons. They are going out of their way to prevent legislation from passing. The only time we can get something through the Conservatives is if they are shamed into doing it.

I was disappointed earlier, as it was difficult for us to get the Conservatives to agree to vote on Bill C-14. It was all about the pandemic and supporting small businesses. It was hours and days before we could get it to a vote.

What about the games that are being played in the House, again mostly by the Conservative Party? There are concurrence reports and points of order. These are measures being taken to minimize

the amount of time for debate so the Conservatives can say a bill cannot be that important if the government has not actually called it up. On the one hand they are going out of their way to prevent legislation from passing, and on the other they are criticizing us for not getting legislation passed. How long will they hang on to Bill C-24 before they will ultimately agree to pass it? It is for the workers. For businesses we saw what they did. Ironically, they even voted against the legislation for them, which surprised me somewhat, I must say. However, we still do not have Bill C-24 through the House.

We have limited time on the House agenda and have tried to extend the time for debate. Even earlier today, a member from the New Democratic caucus asked for additional time to address Bill C-5. However, time and time again, the Conservatives are playing partisan politics in the chamber over and above what is a responsible approach to dealing with legislation that is for supporting Canadians during the pandemic.

Bill C-24 is yet another good piece of legislation, but I do not know when it is going to pass because I do not believe the Conservatives, unless something has happened very recently, have given any indication as to whether they want three hours of debate or 20 hours of debate. I know they will say that we all have the right to debate, and they will want to debate everything extensively. However, they know full well that it does not take much to stop legislation. I could get 12 students from Sisler High School in my area to easily prevent the government from passing legislation. It does not take much to do it. The only way we can get legislation through is if we are prepared to provide some form of time allocation. However, in a minority situation, that could very much be a challenge, even though at times I have seen my New Democratic friends support time allocation when they recognize important pieces of legislation.

● (1900)

I am suggesting that the legislation we have today is both widely supported and progressive. The Conservatives have nothing to fear from allowing it to go through because many of the measures are temporary. At the end of the day, if they want to support workers, I strongly encourage them to get behind the legislation and allow it to go to committee. After all, there are other things the government wants to see additional debate on, and I am sure that many of the issues Conservatives might have with it could be addressed at committee.

Government Orders

We could talk about the Canada emergency response benefit. It is an incredible program that appeared virtually out of thin air last year because of the incredible work of some of the finest civil servants in the world. We, from nothing, created a program that close to nine million Canadians ultimately accessed in some form or another. As it started to wind its way through, we developed three programs via the Canada Recovery Benefits Act: the Canada recovery benefit, the Canada recovery caregiving benefit and the Canada recovery sickness benefit, all of which are referred to within this legislation.

In this legislation, we are seeking an extension of employment insurance. In essence, it would amend the Employment Insurance Act to temporarily increase the maximum number of weeks regular benefits may be paid to 50 weeks.

My New Democrat friend talked about everyone in the House unanimously supporting it. In fact, he implied that there would be unanimous support for it to be a permanent change. Let us see if we can get this to committee.

One of the things I have noted about the minister responsible for the legislation is her openness to hearing what opposition members have to say about legislation she has introduced in the House. There have been some incredible pieces of legislation by this minister, particularly in the area of disabilities, historic legislation recognizing for the first time the significant issue of disabilities and the need to address it in a much more formal fashion, which would ultimately lead to benefits.

This legislation would help workers, and I ask that my Conservative friends to take that into consideration as they caucus and determine whether they are going to filibuster or attempt to prevent this bill from passing to committee.

The government has been very much focused on Canadians since the beginning of the pandemic. We see that with the development of the programs I just referenced. I could talk about those programs for small businesses, whether it was the emergency wage subsidy, the emergency rent subsidy, the emergency business account and more. These programs support small businesses, which indirectly support workers. Again, millions of jobs have been saved.

Canada is in an excellent position to be able to build back better because we have a government that recognizes the need to be there for Canadians in a very real and tangible way.

• (1905)

Mrs. Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale—Langley City, CPC): Madam Speaker, I cannot tell the House how excited I am to hear that the Liberals have a concrete plan to help us reopen. That is really exciting. Businesses are asking for certainty, because that is how we can go forward.

I have one concern. We are about to start vaccinating in B.C. For that to begin, we have to delay second doses for some of our seniors. Earlier today, Pfizer was at the health committee and said that was absolutely not recommended. Could my colleague guarantee that this national experiment will absolutely not create vaccine resistance going forward?

• (1910)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, what I can absolutely guarantee my friend is that the Prime Minister and this government will continue to listen to health experts and work with the provinces, territories and indigenous leaders. Ottawa is responsible for getting vaccines into the country, and we are meeting our plan of six million doses by the end of March. The good news is, as the Prime Minister has indicated, we will be getting closer to eight million vaccine doses by the end of March.

I would have no problem whatsoever, if only time permitted, possibly at the health committee at some point in time, to expand on why I believe Canadians have good reason to be optimistic, to understand that the Government of Canada has in fact done its job over the last 12 months, that there is hope around the corner. I believe we will meet the vaccination demands. We will continue to work with the provinces to ensure that as many doses as possible get administered as quickly as possible.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, the New Democrats are always pleased when we see any kind of legislation that will help working people in our country, so we will support this legislation.

I found it passingly interesting to hear the hon. colleague say that he would have liked to have seen workers better treated over the last 30 years. The Liberal Party has been in power for 21 of the last 30 years. In fact, it has been in power for 100 of the last 150 years. In the time it has been in power, we have seen that six out of 10 workers who pay into EI are unable to claim benefits. We have seen no minimum wage in the Canada Labour Code. We see no guaranteed paid sick time in the Canada Labour Code. There is not even a paid lunch break in the Canada Labour Code. If there is a desire to see better treatment for workers, one would ask the Liberal Party why it has been so reluctant to make that happen.

My question for the member is this. If the Liberals truly want to pass this legislation quickly, why did they have the parliamentary secretary spend 30 minutes of House time talking about this instead of getting to the issue and a vote so we could get this help out to Canadian workers as soon as possible? Is it not a little inconsistent for him to talk about other parties holding up the legislation when he just spent half an hour of valuable House time instead of just getting to the vote?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, if I believed for a moment that the Conservatives would pass the bill if I did not talk on it, I would do that. However, I do not believe that to be the case.

Government Orders

When I reflect on the 30 years, the member needs to be aware that 20 of those years were when I was in the Manitoba legislature in opposition, most of which was when the NDP was the provincial government. That is why I talk about my disappointment with respect to labour. There was a so-called labour-friendly party, but I did not see it acting on the initiatives that were so important to labour. For example, regarding those sick days, whether it was Premier Doer or Premier Selinger, they had that opportunity for many years. I sat when Doer was in opposition and we wanted to see more changes to support workers. I walked picket lines when I was an MLA to see what kind of pensions were there.

In comparison to my experience in the provincial legislature with the NDP and the Conservatives, my experience with Stephen Harper in Ottawa and what we have seen regarding the treatment toward labour in the last five years, we finally have a leader who understands the needs of labour and is taking tangible actions to support labour and workers.

• (1915)

Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Madam Speaker, I also look forward to getting this legislation passed through Parliament as quickly as possible.

A lot of workers need help and they needed help before the pandemic. People have brought this up. The extension of EI support is important for people who have cancer, for example, or have loved ones at the end of their lives who they need to care for, or people in other difficult circumstances or those who are self-employed. There are a number of areas where we need to improve EI. Why are we not doing this on a permanent basis to help people after the pandemic as well?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I would not want to give a false impression that the only time we help workers is during the pandemic. The member referenced EI. Members will remember that on CPP, Ottawa worked with all the provinces, after Stephen Harper had done absolutely nothing for a decade, and we were able to get an agreement through stakeholders to increase CPP. By doing that, it means that as workers retire in the future, they will have more disposable income. In answer to a previous question, I referred to a day I was out walking on a picket line with labourers, who talked about not having enough money in their pension fund when they retired.

These are tangible examples of what this government and the Prime Minister put in place prior to the pandemic. During the pandemic, numerous measures were put in place to support Canada's middle class, workers, people who are retired, people with disabilities and students. I could go on and on about how we have helped—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): There are more questions for the parliamentary secretary.

The hon. member for Kingston and the Islands.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the comments by the parliamentary secretary with respect to the delay tactics we are seeing from the Conservatives. The truth is that whether it is pushing forward with a concurrence motion, or stalling on points of order or putting up various different roadblocks, it is quite clear that the Conservatives are in-

terested in slowing down the legislative process as much as they possibly can. In fact, the Leader of the Opposition recently said in the National Post that he was willing to work day and night to get the job done. However, for four days during the last sitting week, I moved a unanimous consent motion to have the House sit until midnight so we could do exactly what he said. Guess who voted it against it every single time. The Conservatives.

Why does the parliamentary secretary think the Conservatives want to slow down the legislative process?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, the Conservative Party today is more of a destructive force within the House of Commons than I have ever seen, both in Ottawa and in my years as a parliamentarian in the Province of Manitoba. The Conservatives do that by trying to frustrate the government in getting anything passed, anything at all.

The member referred to extending hours. It was for the MAID legislation, after all. It was literally a life and death piece of legislation and the Conservatives said no, that they did not want to sit extra hours because it might mean the bill would pass and they wanted to continue to filibuster. I was supposed to debate Bill C-19 on either Thursday or Friday of the last sitting week and the Conservatives brought forward a concurrence motion so the bill would not be debated. That bill would ensure Canadians would be safe during an election.

There are all sorts of things one could cite with respect to what the Conservative Party is doing today to frustrate the House of Commons being able to get the important work done. I hope the leadership of the Conservative Party will review the question that was just posed, maybe entertain some thoughts I have expressed during my speech and change its ways.

• (1920)

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Madam Speaker, sometimes we have seen it all in politics. I just listened to a 30-minute speech by the member for Winnipeg North talking about how we should quickly pass legislation. That member consistently gets the award for the most words spoken in Parliament, yet all of a sudden, it is time for no one else to speak. It is time to rush legislation through and we should not debate anything. Some days we have seen it all in the House of Commons.

When we talk about Bill C-24, we are looking at three important things that the government is trying to do. I will agree that they are important. The government is trying to increase the number of weeks available to workers through EI, it is trying to make changes to rules for self-employed workers who have opted into the EI system and, of course, it is trying to fix its original blunder in the recovery sickness benefit that, because of a loophole, allowed leisure travellers to come back to Canada and claim the recovery sickness benefit after their vacations, while they were quarantining.

Government Orders

The question might be asked: Why did that happen? Maybe it was because of exactly what the member for Winnipeg North was just asking us to do: speedily pass legislation without review or debate. When that is done, we end up trying to patch the holes in the leaky ship five months later. That is what we are doing here today.

I want to talk about that a little. The speech we just heard from the member for Winnipeg North is the epitome of what is happening in the House of Commons these days. Legislation gets dropped, then we are told that it is urgent, important legislation, and that it should not be debated but should be rushed through committee, because we have to help Canadians.

Of course we have to help Canadians. That is what we are all here for. That is why we vote in favour of the majority of legislation for benefits for workers from the government.

However, the process is the problem. These bills could have been introduced at the start of Parliament. We have been here for two months, since the session resumed. Where was this bill? Why was it not here?

We have known of the problems with the Canada recovery sickness benefit for five months. Why was it not introduced five months ago? We have known of the loophole.

Instead, we get a piece of legislation put forward to us, then all of the proxies go out about how the opposition, especially those terrible Conservatives, are delaying this legislation and obstructing Parliament.

When there is a failure to plan, there is a plan to fail. That is what the government repeatedly does. It does not plan its legislative agenda properly. All of a sudden, it wakes up one day and says, "Oh my goodness, we need to introduce legislation on this. Let's get this passed quickly. Let's not review it. Oh, there are problems with it? Well, we will fix that someday."

This is not the way that things should be run. It is a cynical pattern, and it is a clear pattern. We have seen articles on this as recently as February 28. "Conservatives accused of 'playing politics' in the House: Liberals are accusing the Conservatives of systematically blocking the government's legislative agenda."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Bills are introduced. We have procedures to debate them. In debate, we find problems with legislation, such as the problems with the recovery sickness benefit.

The members of the Liberal government say that debate has so little value that it should not occur. They want this legislation to be debated for two hours, and the member for Winnipeg North just added his 30-minute contribution. It was a valuable contribution of course, but he wants a quarter of the debate to be his. I am not sure what we would say if we were in kindergarten, but we might say that the member was trying to hog all the toys.

We can look at February 24 and see the same thing. The Liberals went out to the press and said:

Unfortunately the work of the House has been held up by Conservatives obstructing [this legislation].... We are calling on the Conservatives to put politics aside.

• (1925)

I am calling on the government to better manage its calendar, to better manage its legislation and to introduce legislation on a timely basis. We have been in the pandemic for a year and we know these things have to get done. We had a big break at Christmas, and the government probably could have done some work and prepared some legislation so that it would be ready to go when we came back, instead of just dropping it on the Order Paper and telling us that we better pass it in two hours. That is not the way we should govern.

There is a question we might want to ask: Why did the Liberals do things this way and what is their end game? Well, one, this is political. They want to shamelessly blame the opposition parties for holding up the benefits for Canadians, who, of course, need those benefits. Two, we have issues with the government's transparency. It is a big problem. The Liberals do not want transparency, because they do not want us to know what is actually going on with legislation and other things. It is very well documented.

Members might recall that the government said it would be open by default. It was a signature promise by the Prime Minister back in 2015. I know that was six years ago, but it was his big thing. Guess what has happened since then? As noted in an article in the *Telegraph-Journal*:

In its latest edition, Canada's Access to Information Act ranks 50th out of 128, behind stalwarts of transparency such as Russia (43rd), Pakistan (32nd) and South Sudan (12th). That's hardly a spot we want to find ourselves in given just how important a strong right to information is when it comes to holding our leaders accountable.

Another article from February noted, "Government and its information should be open by default", as the Prime Minister promised. "Data paid for by Canadians belongs to Canadians. We will restore trust in our democracy, and that begins with trusting Canadians." Who said that? It was the Prime Minister, a mere six years ago.

However, when do we get this transparency? For example, all the opposition parties have been calling on the government to release the vaccination contracts. Have we received those contracts? No, we have not, because there is an absolute lack of transparency.

Why is this lack of transparency so important for Bill C-24? Well, the Liberals are making changes to the Canada recovery sickness benefit, and they are making the changes because they rushed through legislation that allowed people on a leisure vacation to come back and, during their mandatory quarantine, claim the benefit. Constituents in my riding of Dufferin—Caledon find this absolutely outrageous. It was raised repeatedly with the government, and it has taken months and months to try to fix it. Here are my questions. How much did this cost taxpayers? How many people have claimed this benefit? How many millions of dollars have been spent?

We know the Liberals like to filibuster at committee. They accuse us of filibustering legislation, but boy oh boy we are rank amateurs when it comes to that. Look at any committee demanding information from the government and it is delay and obstruct. It refuses to give the information. We have seen it in the WE Charity scandal and when we ask for vaccine contracts. The health committee has been filibustered for ages over that issue.

Why do I think that is important? It is because governments make choices during a pandemic, and during this pandemic the government has made a really big choice. I have raised this question with government members many times: Why are they not providing any funding to new businesses and start-ups? They had clearly made the decision that they are not going to do it. Is it an economic reason? We do not know because they will not answer the question. If it is an economic reason, they are saying they have made the economic choice to let these businesses fail. However, how much money did the government waste on giving vacation returnees access to this benefit? That money could have been given to support new businesses.

When I spoke to this with respect to Bill C-14, I told members opposite that they should spend some time talking on the telephone with new businesses that are going bankrupt. People have invested their life savings and their family's savings. They may have taken out a mortgage on their home to fund a business, and they are going to lose it all.

• (1930)

I have written pleas and letters to the finance minister, the Prime Minister and to the small business minister. None of those letters get answered and nothing changes. We do not end up with any support for small business.

I bet they would be grateful for the \$5 million, \$10 million or \$50 million spent on this benefit to people returning from vacations. Will we see that information? Will my colleagues on the other side of the House commit to looking into how much money was spent on this benefit for returning vacationers and inform the House? I doubt it because it is very difficult to get information from the government, whether it is vaccine contracts or how many people accessed this benefit who should not have accessed it.

For members of the government to say that Parliament is so small, that we do not need to debate legislation, is an insult to all Parliamentarians that—

Adjournment Proceedings

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. member will have eight and a half minutes remaining when we resume debate on this bill.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[English]

AIR TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to be here this evening to talk about the question I asked the Minister of Transport, which was:

...Nav Canada is planning to close air traffic control towers across the country. One of those control towers is in Regina at the international airport.

I met with Nav Canada officials on December 4 to talk about the process to close these towers and how it would decide which ones would be shuttered. It said that this process would take months.

My question is for the Minister of Transport. Why is it that Regina airport employees received notice of layoffs on January 14, if this report is not even finished yet?

The response I received from Minister of Transport was less than satisfactory. He said:

Nav Canada is undertaking several studies to assess the level of service needed. No decision has been made. It is important to note that any changes in the level of service proposed by Nav Canada will be subjected to a rigorous safety assessment by Transport Canada. The process provides for full consultation with all affected stakeholders.

The problem I have with this answer is that I believe the decision has already been made, as do the workers at the air traffic control towers at the Regina International Airport. They are just trying to find ways the report confirms their biased decision to have these air traffic control towers closed.

I have heard often now from members, including the members for Kingston and the Islands and Winnipeg North. They talk about a team Canada approach. I want to bring up one thing that we should all have in common. A letter came from premiers across the country where these air traffic control towers are going to be closed. These premiers included Sandy Silver from Yukon, John Horgan from B.C., Jason Kenney from Alberta, Scott Moe from Saskatchewan, François Legault in Quebec and Doug Ford in Ontario.

All these premiers have asked a question, and I believe it is a reasonable ask. I would like it answered from whoever will be representing the Minister of Transport this evening. Premiers of all political stripes coming forward and asking for a delay in this review until we can know what will happen to air traffic, complex flights and the flights returning after COVID-19 is not an unreasonable request. The premiers and I are asking to delay this review until we get to pre-COVID-19 flight status across the country to see which airports will be active and which will not.

Adjournment Proceedings

The next question I have to whoever will be answering the questions this evening is concerning the 15 Wing air base in Moose Jaw. It is in the same flight zone as the Regina International Airport. It is imperative that the Department of National Defence take into consideration what would happen if there was no air traffic control tower in Regina. There are complex flights going through there and the safety of the trainees at the 15 Wing airbase is of paramount importance. The safety for all air travellers should be important. I ask that a decision not be made until the Department of National Defence takes into consideration safety at 15 Wing Moose Jaw.

The fact that the people of Regina think this air traffic control tower may be closing has already affected flights and possible flights. We have travel agents who say that Air Canada has said there will not be some trips taken, and it is affecting people throughout the City of Regina. I talked to travel agents Laura Lawrence and—

● (1935)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport.

Mr. Chris Bittle (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, first let me reiterate that the safety of Canadians is Transport Canada's top priority, and no compromise to safety will be tolerated.

The onset of the global pandemic has brought many challenges for all industries, and the air sector in particular has taken a grave hit. Transport Canada has been communicating with Nav Canada regarding its proposed level-of-service changes at select sites from the very beginning of this crisis. Prior to making any decision, its proposal will be thoroughly reviewed and all aspects of safety will be rigorously analyzed by civil aviation experts. I can assure the member that the minister will not hesitate to reject its proposal if it is deemed that the changes would result in an unacceptable risk to aviation safety.

Although Regina is in fact one of the sites that is being considered for a service change, no layoffs occurred on January 14. Some employees were provided with notices indicating that their positions may be impacted as a result of the aeronautical study. Nav Canada is actively engaged in a consultation process where stakeholders are invited to share their concerns, and Nav Canada will present its aeronautical studies and conclusions to Transport Canada, which will review them in detail.

In light of the ongoing pandemic, Canadians continue to be advised against travelling abroad and face mandatory quarantine for 14 days upon returning. Since January 6, 2021, travellers aged five and over arriving in Canada must provide proof of a negative COVID-19 molecular test prior to boarding a flight to Canada. In addition, new travel restrictions and additional measures were recently announced to help limit the spread of COVID-19, including suspending all flights to sun destinations until April 30, and restricting the point of entry for inbound aircraft flying to Canada to four major airports. The individuals coming in will be required to reserve a room in a Government of Canada-approved hotel for up to three nights at their own cost and take a COVID-19 molecular test upon arrival.

It is no surprise that all these measures, while necessary to limit the spread of the virus and maintain the safety of the travelling public, have resulted in a reduction in passenger volumes by almost 90% and in major reductions in air traffic, both internationally and domestically. These reductions have a direct impact on Nav Canada's revenue and, as new measures continue to roll out, they will likely bring further financial losses to the air navigation service provider.

As an attempt to mitigate losses, Nav Canada has already conducted staffing cuts, increased its fees and borrowed money. It will likely need to implement additional measures and strategies as it forecasts further losses in the current fiscal year. Transport Canada will continue to work closely with Nav Canada to ensure the safety of air transportation in Canada as Nav Canada works to implement any proposed changes.

Mr. Warren Steinley: Madam Speaker, I thank the parliamentary secretary for reading those speaking points. I have two quick questions.

First, will the parliamentary secretary take into consideration the request from six premiers from across Canada, in a team Canada approach, to delay this review and ask that the minister do that?

Two, what does he say to my constituents Laura Lawrence and Audra Langton? They are travel agents and depend on flights coming into and out of Regina. Their business is at risk because of decisions made at the government's hands, such as closing the air traffic control tower. They do not have services and cannot provide those services to their clients.

These are women who have risked everything to start businesses. One started as recently as December 2019. She is looking to the government for support and to maintain the quality and safety of the Regina International Airport, so that she can support her family and have a business.

● (1940)

Mr. Chris Bittle: Madam Speaker, it is fascinating that the hon. member is accusing me of reading notes when he had to look down to check the names of his own constituents.

As I said, the primary objective of Transport Canada is safety. This is a crisis that has been brought on by a virus. It was brought on by COVID-19, which has caused devastation. The air-travelling public and their safety is the primary concern of the minister. As I said, we will not hesitate to take any action required to ensure their safety going forward.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to join the adjournment proceedings this evening. I want to talk about the issue that I raised in the House and heard from the parliamentary secretary on. That of course is access to reliable high-speed Internet.

Adjournment Proceedings

Now, more than ever, Canadians are counting on having access to reliable high-speed Internet. The strain of the pandemic has forced many people to work from home and students to learn from home. In rural areas in eastern Ontario, particularly in my riding of Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, this has caused an issue with the amount of bandwidth available for folks who are running their businesses on already very limited options, including by getting their Internet over the air, for example.

Small business owners need to be able to connect to the virtual marketplace, and lockdowns have really exacerbated that problem and created a much bigger need than we had before. Farmers, who are on the cutting edge of sustainability, need to be able to connect for crop, herd and soil management. That really is essential so that they continue to feed our families with the highest quality product in the most effective way possible.

We have also seen during COVID-19 the need of seniors to be able to connect to and access their health care services. More and more we are seeing an increase in the use of telemedicine services, which is fantastic, in more urban areas where high-speed Internet is the rule and not the exception. That is a wonderful thing, but here in eastern Ontario, as an example of many places across rural Canada, it is a tremendous challenge and greatly reduces access to care, especially when people are very concerned about their health and unable to travel to medical appointments.

Family members have been forced to be apart from each other for a year now and we expect to continue to be apart for months to come. For many people, connecting virtually using FaceTime, Skype or Zoom is their lifeline. That is how they are seeing updates, whether from their loved ones who may be in quarantine or self-isolation, or even just grandparents getting an update by connecting with their grandkids.

The need for high-speed Internet is pronounced. We have really seen an increase in that over the past year. The universal broadband fund was announced well over 700 days ago and people in my community and across eastern Ontario are still struggling to connect. Following the announcement of that fund, we heard a subsequent announcement and then again, in late 2020, a further announcement of that fund.

What we need from the government is action. We have heard the talk. We have heard that it wants to do it. The government is very eager to compare its record for connecting Canadians against previous governments. I think it is pretty clear that the need for high-speed Internet has only increased and the need for action has increased. Comparing the government's record on high-speed Internet connectivity with any other government's record before it is not really an apples-to-apples comparison.

When will the government take the steps that are needed to finally—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. parliamentary secretary to the minister for rural economic development.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development, Lib.): Madam Speaker, on behalf of all of us in the

House, I would like to take this minute on International Women's Day to thank you for your leadership and support and wish you and all my female colleagues all the best. I am sure I can speak for all of us in the House on that.

I am delighted to stand and chat about our government's progress in improving connectivity for all Canadians and for the member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes. As we know and as the member opposite says, and I agree with him, high-speed Internet accessibility is essential for all Canadians, no matter where they live from coast to coast to coast.

I agree with him as well that the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of connectivity and has accelerated the need to connect all Canadians, and I am delighted to tell him that we are on track to meet our goals of connecting 98% of homes with high-speed Internet by 2026 and 100% of Canadians by the year 2030, years earlier than previously thought.

Our connectivity strategy, and we do have a connectivity strategy, includes several coordinated initiatives, including the Connect to Innovate fund and the universal broadband fund. By the end of the Connect to Innovate program in 2023, nearly 400,000 households will have the potential to benefit from improved Internet access. Over the last month alone, we have announced over 11 communities in Quebec that have benefited from investments, and they are now connected to high-speed Internet.

The \$1.75-billion universal broadband fund, the UBF, is the program that Canadians asked us for. It was enhanced and scaled up to meet the challenges that everyone is facing. It was designed with partners, with colleagues, with small businesses, with farmers and with experts to ensure that it is flexible and addresses the needs of all communities all across the country, whether it is through mobile connections, fibre connections or satellite connections. It includes tools and services to help better plan projects and, more importantly, to track the impact while addressing challenges that can happen to delay progress, because we all know Canada is a wild and wonderful country.

The UBF is going to be used to fund broadband infrastructure projects that will provide rural and remote communities with access to high-speed Internet services to connect with loved ones, use virtual health care services—as the member opposite referred to, which is huge in my riding—manage a farm, help with children's homework, or, frankly, just stay connected. It is going to support the required network infrastructure, whether backbone or last mile, to better meet the geographical needs and regional connectivity needs throughout the country.

Adjournment Proceedings

I am pleased to say that we have begun announcing projects under the rapid response stream. These projects are going to connect households in November of this year. Earlier this year the Minister of Rural Economic Development announced \$6.7 million to connect 1,977 homes in communities in rural B.C. They were in Pemberton, Steelhead, Ryder Lake, northwest of Princeton and the north Sunshine Coast. In Starland County and Stettler County in Alberta, 7,179 underserved households are going to be connected, and northeast of Sudbury, 74 underserved households will be connected, including 68 indigenous households.

Furthermore, 190 households in the Perth—Wellington region and 120 households in the Niagara region will be connected and there will be more coming soon. These are exactly the types of projects this stream was intended for and intended to fund: small local projects that will make an immediate impact.

We know there is so much more to do, but we have a strategy and a plan to make sure that every Canadian will be connected.

● (1945)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, I have heard about some of those projects that the parliamentary secretary mentioned and I would like to draw her attention and the attention of the minister to the Eastern Ontario Regional Network's application under the universal broadband fund. I want to flag that for the parliamentary secretary. This program would allow 95% of the homes in the region, or more than 550,000 premises, to have gigabit service by 2025 if fully funded.

I would ask the parliamentary secretary to commit right now to me and to all the residents in eastern Ontario that she will undertake to review that application and to flag it for the minister so that we can be assured that it has the government's consideration.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: Madam Speaker, I look forward to finding out. I will contact the department and get an update for the member on that and reach out to him directly.

I want to assure him that we launched the universal broadband fund to provide Canadians with high-speed Internet. We accelerated our targets to connect them even faster. That was the rapid response stream. That will allow us to move quickly with projects that are already well advanced. As a result of these projects, many Canadians will have improved access by November of 2021. The impact of these projects is going to be felt far and wide by rural and remote communities that have limited or no access now.

I want the hon. member to know that I really understand this need. I come from a very large rural riding. My land mass is bigger than Switzerland. I have over 200 beautiful little towns. Many of them do not have connectivity, and they are excited about this. I am excited about the pathfinder service with the rapid response stream, because that allows small communities and small Internet service providers to call in and have their questions answered. It is a two-day maximum turnaround—

● (1950)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): With that, we are done. I wish a happy International Women's Day to the hon. parliamentary secretary.

[*Translation*]

The hon. member for Mégantic—L'Érable not being present in the House to raise the matter for which adjournment notice has been given, the notice is deemed withdrawn.

The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 7:51 p.m.)

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