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Monday, October 1, 2012

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, October 1, 2012

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1105)

[*English*]

TRANSBOUNDARY WATERS PROTECTION ACT

The House resumed from June 8 consideration of the motion that C-383, An Act to amend the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act and the International River Improvements Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the NDP is pleased to rise in the House to support Bill C-383.

I would like to thank all of the Canadian activists who have been pushing for years to ensure that we do not have water exports or interbasin water transfers. Canadians across the country have been concerned about this.

This is an issue that has been raised in the House repeatedly, certainly since I first came here in 2004. There were throne speeches in 2008 and 2009 that raised the issue. When the Conservatives were first elected, they committed to this action and brought forward a bill. As members know, even though they brought forward a bill, they did not actually do anything to bring it to the House for consideration. They tabled it, did some spin and paid some lip service to this extremely serious issue, but they did not do anything.

The fact that this private member's bill is coming forward now I think is indicative of the pressure that so many Canadians have put on the government over the last few years. There has been a very strong public response. Canadians are saying that the government should not be playing around with the water resources that we have. As a result, I think it is fair to say that we now have Bill C-383 before us for consideration.

NDP members do a lot of the heavy lifting here and we are very proud of that. I would like to pay tribute to two former members of Parliament who have done a phenomenal job of raising this issue both in the House and in the public domain.

The Hon. Bill Blaikie raised this issue while he was a member of Parliament for many years. The member for Winnipeg Centre is

quite right to applaud Bill Blaikie's work. In 1999, Bill Blaikie brought forward an opposition motion that led to a moratorium on bulk water exports. At the time, he had a key role in both the federal moratorium as well as the actions of Canadian citizens right across this country.

Provincial governments from time to time, such as British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador, sought to move forward on bulk water exports. However, it was the work of activists on the ground who made a difference. They pushed back on what was a very clear intent by those non-NDP governments to promote water exports.

Another NDP member who raised the issue of bulk water exports and interbasin transfers was Catherine Bell, the former member of Parliament for Vancouver Island North. She very eloquently raised concerns around bulk water exports.

These are two former NDP MPs who have played key roles. Also, the member for Parkdale—High Park, myself and a number of NDP MPs have also played key roles in raising this issue. Finally, after many years of promises, although it is in the format of a private member's bill, we finally have some action from the government. Of course, we support the bill because it is a phenomenally important issue.

I think David Schindler, the noted water expert from the University of Alberta, put it best when he said that even though Canada has about 20% of the world's freshwater resources, it is like a bank account that has a very small interest rate. The interest rate, or the renewable percentage of that fresh water, is only about 5%.

Therefore, we have 20% of the world's freshwater resources locked in northern Canada in the muskeg and in our lakes, which cannot be renewed once depleted. The 5% renewable rate, which is actually the extent of renewable freshwater resources in this country, is equivalent to the freshwater renewable rate in the United States.

We know about the chronic water shortages now occurring in the United States. We are aware of the fact that changes have to be made by our American friends and neighbours because, ultimately, with the depletion of the aquifers, with the depletion of the freshwater available in the United States, they simply cannot continue to misuse the water in the way they have been. Canada has relatively the same percentage of renewable fresh water. If we ever went the route of bulk water exports or interbasin transfers, we would find ourselves in a similar situation extremely quickly.

Private Members' Business

It is simply not appropriate. It is simply not responsible, with our water resources, to envisage bulk water exports or to envisage interbasin transfers. To think that we will solve the problems that are occurring now worldwide by the simple act of transferring more water out of our country is simply not true. When we talk about this issue, we are talking about a fundamentally important one for the stewardship that we have over that incredible resource.

There is no doubt this legislation falls short of what we would like to see. We are looking to see amendments when the bill moves to committee.

The issue of interbasin transfers, which I mentioned earlier, is included in the bill. One issue that is not included though, and one that is extremely important and was raised both by Bill Blaikie and Catherine Bell and many NDP MPs in the House, is the issue of bulk bottled water. The difference between bulk water exports and smaller container bulk water exports is a thin one.

This is a relevant and pertinent issue given the world water shortages that we are seeing. It is something that we would expect to see amended when the bill is sent to committee. There is no doubt that would make a difference in completing the bill. The bill is good enough for us to support it at second reading, but there is no doubt that improvements could be made.

There is also the issue of the technical amendment that has been raised by the Canadian Water Issues Council, and this is something that we would also seek to see amended at committee.

The bill is a good first start but this is certainly in no way the end of the consideration that it should be given.

More important is the issue of how the government will react to the passing of the bill, assuming that it has support from both sides of the House. We support sending it to committee where we will propose the kind of strong and reasoned amendments that we always move but it may not surprise the House to know that sometimes our strong and reasoned and thoughtful amendments are not received by the other side. We hope this will not be the case this time because of the work that we have done on this issue. We have been doing all the heavy lifting. We are pleased to be joined by at least one Conservative colleague now. We intend to carry that heavy lifting right through the process.

The other issue is a greater issue as the House is well aware and that is the issue of water in general. This is something that I addressed in a bill that calls for a comprehensive water strategy. I would just like to touch on that before I conclude.

We are looking to have the government develop and present a comprehensive water policy based on the public trust, which would recognize that access to water is a fundamental right. It would recognize the UN Economic and Social Council finding in "General Comment No. 15" on the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that access to clean water is a human right. My bill would prohibit those bulk water exports and implement strict restrictions on new diversions.

The bill also talks about introducing legislation on national standards for safe, clean drinking water and implementing a national investment strategy to enable all of those municipalities, and first

nations communities particularly, to upgrade the infrastructure that they need around water. Those are considerations that we will bring forward at a later date in the House.

Needless to say, the NDP will continue to work to ensure that the water resources in this country are, as a human right, made accessible to all Canadians.

• (1110)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is a wonderful opportunity for me to express a number of concerns regarding waterways and the impact not only in Canada but, more specifically, in the province of Manitoba.

Whenever we see legislation of this nature there is a bit of hope generated. There is a huge concern in Manitoba, particularly in Winnipeg, with regard to our waters. A lot of it deals with the exportation and also the sheer volume of water that comes into our province every spring, particularly from the United States. There is this huge expectation that different levels of government are trying to deal with the whole issue of water management, which is so critically important to our country. Specifically for me, in the province of Manitoba, given the amount of water that we have, with our hundred thousand plus lakes and rivers, there is a great deal of concern from many different stakeholders, whether environmental groups or just young students in classrooms.

I have had the opportunity over the years to have wonderful exchanges dealing with the whole water management issue. It is an issue that comes and goes. It really comes to a peak when the Red River starts to peak in the springtime. We get so much water coming into the province of Manitoba, there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of people who start looking at what we can do to somehow funnel that massive amount of water and minimize the environmental damage.

There are a number of concerns that we have with Bill C-383. At the end of the day, we suspect that it will be sent to committee, so we need to look at the possibility of amendments. It is important to recognize that the Liberals were one of the first to appoint a critic in this area, because we see the value of water.

Bill C-383 is a reaction, I would suggest, from one of my colleagues. It is a bill that we had explored and we had discussions regarding the whole idea of the water basin transfer and many other aspects. We applaud the government for looking at what the members of the Liberal caucus have been saying. I suggest that other political parties inside the chamber would do well in recognizing the need for Liberal critics and more attention being given to the water file.

In Manitoba, we have a huge concern that has been brought to the government's attention year after year, not only here in Canada but also in North Dakota. It has made it to Washington. Presidents and prime ministers have been involved. Obviously the premier of Manitoba has been involved and many others. That is the whole Devils Lake project in the United States.

Private Members' Business

The amount of water that flows from the states to Canada is a great concern in terms of how we can minimize the environmental damage by coming up with some sort of screening method to provide filtration to a certain degree and minimizing the amount of manure and fertilizer on farms that ultimately seeps into our waterways. When we get serious flooding, the amount of foreign fertilizers and other mixtures that end up in Lake Winnipeg is really quite profound.

• (1115)

Lake Winnipeg is of critical importance not only to the province but, indeed, to our country. When we look at the cutbacks with respect to the Experimental Lakes Area project, there are a good number of Manitobans who believe we cannot afford to lose the technology and research being done there because of the impact it has on water quality, whether in our lakes or rivers. There has been a very high level of interest in the cutbacks that are taking place there. We need to ensure that research council remains truly independent and, most important, that it continues to do the type of research that is of critical importance for preserving and improving the quality of our water tables and the health of our rivers and lakes.

I have had presentations presented to me showing the types of impacts on fish populations when we are not doing the right thing. Some of the work that has been done on acid rain is amazing, for example, and the other types of nutrients that ultimately end up in our lakes and waters and why it is so important for us to understand the impact of that. Our aquatic system is very important. Something that happens on the land does have a direct impact on it. Flooding plays an important role in how we can control flooding and minimize its negative impacts.

When I was in the Manitoba legislature I recall another issue that we talked a lot about was the exportation of water. There has been a great deal of concern about how we will do that. Freshwater is in huge demand and it is expected that the demand will continue to grow. Many industries across Canada are very interested in how that will occur and what types of regulations and laws Canada will put in place to protect our water supply to ensure that we will not just be shipping freshwater down south or into other communities without some sort of controls or mechanisms. That is one of the issues that will be talked about in the years ahead as different levels of government come together to come up with agreements on what is and is not appropriate.

I would suggest that the most important thing must be our water management strategy. We do need to have both interprovincial and international water strategies that put water quality first and, obviously, the impact that has on the environment.

The second issue is what we do with the vast amounts of freshwater that Canada has. There will be an increasing demand on that water. Citizens as a whole are concerned that the government has been neglecting that particular file. It is interesting to note that this is a private member's bill. Where is the government itself on trying to develop that international-interprovincial water strategy that deals with the environment, water quality and the whole issue of the exportation of water? The federal government does have a stronger role to play in that area. It needs to work with the provincial

governments. Some governments have a stronger vested interest in the issue.

• (1120)

I would suggest that the Prime Minister have talks about issues such as the impact of Devils Lake and the exportation of water. He should work with the provinces and follow the lead of the Liberal caucus in recognizing the importance of this issue to the degree that we now have a Liberal member taking on the role of water critic.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity today to speak in support of Bill C-383, sponsored by my colleague from Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound. The protection of Canadian waters is important to him, as it is for all members of the House, and, to that extent, all Canadians.

During a previous debate on the bill, I was pleased to hear that colleagues on the other side of the aisle expressed their support for this important and timely legislation.

Environment Canada points out a number of important courses of action. Managing Canada's water resources, which represents about 7% of the world's renewable freshwater or about 20% of the world's freshwater is found in Canada, and everyone is responsible. We want to ensure that our water resources are used wisely, both economically and ecologically.

Also, we want to manage the resource because various users are competing for the available supply of freshwater to satisfy basic needs, to enable economic development, to sustain the natural environment and to support recreational activities.

Environment Canada is also correct in its indication that it is necessary to reconcile these needs and promote the use of freshwater in a way that recognizes its social, economic and environmental benefits.

I am sure all members of this House will attest to the notion that the waters that surround and are encompassed within Canada are of the utmost importance to Canadians. They play a deep role in our country's birth and its continued success economically, culturally and nationally.

During my tenure on the Standing Committee on International Trade, as well as presently serving as chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, I have come to understand and appreciate the protections we have in place for our water supplies.

The transboundary waters protection act would amend two acts, the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act and the International River Improvements Act. Through the amendments to the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act, Bill C-383 would strengthen prohibitions against bulk removals of water and improve upon protections currently in place.

At the federal level, a prohibition currently exists against the bulk removal of boundary waters; waters shared with the United States, such as the Great Lakes. The new amendments in Bill C-383 would add transboundary waters, those that flow across the border, to these protections.

Private Members' Business

The changes found in Bill C-383 would ensure that all waters that are under a federal jurisdiction are protected from bulk water removals. They complement provincial protections that are in place to protect waters under their jurisdictions.

It is important to note that there are other elements in Bill C-383 that would strengthen protections against bulk water removals. Penalties and enforcement mechanisms would be strengthened under the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act. Violations would bring penalties ranging from up to \$1 million for an individual to \$6 million for a corporation. These penalties would be cumulative, meaning that every day the violation occurs is considered a separate violation. Therefore, penalties can increase rapidly. While these fines provide a strong deterrence for violations of the act, there is also the potential for further penalties that would allow the courts to add penalties for aggravating factors, such as damage to the environment or profiting from any actions. These provisions would bring this act in line with amendments made by our government to nine other environmental protection statutes in 2009 through the Environmental Enforcement Act.

Bill C-383 would improve on current protections by moving certain definitions and exceptions from the regulations into the act itself. Bringing these definitions into legislation would ensure that parliamentary approval would be required to make any future changes to the exceptions or definitions.

Bill C-383 would also make changes to the International River Improvements Act to prevent the linking of boundary or non-boundary waters with a waterway flowing across the border for the purpose of increasing the annual flow of this waterway. This would prevent an international river, that is a river flowing from any place in Canada to any place outside of Canada, from being used as a conveyance to move water out of this country.

• (1125)

I would like to point out that the following introduction of government Bill C-26 during the last Parliament, the Canadian Water Issues Council wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in June 2010 and, among other things, highlighted the concept and potential threat of the transfer of water from a non-transboundary basin into a transboundary river. I am happy to say that an amendment to the IRIA found in Bill C-383 would prevent this from happening. This is a valuable addition to the bill. These changes, along with the protections that the provinces have in place, would provide strong protections against bulk water removals.

During the previous debate, some members raised questions about the trade and export of water. I assure my colleagues that their concerns have been addressed. Bill C-383 and the International Boundaries Water Treaty Act would regulate and protect water in its natural state as found within its basins. Water, in its natural state, is not considered a good or a product. Therefore, water in its natural state is not subject to the provisions or obligations of the trade agreement, including the North America Free Trade Agreement.

Water in its natural state is like other natural resources, such as trees in the forest, fish in the sea or minerals in the ground. They can all be transformed into saleable commodities through harvesting or extraction but, until that step is taken, they remain natural resources and outside the scope of international trade agreements. Because

they are natural resources, governments are free to decide whether they should be extracted and, if so, under what circumstances.

This point is clearly demonstrated in the fisheries industry where governments have the discretionary power to decide whether to allow fishing, when and where fishing is allowed and the total quantity of fish that can be caught, even though the harvesting of fish and treating the caught fish as a commodity is a long-standing practice in Canada and around the world. Therefore, in this case, we would be regulating water as a natural resource. Due to the potentially negative impacts of bulk water removals, we would prohibit its removal in bulk. I want to assure all members that none of our trade obligations prevent us from doing this.

It has been suggested that by allowing some water to be exported as a commodity, it automatically means that all water is a commodity and subject to international trade rules. The fisheries analogy provides a good illustration. Those familiar with the fishing industry would not suggest that because some fish are caught and sold as commodities, it would mean that Canada has lost the ability to regulate this industry from a resource management perspective and, by doing so, runs afoul of trade rules. So it is with water. While it is in its natural state, it is considered a natural resource and, therefore, remains outside the trade rules.

Our government is committed to protecting Canada's freshwater for the communities and ecosystems that depend upon it. We believe that Canada's sovereignty extends to our natural resources, including our freshwater. That is why I am pleased to support my colleague's bill which would achieve these objectives.

I thank members of the House for their support of the bill and their desire to see it pass second reading and be referred to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. As I have described, this bill would: improve our existing bulk water protections; add transboundary waters to the protections already in place for boundary waters; strengthen penalties to ensure that violations are met with the appropriate punishment; and moves exemptions and definitions from the regulations into the body of the act, ensuring that any future changes would be undertaken with the scrutiny of Parliament.

This bill would provide the protections we need to prevent the harm that could result from the permanent loss of water from Canadian ecosystems. I am grateful that the member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound took a leadership role to advance this issue. I look forward to continuing a discussion of this bill during the committee stage.

Private Members' Business

●(1130)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, water is without a doubt our most precious resource. Without water, humankind cannot survive. Some 75% of the earth's surface is made up of water, which is a unique situation in our solar system. The small blue sphere that astronauts see from space and describe so passionately must be protected. Water is essential to the equilibrium of this planet. Meanwhile, there is increasing pressure on our water resources. For instance, global warming is increasing the frequency of droughts and floods. Rising temperatures are causing increased evaporation of water resources and causing water levels to fall in our lakes and rivers, as was the case this summer in the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes.

An increasing global population is also adding to the demand for drinking water. The demand for water is increasing not only in terms of individual consumption, but also for the production of many consumer products. Four litres of water are needed to extract one litre of oil from the oil sands; 10 litres are needed to produce one sheet of paper; 30 litres for a cup of tea; 40 litres for a slice of bread; 70 litres for an apple and 75 litres for one glass of beer.

We are therefore facing a problem. Fresh water is more and more in demand, yet it is also more threatened by pressures related to population growth, climate change and industry. Some people believe that we are heading toward water wars. I hope that is not the case. However, one thing is for certain: water has become the blue gold of the 21st century.

Canada will thus have a key role to play in the coming years since our country holds 7% of the world's fresh water. The United States has been coveting our water supply for a number of years, particularly in times of drought. Many of the southern states are facing serious water shortages and have had to import water. Other emerging countries, such as China and India, will need larger quantities of water in the coming decades. States that have insufficient water will turn to those that have an abundance. We regularly hear about proposals to export fresh water by tanker. Concerns heightened with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA in 1994. NAFTA considers water to be a consumer product, and some provisions of the agreement could open the door to the export of water.

The purpose of Bill C-383, which was introduced by the hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, is to strengthen the prohibitions against bulk water removal. In fact, it corrects some of the shortcomings of Bill C-26, which was introduced by the government in 2010 and died on the order paper. The purpose of Bill C-26 was to prohibit the removal of water from transboundary and boundary waters; however, the bill did not take into account the most plausible threat to Canadian waters: the removal of water via interbasin transfers.

Bill C-383 will prohibit the issuance of licences for projects that link non-boundary waters to an international river where the purpose of the project is to increase annual flow to the United States. If the bill is passed, constructing a canal or pipeline channeling Canadian water into an international river, such as the Red River, will be prohibited.

This bill is a step in the right direction to protect our waters, but the official opposition is of the opinion that this bill will not completely resolve the issue of water management in Canada. Clearly, this private member's bill does not prohibit all types of bulk water export. It is also necessary to ensure the protection of surface water, regulate future exports of water by tanker, respond to threats presented by NAFTA and, above all, prohibit the export of bottled drinking water.

Last year, my colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster moved a motion in favour of a national water strategy, and we are very thankful for that. We believe that access to water is a fundamental right, that we must prohibit all commercial exports and that we must not privatize water services. Why? Because water is not a product; it is a common property resource. It is essential to the survival of our species and all other species. The UN General Assembly declared access to water a fundamental right in 2010. Unfortunately, Canada, led by the Conservatives, abstained and said that the right to water was not codified under international law.

It is time for Canada to play a key role with respect to access to water. Some entrepreneurs will say that we must export our water to the countries that need it. However, this commodification of water will not solve the problem, especially since the poorest people will not have the means to purchase this imported bottled water.

●(1135)

In addition, it is not simply a matter of export and supply; it is a matter of distribution.

Large quantities of water are wasted by the richest members of society—a minority—at the expense of the poorest.

It is estimated that, in developing countries, daily water needs vary between 20 and 30 litres a day, and some very poor individuals consume only three or four litres. In Canada, the average person consumes 300 litres of water a day, which is the equivalent of three full bathtubs. That is double the amount consumed by a European. Canada is the second-biggest waster of drinking water after the United States.

Before talking about exports, we should talk about conservation. Our overconsumption of manufactured products, the exploitation of natural resources under conditions that are not mindful of the environment, and waste all have disastrous consequences on our water management.

We must also remember that old water systems that are not maintained or repaired can cause huge leaks and a lot of waste. We must repair the pipes and filtration systems, which are now a municipal responsibility.

Lacking resources, municipalities are turning to private investors to finance the work. However, water is a matter of public health and safety and it should be managed by the government, which is accountable to the community. When for-profit businesses control the water, the quality decreases and costs increase.

The federal government should help the municipalities upgrade their water supply infrastructure.

Private Members' Business

It is all well and fine for the Conservatives to announce new wastewater treatment regulations, but the fact remains that the municipalities need to have a decent budget. What is more, the municipalities are still waiting for the budget that is yet to be announced by the federal government.

We must also recognize the importance of preserving the quality of our water. The cuts to the environmental monitoring programs and the changes to the Fisheries Act will have a catastrophic impact on our waters. Fish habitat will no longer be protected, there will be fewer environmental assessments of industrial projects—the number of assessments already went down by 3,000 this summer—and the public will not be consulted as it used to be.

All of this is a result of the omnibus Bill C-38, which passed in June. In addition to weakening our environmental laws, this Conservative government is cutting water monitoring and research programs. It is axing programs such as the Municipal Water and Wastewater Survey, which collected data on water sources, water use and wastewater treatment levels.

The government is also abolishing environmental effects monitoring studies, a scientific tool to detect changes in aquatic ecosystems affected by effluent.

All these cuts will have an impact on water quality. Need I remind hon. members that in 2000, seven people died in Walkerton, Ontario, when drinking water was contaminated by *E. coli*?

Do we want to see poor water quality management cause other similar tragedies? Who will want to import Canadian water if there is any doubt about its quality and safety?

In closing, I would like to say that it is wrong to believe that Canada is protected from a water shortage. A quarter of Canadian municipalities have already dealt with water shortages, and a third of them rely on groundwater to meet their current needs.

We must have a national water strategy, as my colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster proposed in 2010.

The bill introduced by the hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound is a step in the right direction, but it does not go far enough.

The environmental crisis we are experiencing requires fundamental changes to our lifestyle and our resource development policy.

There is no room for ideology or partisanship. We need pragmatism, initiative and leadership on the national and international levels.

We must not leave our children and grandchildren with a social and environmental debt. The time to act is now.

• (1140)

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to lend my support to Bill C-383, the transboundary waters protection act. This bill, introduced by my colleague from Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, would prohibit the bulk removal of water from transboundary waters, waters that flow across borders. This would strengthen the protections against bulk

water removals from boundary waters, waters shared with the United States such as the Great Lakes.

As members know, in May 2010, our government introduced Bill C-26. That bill, like the one we are debating today, would have amended the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act. At the time, we introduced that important legislation after reviewing options for improving and strengthening protections for the purpose of preventing bulk water removals. Unfortunately Bill C-26 died on the order paper when Parliament was dissolved.

This issue did not go away with the election call and, as we all know, protection of our waters is an issue of critical importance to all Canadians. I am confident it is something all members in this House will agree with, no matter on which side of the aisle they sit.

Why is this the case? It is clear from an environmental standpoint that the bulk removal of water is both environmentally and ecologically damaging. It removes water from the basins that depend on it. It deprives those living in the basin and the ecosystem itself of a critical resource. It also increases the risk of invasive species transfer if previously separated water basins are connected. It is this environmental component that is critical. The potential harm this could cause to the environment led our government to introduce Bill C-26, and I am happy to see the member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound has taken up the cause and introduced this legislation, which I would like to call Bill C-26-plus.

In a few minutes I will explain what I mean by Bill C-26-plus, but now I will discuss why the approach found in Bill C-383 is the appropriate way and the best path forward. In previous parliaments we have seen multiple bills aimed at preventing bulk water removals. These bills may take different approaches to addressing the issue, but the goal is the same: prohibiting the bulk removal of Canada's water and protecting Canada's fresh water for the communities and ecosystems that depend on it.

We have recently debated another bulk water bill, Bill C-267, introduced by my Liberal colleague from Lac-Saint-Louis. That bill takes the approach of banning all inter-basin transfers. Bill C-383 takes a similar approach but focuses on water within federal jurisdiction. This difference recognizes that the provinces have a key role to play in the protection of Canada's water. Water is a natural resource, and so we must recognize that the provinces have their constitutional jurisdiction. They take this role seriously. They have protections in place to prevent bulk removal of water in their territories and from their territories. They have the same commitment to the protection as the federal government and as Canadians in general. Our government intends to keep working with the provinces to ensure that these protections remain robust and that all jurisdictions take care of waters under their purview.

Private Members' Business

As we all know, there are already strong protections in place at the federal level to prevent bulk removals from boundary waters, those that straddle the international boundary as I mentioned earlier. This obviously includes the Great Lakes, but transboundary waters, which are those that flow across the border, are not protected federally. Bill C-383 aims at bringing these same prohibitions to transboundary waters, which are also under a federal jurisdiction. This would bring much-needed consistency and would ensure all of these types of waters are protected.

Looking at the approach taken in Bill C-383 to prohibit bulk removals, I emphasize that this legislation focuses on water in its natural state in lakes and rivers. We view this as being the best way to protect water. Other approaches that are mentioned from time to time, such as export bans, would not provide the same level of protection as dealing with water in its natural state. We believe that taking an approach that focuses on the sustainable management of water in its basin as a natural resource is the best way to ensure it remains there.

While on the subject, I will take this opportunity to clarify the issue of NAFTA, the North American free trade agreement, and water. Water in its natural state, such as a river or a lake, is not a commodity and has never been subject to any trade agreement.

• (1145)

Although this has been stated from time to time, given the confusion over the issue, it is worth repeating. Nothing in NAFTA, or for that matter in any of our trade agreements, prevents us from protecting our water. These agreements do not create obligations to use water. Nor do they limit our ability to adopt laws for managing our water resources.

The status of fresh water under NAFTA was reaffirmed in 1993 when Canada, the United States and Mexico declared that the agreement created no rights to the NAFTA resources of any party to the agreement and that unless water had entered into commerce and became a good or a product, it would not be covered by the provisions of any trade agreement. Further, it was agreed that nothing in NAFTA would oblige any party to exploit its water for commercial use or to begin exporting water in any form.

Finally, it was declared that water in its natural state was not a good or product, it was not traded and therefore it was not, and never had been, subject to the terms of any trade agreement.

As we have said, Bill C-383 is similar to Bill C-26 in terms of the added protections provided to water under federal jurisdiction. However, as I said early, it is Bill C-26-plus, and here is why.

As mentioned by previous speakers, this bill contains an amendment to the International River Improvements Act, which would ensure that the waterways flowing from Canada across international boundaries could not be used to deliver water coming from other sources out of the country.

For example, there would be a prohibition to linking non-transboundary waters to an international river for the purpose of increasing the annual flow of that river. An international river is one that flows from any place in Canada to any place outside of Canada. This increase in annual flow would be bulk water transport and would be forbidden.

When our government introduced Bill C-26 last Parliament, some groups stated that we did not do as much as we could in protecting our waters. What my colleague from Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound has done in his bill is add an additional protection by including this amendment to the International River Improvements Act. By prohibiting the use of an international river to transport water originating from outside its watershed, the legislation would prevent what could be a potentially efficient way to transport water long distances from being used for bulk removals.

This small change from Bill C-26 is a significant protection and I hope that groups in our country, which have been long-time proponents on behalf of protecting Canada's water, will recognize that Bill C-383 is worthy of their support.

Finally, I would like to briefly touch on the penalty and enforcement provisions included in Bill C-383. These provisions are in line with those found in the other environmental statutes, which are amended through the Environment Enforcement Act of 2009. This includes an enforcement regime that would allow the Minister of Foreign Affairs to designate enforcement officials for the purpose of verifying compliance with the act.

The penalties for violations are steep, such as up to \$1 million for an individual and \$6 million for a corporation. These penalties are cumulative, meaning that each day the violation occurs will be considered a separate violation. In addition, courts will be able to impose additional fines on offenders where there are aggravating factors, including environmental damage.

I would like to once again thank my colleague from Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound for introducing the bill. He comes from an area surrounded by the Great Lakes, the rugged shores of the Bruce Peninsula, sandy beaches like Sauble Beach in Oliphant. He recognizes not only recreationally but economically what water can be for Canada. Coming from a riding on the Great Lakes myself, I commend him for what he has done.

I believe the approach taken in Bill C-383 will ensure that Canada's waters are protected and that bulk removals of water from Canada will never take place. The legislation covers waters under federal jurisdiction and recognizes the good work that the provinces have undertaken over the years to prohibit bulk removals of water from their territories.

Both federal and provincial governments understand the potential harm that bulk removal can have on the environment and our government is committed to doing its part to protect our waters. I encourage all members of the House to support the member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound on Bill C-383.

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Pilon (Laval—Les Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my views regarding the bill before us, Bill C-383, introduced by the hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Private Members' Business

This bill has to do with our water resources, and as a member of the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development, I have a special interest in this issue. I am therefore pleased to be able to add my two cents to the debate.

With just one exception, Bill C-383 is identical to Bill C-26, which was introduced by the government in 2010 following its promise to bring in legislation to ban all bulk water transfers or exports from Canadian water basins.

On the positive side, the bill before us today addresses a large gap that existed in the previous bill and was pointed out by the Canadian Water Issues Council, specifically, that Bill C-26 did not address the most plausible threat to Canadian waters: the threat of transfers from a water basin that is neither a boundary nor transboundary water body from Canada into the United States.

This bill would amend the International River Improvements Act to prohibit the issuing of permits for projects that link non-boundary waters to an international river when the purpose of said projects is to increase the annual flow towards the United States. This important change would prohibit the issuing of a permit to build, operate or maintain a canal or pipeline transporting Canadian water to an international river.

Although Bill C-383 does have some strengths and represents a step in the right direction, it is obvious that it does not prohibit all bulk water exports. Consequently, because water is considered a commodity, NAFTA has long been a threat to Canada's sovereignty over water resources.

To counter this threat, in June 2007 the New Democratic Party introduced a motion sponsored by the hard-working and extraordinary member for Burnaby—New Westminster asking the government to initiate talks with its U.S. and Mexican counterparts to exclude water from the scope of NAFTA. This motion was adopted by the House, but the government has not followed up with these countries.

In 2010, the government introduced Bill C-26, which was mentioned earlier. The bill did not progress past first reading.

In 2011, our brilliant colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster raised the issue again with a new motion for a national water strategy.

I hope that Bill C-383 comes to fruition, unlike Bill C-26 and the motions of the member for Burnaby—New Westminster. I hope that this time the government will take Bill C-383 seriously and implement it.

• (1155)

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Accordingly I now invite the hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound for his five minute right of reply.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to finally get to second reading on my private member's bill. My riding of Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, like yours, borders on beautiful Georgian Bay as well as Lake Huron on the west. Therefore, this is very important to me and a lot of other

members in the House, including you. I want to thank my colleagues today who have all stood to speak to this, including the opposition.

This is an issue that carries on, as has been pointed out many times, Bill C-26 tabled by the government in 2010. In the throne speech of 2008, the government made a commitment to address this issue, but we ended up going to an election. I thank the opposition for that because I probably would not have had a chance to bring this bill forward.

One thing that needs to be pointed out, and has been pointed out by a couple of members today, is that this bill is stronger than Bill C-26. Some issues were raised by some different groups and organizations at the time. Showing that we want to get along and address all the issues, that amendment has been addressed. I know the comments from those groups have been very positive and they thankful for that.

The Prime Minister has said many times that our water is not for sale. I do not know how many times he has to say that before people get it, but this bill really fortifies that. Yes, water is a commodity, but it is not a commodity like oil or minerals, or trees or lumber. It is something that has to be treated differently. It cannot be sold on the market in the same way. It has to be protected, as pointed out by my colleague across the way.

That same colleague wanted to know if the government would treat this bill differently from Bill C-26. I think it is very clear to anybody who has a clear mind on this that Bill C-26 would have gone through had the opposition not been intent on an election. Therefore, we had to shove that one aside.

I was glad the member for Burnaby—New Westminster rose to speak in favour of the bill. I have not had any recent reason to doubt him in any way. However, his leader is on record as being in favour of the sale of bulk water. I will take his word for it that on Wednesday, when we vote on the bill, his leader will be here and will vote in favour of it. I guess until that night comes, I will not know for sure.

Bill C-383 stays out of provincial jurisdiction. Some people wanted to know why it did not go further. Provinces like Alberta, Quebec and others do not like it when we step into their jurisdiction, and with good reason. The bill is deliberately designed to stay out of their jurisdiction. We are looking after our jurisdiction. We know they will look after theirs. This needs to be pointed out.

I want to personally thank my colleagues from Elgin—Middlesex—London and Niagara West—Glanbrook for their support. They both have ridings that border the Great Lakes. I certainly appreciate their support.

With no further ado, it appears as though I will have widespread support for this bill, as I should. It is a bill that is not partisan in any way. I think it looks after water, which is vital to all of us for life. I certainly thank members for their support on Wednesday night and as this bill carries on to third and final reading.

Business of Supply

• (1200)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The time provided for debate has now expired. Accordingly the question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): In my opinion the yeas have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Pursuant to Standing Order 93 the division stands deferred until Wednesday, October 3, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of the House, the new Working While on Claim pilot project is: (a) not benefiting the vast majority of EI recipients who are able to find employment; (b) creating a disincentive to take part-time work; and (c) leaving low income Canadians worse off than before; and that the House call on the government to take steps to fix Working While on Claim immediately.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to be sharing my time here today with the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain.

Since Parliament resumed, the opposition has been trying in vain to convince the government to listen to reason regarding the flaws in the employment insurance reform, particularly concerning the working while on claim pilot project.

It has been shown several times in this House that the new formula used to allow people who are working part-time to find full-time work is putting our most vulnerable citizens at a disadvantage.

That is why, on behalf of all of my NDP colleagues—who are having to deal with thousands of people in their ridings who are both worried about their situation and frustrated because this government continues to dig deeper into their already empty pockets—I move the following motion:

That, in the opinion of the House, the new Working While on Claim pilot project is: (a) not benefiting the vast majority of EI recipients who are able to find employment; (b) creating a disincentive to take part-time work; and (c) leaving low income Canadians worse off than before; and that the House call on the government to take steps to fix Working While on Claim immediately.

Mr. Speaker, throughout the day today, my colleagues will certainly tell you sad, true stories about workers, unemployed workers and employers who are completely discouraged to see the total lack of consideration that this government has for their economic reality.

From seasonal workers in the Gaspé, employees in New Brunswick's tourism industry, construction workers in British Columbia and farmers in the Prairies to employers in specialized seasonal fields, thousands of people are outraged at a government that is attacking their way of life and preventing them from putting food on the table for themselves and their families.

I hope that, when it comes time to vote, once we have clearly demonstrated that this pilot project puts thousands of claimants at a disadvantage, the Conservatives will go back to the drawing board, redo their homework and immediately amend this ill-advised reform.

Before I go into more detail about the problems with the new working while on claim pilot project, let us remember that, initially, under the Employment Insurance Act, claimants who worked during their benefit periods could keep \$50 a week, or the equivalent of 25% of their weekly benefits, without having their benefits reduced. Under this pilot project, this amount has increased to \$75 a week or 40% of the claimant's weekly benefits.

As a new change in its mammoth bill, the government announced that this pilot project would end in August 2012 and would be replaced by a new national pilot project under which claimants can keep the equivalent of 50% of their weekly employment earnings.

If we compare different amounts of weekly earnings and different amounts of benefits under the old and new systems, it quickly becomes obvious that only people who earn \$400 or more will benefit from the new system. Everyone else will lose money whereas, under the previous formula, claimants who received lower employment earnings could obtain more benefits.

As I said a few moments ago, in recent weeks many of us here in the House have pointed out the problems that this new pilot project creates for our constituents. I would like to introduce you to Johanne, one of my constituents, whose case shows just how flagrantly ridiculous the Conservative's calculations are for Canadians.

Johanne is a single parent who works in tourism, a seasonal sector. She is receiving benefits of \$250 a week. In order to make ends meet, she has found a part-time job as a receptionist and earns \$120 a week.

Business of Supply

Under the 40% rule in the old system, she could earn \$100 without any reduction in her benefits. Thus, she lost \$20 of her benefits. Now, using the new system, her benefits will be cut by an amount equivalent to half her earned salary; that is \$60. In total, Johanne will lose \$40 under the new system of calculations. And Johanne is only one example among thousands. I have a table here that shows which combinations of salaries and benefits put people at a disadvantage under the new system. I certainly could share it with the minister, to prove that what her government has proposed is penalizing thousands of Canadians.

• (1205)

We do recognize that the new pilot project is better for certain workers, especially those who have a slightly higher salary while on claim. Still, it must also be recognized that the new model is worse for people with low salaries, seasonal workers and part-time workers, who often are women, vulnerable workers and young people; they account for 14% of all unemployed workers. Looking at it this way, things are very simple for the Conservatives: the poorer you are, the more likely you are to stay that way. Why does the government continue to directly attack women, seasonal workers and Canada's youth?

I would also like to take a moment to correct some statements made by hon. members opposite. Recently, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development stated—and repeated—that the vast majority of employment insurance claimants who were working while on claim would be better off under this new pilot project. The minister was asked to define this majority, but we are still waiting for the numbers, unfortunately.

In May, the Canada Employment Insurance Commission presented a report to the government concerning these changes, estimating that 403,000 Canadians would be better off and 240,000 would be worse off. What is the minister going to say to those 240,000 claimants? Moreover, we know that the amount of money allocated to financing the pilot project is a clear indication that the Conservatives know the new system will be less accessible to claimants than the old system.

In 2009 and 2010, the program cost the government \$141 million and \$132 million respectively. In 2011, the government extended the pilot project by one year and the amount allocated was \$130 million. According to the 2012 budget, the new program will cost about \$74 million over two years, or one-quarter of what it cost previously.

How can the minister explain the significant reduction in budget allocations without admitting that the Conservatives know very well that the benefits of thousands of people will be reduced? Instead of deliberately misleading all Canadians, as this government is apt to do, it is high time that the minister announced changes to her pilot project that will not penalize the 240,000 part-time and low-income workers on employment insurance.

How many times will we have to state loud and clear that employment insurance is not a government benefit? Employers and employees contribute to the fund. Canadians make their employment insurance contributions in good faith because they believe that this social safety net will be there for them when they need it.

This ludicrous intrusion, which dates back to when the Liberals shamelessly stole \$54 billion from the fund, must stop immediately. This government does not have the right to interfere in a matter that concerns employers and workers.

Employment insurance is a social safety net that provides some support to Canadians when they go through more difficult times. Unfortunately, four out of 10 unemployed workers today do not have access to employment insurance, even though they paid into the fund. The government is doing nothing to improve accessibility, which is restricted as never before. Instead, it prefers to send the message that the individual must bear the burden of unemployment. The government is implying that it is people's own fault if they lose their jobs.

Under the Conservatives, the responsibility for social problems such as unemployment are shifting increasingly from society to the individual. There is no longer a social or collective aspect to unemployment, as though the risk of losing one's job were assumed entirely by the individual and not society. When a corporation replaces a worker with a machine, is it the worker's fault?

One thing is clear: based on what we have seen over the last few decades, the NDP is the only party that can be trusted when it comes to employment insurance. We are the only party to propose policies to improve access to employment insurance benefits and not limit access even more.

I hope that the minister will listen to the thousands of pleas from across Canada that are echoing here in the House today. That is why I urge the government to support this motion and to do everything possible to improve the working while on claim program.

• (1210)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is a lot to be said about the opposition day motion. The member concluded by saying that the NDP was the only party that could be counted on when it comes to employment insurance. It is amazing it took the New Democrats so long to realize the changes that have been made. The member for Cape Breton—Canso talked about it for well over a week before the NDP even tuned in on the issue.

It was the Liberal Party that essentially created employment insurance benefit programs. The Liberal Party also moved an opposition day motion last week to try to deal with this. At the end of the day, we Liberals recognize how critically important it is to get the minister to change the policy. We need to recognize the importance of the minister reversing the decisions that we in the Liberal Party and the johnny-come-lately New Democrat Party now recognize need to be changed.

I am wondering if the member would join with all opposition members in acknowledging that the minister is not doing a service to the unemployed by continuing to ignore the calls for change, whether from the Liberals or NDP.

Business of Supply

•(1215)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I would remind hon. members that with five minutes for questions and comments, when other members are standing for questions we ought to try to keep the questions and responses to about a minute where possible.

The hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Mr. Speaker, I do not think the Liberals can deny that the NDP has never dipped into the employment insurance fund. The NDP is the only party that has never dipped into the employment insurance fund. That is a fact.

As for the Conservatives, we know that they are taking any chance they can get to take money from all aspects of employment insurance. Today, it is one aspect, but there is also seasonal work. It is everywhere.

There is a reason why they budgeted \$74 million for two years, when the budget used to be \$132 million. It is basic math. They want to make cuts everywhere; they want to keep people from receiving EI, and they are hurting the Canadian economy.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles for her work on this.

I would like more examples of the impact this bill will have on seasonal workers in particular. I come from the second-largest riding in Canada. There is a lot of seasonal work in forestry, agriculture, the tourism industry and so forth.

What is her party going to do differently?

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Mr. Speaker, today's motion is on what the unemployed will lose during the benefit period. This has a huge impact on seasonal work, because not everyone lives in a rural area.

Living in a rural area has its own reality. I lived in a rural area for a long time and it is quite a bit different than living in an urban area. There is no comparison. A person cannot just pick up and leave a rural area to go work elsewhere just because he gets two job offers a day. There are so many unavoidable factors to consider such as distance, ice, freezing rain, black ice, the commute back and forth. People are going to have to accept less money and lower benefits, which will make them poorer. The rural areas will be poorer.

[*English*]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be very precise. This is a good motion. People are hurting. Let us fix it. Let us focus the debate on that today. If we can do that, we are doing our job as members of Parliament.

Does my colleague agree that the most hurtful change was the removal of the provision for allowable earnings? It is very specific. When the provision for allowable earnings was dropped, that is when people got hurt by this change.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Mr. Speaker, getting rid of measures is part of what is hurting the unemployed and we all know it. In August, the government got rid of the five extra weeks of benefits that could be given to workers in the regions in order to fill the

infamous gap. Getting rid of this measure further impoverishes people who were already getting less by way of benefits while waiting for the next tourist season or the next season in the forestry sector, the fishery and so forth.

This weakening of the EI system is something else we would eliminate.

[*English*]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to participate in today's full-day debate on the government's recent changes to the working while on claim component of the employment insurance system. I am not sure that the government is equally delighted, though.

That is the beauty of the days that are set aside by the rules of the House for the opposition to choose the topic of debate. They represent a relatively rare opportunity to hold the government to account on issues the Conservatives would just as soon not have exposed, and no issue is more on point in this regard than the government's recent changes to the employment insurance system. That is why my NDP colleagues and I decided to make the working while on claim component of EI the topic of today's debate and to put the government's record to a vote.

For those who may be watching at home, let me just remind everyone what the motion before us entails. It says:

That, in the opinion of the House, the new Working While on Claim pilot project is: (a) not benefiting the vast majority of EI recipients who are able to find employment; (b) creating a disincentive to take part-time work; and (c) leaving low income Canadians worse off than before; and that the House call on the government to take steps to fix Working While on Claim immediately.

Anyone who has given this issue even cursory thought would know that all three claims in this motion are absolutely correct. Contrary to the minister's claim, the changes do not benefit the vast majority of EI recipients. They do create a disincentive for accepting part-time work while on claim, and it is the lowest income earners who are hardest hit.

If this were any other place and people were to cast their ballots based purely on the facts, this motion would pass unanimously. However, there is a reason why some have called this place Disney on the Rideau. There is often a suspension of belief that renders surreal results. To prove my point, just watch the vote tomorrow night. In the meantime though, let me first prove the facts.

In their 2012 budget, the Conservatives announced their intention to make changes to the working while on claim pilot project. Previously, EI recipients who accepted work were allowed to receive the greater of \$75 or 40% of their weekly benefits without any money being clawed back. Above those thresholds, earnings were clawed back dollar for dollar.

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Under the new national pilot project, workers are allowed to keep 50% of every dollar they earn up to 90% of their insurable earnings, but importantly, they lose 50% from the first dollar earned. Nonetheless, it was the intention of the new working while on claim program to encourage work by not clawing back 100% of earnings above the threshold of one or two days of work.

Of course, we all know where roads paved with good intentions end up, and this pilot project is no exception. As has become clear in the month and a half since the new pilot project was announced, the new program has had the effect of targeting the most vulnerable workers. It reduces the earnings of those who can only find one day of work a week, as well as those who receive Canada pension plan benefits or other income while on EI.

MPs' offices have been flooded with complaints and even employers are complaining because they are unable to find people to take piecework now, because one day of work per week no longer pays. However, the minister responsible stubbornly maintains that there are no problems requiring her attention.

The Conservatives claim that the new pilot program would incentivize all EI recipients to accept new work. According to budget 2012, "This new pilot will ensure that EI claimants always benefit from accepting work by allowing them to keep more of what they earn while on EI and supporting their search for permanent employment". Similarly the parliamentary secretary claimed in the House on September 24 that "those who work more will be able to keep more when it comes to their employment insurance".

Unfortunately, the cold reality belies the Conservative rhetoric. When compared to the expired program, the new pilot program discourages part-time work or low-paid work for many EI recipients because they will be allowed to keep less than they were under the old system.

Mathematical equations do not make for a riveting speech but they are essential to proving the point, so bear with me for just a moment.

Let us take the average earning EI recipient. In 2010-11, the average regular EI weekly benefit was \$370 a week. This means that previous earnings for the average EI recipient were about \$670 per week. Under the new system, the average EI recipient will have no incentive to accept new work unless they earn over \$300 a week. For example, if this person accepted work earning \$150 per week, they would essentially lose \$70 under the new system compared to the old.

I know it all sounds a bit confusing, but it is easier to understand if we look at EI recipients with both the maximum earnings and those with lower earnings.

● (1220)

Let us start with the maximum earnings. In 2011, the maximum EI regular benefit was \$468 a week. This means that the previous earnings for the maximum EI recipient were at least \$850 per week. Under the new system, the maximum level EI recipients would have no incentive to accept new work unless they earn over \$350 per week. For example, if EI recipients accept work earning them \$200 per week, they essentially lose \$90 under the new system compared to what they would have kept under the old system.

For EI recipients with lower earnings, if they previously earned \$300 per week, they would get \$165 per week on EI. Under the new system, these recipients would have no incentive to accept new work unless they earn over \$125 per week. For example, if they accept work earning them \$75 per week, they essentially lose \$30 under the new system. That does not even take into account work-related expenses such as transportation and child care. If those additional expenses are factored in, very few EI recipients benefit from accepting work while on claim.

Despite all of that evidence, the minister continues to claim that the "vast majority" of EI recipients working while on claim benefit from her new pilot project. Interestingly though, when pressed she is unable to give any figures to back up her claim.

In fact, the amount of money committed to the program clearly indicates that the Conservatives know that the system is less generous than the older one. In 2010, the working while on claim pilot cost the government \$132 million. In 2011, the government extended the pilot for one year with a budget of \$130 million. However, budget 2012 set aside only \$74 million for the new pilot project. That was to cover two years, not one. Consequently, there is roughly half the money over twice the time, or a 75% cut. That hardly supports the Conservatives' contention that EI recipients will now be better off.

If we do not trust the government's own figures in that regard, and who could blame us, I refer members to a report by the Canada Employment Insurance Commission, which estimated that while 403,000 Canadians would benefit from the program, 240,000 would be negatively impacted. That means that nearly four in ten EI recipients are worse off as a result of these changes, stretching beyond credulity any possible definition the minister might offer of the "vast majority".

Employment insurance is not a government benefit; it is paid for by workers and employers. Canadians pay EI premiums in good faith that EI will be there for them in times of unemployment. The reason my NDP colleagues and I brought forward today's motion is to protect that sacred trust from the government's repeated meddling in the EI system without so much as consulting the very workers who paid for the system. It is time for the Conservatives to stop attacking unemployed Canadians, blaming them for their own unemployment, and to get serious about developing a job creation strategy and to invest adequately in skills training.

I will be interested to see how the Conservatives vote tomorrow night. They can no longer claim they are unaware of how their program changes have impacted the lowest earning EI recipients. It is time they own up to the mistake and fix it.

Business of Supply

There is no shame in making a mistake. The shame lies only in the refusal to acknowledge and correct it.

• (1225)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have always enjoyed working with my colleague on the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

When this change was made, and I am sure the member will be quick to remind everyone of what I said about it at the time, I thought it was a good change. I said that the government was doing the right thing because it had indicated that it was going to increase the amount that people would be allowed to earn from 40% to 50%. It made sense to me. I thought it would just increase the incentive to go back and take work. However, I guess what I should have known, and maybe my colleague was somewhat wiser on this, is that the devil is always in the details. At that time, there was no mention of the dropping of the allowable earnings component of this particular program.

Would my colleague not agree that it was the dropping of allowable earnings that has really had a huge impact on the low income earners and the poorest of the poor? We are trying to fix something here today. Hopefully, that is what we can accomplish with this motion. Would she therefore agree with me that if we could get back to looking at the allowable earnings portion, it would go a far ways in helping people?

• (1230)

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely right. If we looked at that portion of the new changes under the new working while on claim provisions, we could certainly start to restore some of the balance. What has gone missing in the government's approach to this program is that, while it has indeed helped those who earn the most, it has completely abdicated any responsibility to those who are at the lower income earning scale. That is absolutely shameful. If we are going to fix EI, by all means let us do it in such a way as to help the most vulnerable, who need help the most.

Like the member opposite, I would say the devil always is in the details with the government. We certainly did not anticipate a 75% cut in the budget to working while on claim when the minister announced she had good news for unemployed Canadians. If the government were serious and wanted to improve and assist those on EI currently, it would do its damnest to fix the program now.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I fully support the opposition day motion put forward by the New Democratic Party. I wonder if, when addressing the mistakes that are being made to the employment insurance program, we could not just reach back to the spring and include the egregious changes that were made in Bill C-38 that will make it increasingly difficult for Canadians who are dependent on seasonal industries, whether fishing, tourism or forestry, to be able to continue in those industries? It is a real threat to their employers as well.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I absolutely agree with the leader of the Green Party. The changes that were made in Bill C-38 to the provisions impacting those who are seasonally employed are absolutely outrageous.

The reason we focused on this particular part of the EI system for today's motion is that, one, it is a stand-alone discrete item and, two, we in the NDP kind of want to give the minister the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps she did not understand her own program. We want to give her the opportunity, in this one very specific way, to say, "You know what? You're right; there is a mistake in the program design. I recognize it now and I'm prepared to fix it". That is why we cast the motion as narrowly as we did.

The member is absolutely right. We could spend the entire rest of this Parliament talking about things that need to be fixed with Canada's employment insurance system.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I enjoyed, as I always do, the speech from the member for Hamilton Mountain. She is a very passionate advocate for ordinary Canadian families.

She pointed out that this is nothing less than a punch in the gut to seasonal workers and families that are just trying to get by, to make sure they have food on the table and to pay for their kids' education. There is a whole bunch of consequences to ordinary families that stem from this very mean-spirited action by the government.

I would like the member for Hamilton Mountain to comment on what this means for whole communities. Families are getting this punch in the gut from Conservatives. What does that mean for small businesses in the communities that are impacted by it? What does it mean in terms of economic development? To what extent does this lead to a domino impact that is going to hit whole regions of the country? Could she comment on that please?

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, it is a terrific question, because all too often we focus on the forest instead of the trees in this House. He is absolutely right. The changes that were before us have a profoundly negative impact, not just on the individual families but on communities as a whole. That, of course, includes small business.

When we were debating here in the House how we would deal with the incredible economic downturn in 2008-2009, economists were saying to us that one of the tools at our disposal is to strengthen employment insurance, because if people have more money in their pockets they will spend it in their own local communities. They will spend it in the mom and pop stores in their communities. They are not going to put that money into some savings account. There is no dead money in the homes of people on EI. That money would go to support communities. That is one of the reasons why EI is so important, not just to Canadian families, but indeed to the whole communities in which they live.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Mississauga East—Cooksville.

Business of Supply

I am pleased to speak about the important changes we are making to the employment insurance program and how these changes would ensure that Canadians are better off working than not.

Today's motion is based on faulty assumptions and is simply wrong. It represents yet another attempt by the NDP to roll back a measure that would help improve our economy. As a result, the government will be voting against the motion.

As I have said many times before in this place, we believe Canadians are better off working than not, because Canadians who have a job are able to provide for their families.

This is a pilot project to encourage EI claimants to pursue and accept all opportunities to work. We are always working to ensure our programs fulfill our goals.

This pilot project cannot, however, be focused on in isolation. In economic action plan 2012, we announced several changes to the EI program that will improve incentives to work, allow EI claimants to accept all available work, and ultimately connect them to jobs more effectively, to ensure and enable them to return to work more quickly.

I can assure all hon. members in this place that, under this new program, the majority of people who work while they are on claim will benefit and will be better off. However, I can also assure the House that when the NDP's reckless \$21 billion carbon tax comes into effect it will have a huge impact on low-income families and leave them worse off.

As someone who has lived for several years in Atlantic Canada, I know from personal experience the detrimental impact a \$21 billion carbon tax would have on Atlantic Canadians, let alone those individuals who live in my riding of Simcoe—Grey in rural Ontario. This tax would not only increase the cost of everyday essentials such as groceries and clothes; it would significantly raise the cost of home heating oil and gasoline. Sadly, this tax would punish rural Canadians, like those in my riding of Simcoe—Grey, far worse than those in urban Canada. With tens of thousands of good paying jobs relying on the continued development of Hibernia and other offshore oil fields in Atlantic Canada, or the thousands of energy-related jobs at Irving Oil, Atlantic Canadians would be particularly hard hit by this carbon tax.

I find it disingenuous of the NDP to be talking about supporting low-income Canadians when its policies are detrimental and would hurt so many Canadian families.

• (1235)

[*Translation*]

Our top priority is job creation, economic growth and long-term prosperity for Canadians.

[*English*]

Canada's economic performance has been strong and continues to be strong in 2012. Since July 2009, more than 770,000 new jobs have been created, resulting in the strongest employment growth by far in the G7.

We know there are jobs available across the country. According to Statistics Canada, in June there were 263,000 job vacancies across Canada that went unfilled.

We believe that Canada's EI program must encourage and not discourage unemployed Canadians from filling these jobs.

[*Translation*]

We want to connect Canadians with jobs to help them return to work quickly.

[*English*]

One way we will do this is by making it easier for Canadians who are out of work to identify new opportunities in their communities. We will do this through increased job alerts to inform EI recipients of local opportunities.

We are also linking the temporary foreign worker program to the EI program to ensure Canadians are always available and always have the first chance to fill local jobs before employers are allowed to bring in temporary foreign workers.

We also introduced a new national best variable weeks program, which would use the local unemployment rate to determine the number of best weeks a claimant can select to calculate his or her average salary. The higher the unemployment rate, the fewer weeks claimants can use to set their average salary. This would ensure that seasonal workers with few alternatives in the off-season are not punished for accepting partial weeks of employment or lower paying work when it comes to calculating their EI benefits.

Another change we are making to employment insurance is the working while on claim pilot project.

Beginning in 2005 under the Liberals, the previous version of the working while on claim pilot tested to see if allowing claimants to earn more while receiving EI benefits would encourage people to accept all available work.

Under the previous pilot project, EI recipients who had part-time or occasional work had their benefits reduced dollar-for-dollar once they earned \$75 or 40% of their weekly benefit amount, whichever was greater. To put it another way, once they hit this cap their wages were clawed back 100% from their benefits. This discouraged many of them from accepting work beyond the 40% threshold.

We are working on what we have learned from that pilot and are making further improvements to work incentives through this more moderate clawback rate over a greater range of earnings. Under the new pilot project, EI claimants can keep more of what they earn, as benefits are only reduced by 50% of total earnings from working.

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There are some members of the opposition who have retracted their support for this pilot project, claiming that they misunderstood exactly what the pilot project was going to do.

I will quote the economic action plan 2012, from page 147:

This new pilot project will cut the current clawback rate in half and apply it to all earnings which are made while on claim.

Knowing that the previous clawback was 100% and that this reduced clawback was going to be applied to all earnings, we were clear from the beginning that this new pilot would apply a 50% clawback from the first dollar earned. I will provide an example of how this works, for the members across the aisle.

Theresa is currently making \$264 a week on EI. She finds work for three days a week at \$12 an hour, which is slightly above the minimum wage of \$10.14 in Nova Scotia. Under the previous pilot, Theresa would have kept \$106 of what she made. Now, she will be able to keep \$144, which is \$38 more per week in her pocket.

This new pilot project is making sure that more people who work while on claim will be able to receive more of the money they earn without an artificial cap getting in the way. We recognize that Canadians want to get back to work.

● (1240)

[*Translation*]

We know that people who remain active in the labour market are more likely to find a permanent job quicker.

[*English*]

We know that people who remain active in the labour market are more likely to find permanent jobs quicker. Having a part-time job allows people to keep and nurture networks with employers and others who can help them find more permanent full-time employment. It allows people to keep their work skills sharp and develop new skills.

[*Translation*]

These changes are about empowering unemployed workers, helping them get back into the workforce, and focusing resources where they are needed most.

[*English*]

Our government is committed to making targeted common-sense changes that encourage Canadians to stay active in the marketplace and remove disincentives to work. As we face unprecedented labour and skill shortages, it is important that we ensure EI is working effectively. The most recent change made it possible for EI recipients to make more money while working than they would on EI alone. It is a good example of how we are trying to make things better.

Let me be precise. This is a pilot project and not a permanent measure. We will continue to work so it will always be of advantage for Canadian workers. After all, helping Canadians get back to work is better for them, their families and their communities.

The motion is flawed and misleading, and that is why we, as a government, will be voting against this motion. We urge all hon. members to support our government in doing so and vote against this motion.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would point out that successive federal governments have abused the EI system to such an extent that the NDP felt compelled to put forward an opposition day motion today to try to restore some semblance of order to at least some aspects of the EI fund.

When the Liberals were in power, they used the EI fund like some cash cow. There was \$58 billion worth of excess revenue put in. They changed the rules so that nobody qualified anymore. Employers and employees dutifully paid into an insurance program that ceased to be an insurance program. It became another payroll tax that the government used to give tax breaks to its friends and to squander it on all kinds of purposes, anything but income maintenance. That was an outrage and had to stop.

I would ask the member to defend the Conservatives' inaction to correct what the Liberals have done. In fact, there are even fewer people eligible for EI now and less benefits.

Is this some kind of tough love, social-engineering program on the Conservatives' part to try to use the EI system to starve people into accepting jobs that are not suitable for them or that force them into moving across the country when temporary workers are needed right where they live?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, this government has a track record of job creation. We have created 770,000 new jobs since the downturn in the recession in July 2009. We have put in place a number of initiatives in order to allow individuals who are unemployed to have employment. Those initiatives include Helmets to Hardhats, a targeted initiative for older workers, and a youth employment strategy. In fact, \$300 million topped up another \$50 million over two years in this year's budget in order to allow those individuals who may not be connected to employment to have an opportunity for a job and improve the quality of life for their families. Individuals in my riding of Simcoe—Grey, whether in Collingwood, Thornbury, Alliston or Stayner, all embrace these changes because they see opportunities for themselves, their children and their families.

This government is about being focused on ensuring we are creating jobs and economic growth. I encourage the opposition members to please get on board. We want as many Canadians as possible to have a job.

● (1245)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, sometimes questions are asked in this House for which the answer can be spoken around. I will ask a question for which there is an answer. The question is drawn from the terrible job the minister has done handling these files. She is just two feet in front of NFL replacement officials with the bungling of these files. She said twice last week that the maximum amount people could earn under the old program was \$75. That is the minimum they can earn. They can earn 40% of their EI benefits.

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If somebody has a calculator over there, he or she could help out the parliamentary secretary. If people are drawing the maximum benefit of \$485 a week, they are allowed to earn 40% of that. On my calculator, it reads \$193. They are allowed to earn \$193 before there is any clawback at all. Would the parliamentary secretary confirm whether that is right? It is not \$75 maximum. People can make up to \$193 if they are on maximum benefits.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, I greatly enjoy my colleague's presence on the human resources committee.

To be frank, this is about ensuring that the employment insurance program is working better for Canadians. It is about ensuring we better connect Canadians to available jobs. We are putting in place a number of changes. What will those changes do? They will ensure that individuals receive job alerts on a regular basis. We introduced the national best weeks program. Now, instead of a certain subset of regions in the country benefiting from a great program, the entire country will benefit from that great national program through EI. We put in place a new small business EI tax credit so we can encourage small businesses to increase the number of individuals they are employing.

As I mentioned in my speech, taken together, the changes to the employment insurance program will better connect Canadians to jobs, which is what we need.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will begin by indicating that the government will not be supporting this motion today. We believe Canadians are always better off working than not. This pilot project increases incentives for claimants to accept all available work while on employment insurance. I can assure hon. members that, under this new program, the majority of people who work while they are on claim will benefit and will be better off.

This is a pilot project to encourage EI claimants to pursue and accept all opportunities to work. We are always working to ensure our programs fulfill our goals.

However, I find it passing strange that the NDP brings forward a motion concerning the well-being of low-income Canadians. As we debated at length last Tuesday, poverty in Canada is at historic lows under our government. In 2010, three million Canadians, or only 9% of Canada's population, lived in poverty. While this number is still too high, we are continuing to act to reduce it. This number represents the lowest percentage in Canada's history. To put it in context, this is 1.3 million Canadians who, under our Conservative government, were lifted out of poverty. Whether it is adults, children or seniors poverty, Canadians have never been better off than under our strong, stable, national Conservative government.

However, I can assure this House that a \$21 billion job-killing carbon tax would not help Canada's low income families. In fact, given the reliance on home heating oil as a source of warmth through the winter months, the NDP's proposed \$21 billion tax grab would disproportionately hurt Atlantic Canadians. I wonder what the NDP would say to employees of Irving or the many families who rely on the continued development of the Hibernia oil field when they hear their jobs are on the line because of the NDP's risky tax policy. The NDP talks about supporting working families but its policies threaten the good paying jobs that they rely on.

Our government is introducing changes to the employment insurance program to ensure that it is fair, flexible and responsive to local labour market conditions.

Canadians gave us a strong majority mandate in the last election because of the strong economic record of our Conservative government. They know that a healthy economy is the prerequisite for a high quality of life. Simply put, Canadians trust the Prime Minister's low tax plan for jobs and economic growth over the risky schemes of the opposition.

Thanks to the strong leadership of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, Canada has created over 770,000 new jobs since the depth of the recession. Over 90% of these jobs are full-time positions. In fact, Canada has over 350,000 more jobs today than at any highest time pre-recession.

It is an inconvenient truth for the opposition parties that right now there are more Canadians working than at any previous point in our history. Unlike other G7 countries, we are actually facing labour and skills shortages in many regions and industries. This has been caused by both our aging population as well as continued economic growth.

The effects are already being felt in the labour market and will accentuate labour and skills shortages that are already serious in some sectors. In fact, Statistics Canada revealed that there were 250,000 jobs in our country that remained unfilled this spring. These are not even in top-of-mind locations such as Alberta. In Labrador City, there is such a shortage of workers to work in their new mining projects that restaurants cannot stay open and the municipality cannot find enough people to maintain the roads.

However, many Canadians are not aware of local opportunities to work within their region. We can do better at connecting Canadians with available jobs. This is why, as announced in economic action plan 2012, we are making improvements to the EI program to help Canadians connect, maintain and reconnect with the labour market, improvements that the NDP voted against.

● (1250)

This is what we proposed. Canadians receiving regular EI benefits would now be able to receive comprehensive job postings on a daily basis from multiple sources. This would ensure that they are made aware of jobs available in their local area. In addition, measures are being taken to enhance the connection between EI and the temporary foreign workers program. This link would ensure that Canadians always have the first chance to apply for local jobs before employers are approved to hire temporary foreign workers.

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The new variable best weeks initiative will use the local unemployment rate to determine the number of best weeks used to set the average salary for calculating EI benefits. The higher the unemployment rate, the fewer weeks used to determine this average. This means that working more partial weeks or more jobs at a lower wage will have less of an impact on EI benefits for seasonal workers.

On the topic of today's motion, as of August 5, 2012, the new working while on claim pilot project came into effect. This new pilot project removes the cap on earnings from EI claimants so that Canadians who accept more work can now earn more while on employment insurance. I will explain this measure a little more.

Under the new pilot project, people receiving EI benefits will have their benefits reduced by 50% of their earnings from the first dollar earned. The new pilot project aims to encourage claimants to increase their work efforts while on claim since this has been proven to be one of the better ways to move toward permanent employment.

It has been found in study after study that people can find permanent jobs more rapidly if they continue to be active in the labour market by looking for work or by working even part time or casually. The working while on claim pilot project promotes workforce attachment by encouraging claimants to accept available work while receiving EI benefits and earning some additional income while on claim. This applies to those who receive regular, fishing, parental or compassionate care benefits.

I would remind members that this is a pilot project. This is not a permanent change but an opportunity to test whether we can encourage unemployed Canadians to work more while on claim.

The employment insurance program must evolve to the needs of Canadians. It must be efficient, flexible and fair for all. However, it must also ensure that it helps Canadians find work more quickly as the economy continues to recover. This is not only an objective we have set for ourselves but a commitment we have made to the Canadian people.

The changes to the working while on claim pilot project cannot be focused on in isolation as it does not take into consideration the many other changes that we made to the EI program this year. This package of EI measures is meant to connect Canadians with local jobs and to return them to work more quickly. Canadians are always better off working than not. Sadly, the NDP has voted against countless initiatives we have put in place to help get Canadians back to work. Unfortunately, the NDP continues to be interested in playing politics instead of supporting our economic action plan, a plan that has reduced poverty to a historic low while increasing the number of Canadians working to a historic high.

Instead of proposing a risky carbon tax that would raise the cost of everything for low-income families and threaten the jobs that so many middle-class families rely on, I ask the NDP to support measures that will actually help Canadian families and vote against this motion.

•(1255)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his statement, although it was chock full of propaganda, for lack of a better way of putting it. I would like to go back to the mention he made of seasonal workers.

How can he justify the effect on seasonal workers that these changes would cause? It is easy to say that seasonal workers can go back to work during the off season but we need to look at the employers as well. Who will hire people who are only available for a few months before they go back to their trade, be it fishing, mining or whatever seasonal trade? How do we encourage employers to hire people who are only available for certain months? How do people who know nothing but fishing, for example, work in a completely different milieu when they are not trained to do so? How do the EI changes address those things?

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Speaker, when people go on employment insurance, there are incentives in the new program for them to go and find work, if it is available in the region, and many people do. Many people are not aware of the fact that there is work there. If there is no work, this program does not change. The benefits that are now proposed by the program are still there for those who will be out of work. Therefore, I do not fully understand why there would be a concern.

The program has incentives for Canadians to look for work, find work and earn money, while they are on EI benefits.

•(1300)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member for Mississauga East—Cooksville. We debated this issue once last week and still the members from the government side still do not understand the system, nor do they understand how serious the pilot project affects those while working on claim. The member for Mississauga East—Cooksville is absolutely incorrect when he says that they can now earn more while working on claim. In most of the cases that is not the case.

I see the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development whispering in his ear, but she does not know the facts either.

In order to lay out the facts, I would ask unanimous consent again to table the Library of Parliament paper that explains that to them so they understand it and we can fix the problem in the House, which is an easy fix.

For heaven's sake, their colleagues in the Senate agreed to allow it to be tabled. They are not scared of the facts. Why are the members of the government side in the House of Commons so scared of the facts so they can see them and fix the problem.

Therefore, I ask for unanimous consent to table that report.

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The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Does the hon. member for Malpeque have the unanimous consent of the House to table the documents?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Speaker, I did not really hear a question from the hon. member. I will give an example from the riding I am proud to represent, Mississauga East—Cooksville.

At this moment, employers are looking for workers, paying \$16.00 an hour to start for jobs that do not require any real skills. Believe it or not, there are no takers. They are having a hard time finding workers. There is work there.

The notion that somehow people are better off staying on employment insurance than working is really very bizarre.

I will mention one more thing. There are other initiatives that we have put forward: youth employment strategy; EI hiring credit; apprenticeship incentive grant; targeted initiative for older workers; tool tax credits; pan-Canadian framework for foreign credential recognition; and the foreign credential recognition market loans program. The opposition voted against all these initiatives. Why?

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to join in the debate today.

I am a little disappointed with the government's start on the debate. I would hope that we would use this day in the House to help a real situation for many Canadians who find themselves with fewer dollars coming into their household as a result of the changes that have been made in EI.

On a cautionary note, this is only the beginning. Some industries, like the fishery, have wound down. Agricultural industries and the people in those seasonal industries are still busy. Some tourism operators are just winding down. When they look for some part-time workers for fall events or to grade harvests, whatever it might be, they will find a similar situation.

We are closer to the beginning of the problem than we are to the end. Let us hope that we can focus, as members of Parliament today, on trying to help all Canadians, especially this group of Canadians, who are being placed in harm's way by losing that amount of money from their weekly pay packets.

I am not really encouraged by the comments from the two government members who spoke so far on the issue and who said that Canadians were always better off working. Yes, Canadians are always better off working. Canadians are better off making a higher wage than a lower wage. Canadians are better off being healthy than not being healthy. Just because they are better off being healthy, we do not close off health services and shut down hospitals. If the Conservatives are stating that Canadians are better off working, they are implying that Canadians who receive EI benefits do so because they are lazy.

I hear from the Conservatives across the way that is not it. Let us deal with the motion and let us fix the problems today, because people are being hurt. Of course people are better off when they are

working, but this is when they have no work or they are only able to get small amounts of work.

When the Conservatives made this first change, to much fanfare, there were a number of different aspects that came out in the omnibus bill and about five impacted EI. Two specifically were pilot projects. One was best weeks and the second was working while on claim.

I am very happy to say I will be splitting my time with the member for Beauséjour, who will enlighten the House about a couple of other aspects of the concerns we are raising, and I know all members are looking forward to his comments.

The three other aspects that the Conservatives changed were of great concern to me and I spoke against them, but I spoke in favour of these two particular changes. I said that I would commend the government on those. The best weeks, so far we think it actually got that one right.

The Conservatives did not say anything at all about taking away the allowable earnings aspect of working while on claim. They said that they would increase the amount an EI recipient could earn from 40% to 50%, a little more to take away a disincentive, and I thought that was a great idea. However, the devil is absolutely in the details. Those details are hurting low-income earners who are trying to provide for their families and to get by.

The Conservatives took away the allowable earnings. Rather than trying to fix the problem, we have seen a continual regurgitation of talking points by the minister. It has been absolutely dishonest. The minister said twice last week that every dollar recipients made after \$75 while working on claim would be clawed back dollar for dollar, and that is not even close to being the truth. She spoke as if \$75 was the maximum an EI recipient could earn. Instead, \$75 was the minimum they could earn. If they were only earning \$100 a week on EI and they made \$100 a week on a part-time job, the maximum they could make would be 40%. That would have been \$40. However, with the old system, the minimum that recipients could actually keep was \$75. They could keep 40%. The minister is trying to make it appear that \$75 is the maximum.

● (1305)

The misinformation that the minister has shared over the course of this debate is totally egregious. She had every opportunity to tell us that. When the budget discussions were on, she said nothing about taking away the allowable earnings. She gave a major speech on May 24 and said nothing about it. The pilot project was announced on August 2 and nothing was said about it. She said that recipients would always benefit from working.

What is happening now is the minister has gone from "always" to "the majority" to "most", and I am sure by Friday it will be that "some" benefit from working.

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Even the examples that are cited on the Service Canada website use high-end earnings. One example is that if a part-time worker earns \$795 a week, then he or she would benefit. If somebody earns \$795, that is about \$40,000 a year. In my riding, that is a career.

In the minister's answers the other day she used two examples, both of which started with, "If the claimant worked for three days". Not everybody can find three days of work. Some can find two, some can find one, some can find four hours for the week. There should not be a disincentive in taking those four hours for the week. However, if people are making \$10 an hour and they go for that four hours expecting to make and keep \$40 but are only getting \$20 and if they need gas there and back, a sandwich and maybe a babysitter, there are a lot of people who would find themselves in a situation where they actually lose money. The motion put forward by the opposition tries to deal with those aspects of the changes so those people are not hurt.

We have talked about the workers, and I will cite some examples shortly. What we see now is employers that are become frustrated when they try to find workers because it is tough to get workers out for that small block of hours because they lose so much. There was an incident this past weekend in one of my fishing communities. A load of herring had come in. People work countless hours during lobster and crab seasons, but during herring season they just have to come out and unload a boat for four or five hours. However, 30 workers were needed to unload the herring and the employer said that he fought and fought and was able to get about 15 or 20 people out. If it costs people money to work, that is a disincentive.

We received an email from a guy who operates a small construction company in Kenora. The folks who work there all year long operating front-end loaders and excavators work as long as they can at the end of the season. Then over the course of the winter they get involved in snow removal. These guys are bidding on contracts, but they do not know if they will have the workers during the winter season. When the snowstorms come, they do not know if they will have the bodies to run the equipment because they know the changes that have been made have created a disincentive.

Therefore, if this debate does anything today, it is that all members of Parliament take it seriously and try to find a way to fix this. I had commended the government on the best weeks aspects. When I did that, it took away the allowable earnings. If it fixes that, I will stand in my place and commend it on doing what is necessary to take away this disincentive that has been created through the changes it made to the working while on claim component.

• (1310)

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague to discuss the effects of the recent reforms, and the previous ones, on workers, especially seasonal workers. I am referring to the reforms brought in by the Liberal government as well as the current reforms, and their effects on the Maritimes, primarily on seasonal workers.

[English]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, this is just another brick on that load. There were a number of changes made that will certainly work against people who work in seasonal industries.

These are not seasonal workers. They are people who work in seasonal industries. Many Canadians work in a number of different industries to try to piece together an annual income. Some of the changes the government has made, such as the three categories of EI claimants or the repeat offenders legislation, are absolutely going to hurt and impact seasonal industries. This working while on claim project is just going to further aggravate the hardship of those people who work in seasonal industries.

We hear it all the time. There are municipal elections taking place in Nova Scotia and candidate after candidate is talking about out-migration and how we are losing population in rural communities. Certainly, these changes will do nothing to help their situation and their plight in rural Canada.

• (1315)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I can tell the member that on the weekend, in my riding of Malpeque, this clearly was the issue. People are being seriously hurt. Employers cannot get workers as a result of it actually costing them money to go to work.

The member in his remarks said let us find a way to fix this. There is a simple fix and the House should fix it. All that needs to be done is to go back to the original 40%, so that a claimant can earn 40% while working on claim without any clawback. Then bring in the government's new measures of 50¢ on the dollar over and above that. Everyone would benefit.

Is this the kind of fix the member for Cape Breton—Canso is talking about, and what would it take to implement that fix?

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, that is the essence of it. There were two pilot projects and both were showing benefit. My colleague from Malpeque, the Liberal caucus and I have long advocated for them. I have spoken on it on a number of occasions, whenever I can. Those were two pilot programs that worked well and took disincentives out of the system, and they should be adopted.

The government did one, but it had this new idea with working while on claim. It sounded really good going from 40% to 50%, but the 50% kicks in on dollar one. The 50% kicks in on the first dollar a claimant makes rather than 40% being free and clear. They are losing money from the first dollar, so it is a disincentive.

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There is a way to fix it. Go back to the original. It was good the way it was. If we want to make it better, we could go from the 40% allowable to the 50% allowable and that would be taking away even more of a disincentive. We did not hear any complaints about the old system as it was at 40%, but if the government wants to go to 50% that would be even better.

We saw with Bill C-38, the omnibus bill, an unwillingness to adapt. There were 800 amendments put forward and none were accepted. I would hope that we can get together in the chamber today and help the people who are being hurt by these changes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to indicate my enthusiastic support for the motion introduced by the hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles.

I would also like to congratulate the Liberal human resources critic, the member for Cape Breton—Canso, for all his work on the employment insurance file.

Ever since the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development made her announcement in August—without ever having discussed it in Parliament—we have heard many times during question period and in debates in the House that the changes she proposed have had the opposite effect to what the government claimed.

Many times over, my colleagues in the NDP, the Bloc Québécois and the Liberal Party have shown the government some very specific examples. They have explained how the changes the minister has proposed to the former pilot project, created by the Liberal government in 2003, were going to cause problems and discourage people from accepting additional hours of work or part-time work during the part of the year they receive EI benefits.

As the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso said, when we saw the budget in the spring and the changes described in the working while on claim pilot project, our first reaction was to commend the government. The government talked about improving the changes that had already helped employers a great deal, in my region, in New Brunswick, and across Canada. Those changes had helped workers, both men and women, to accept available work during times when a business is closed down for part of the year, or the workers' usual employment is not available, or they are on parental leave. We commended the government because at the time, we thought that it was going to increase to 50% the amount that a person could earn without suffering a dollar-for-dollar reduction in EI benefits. In August we found out we were mistaken.

In fact, what the budget said was not entirely truthful. In her announcement, the minister changed the 40% base for calculations. Previously, under the old pilot project, a person was entitled to earn up to 40% of EI benefits without any reduction. The government said it was going to increase that to 50%, but in fact, that 50% of earned income will not be deducted, dollar for dollar, from EI benefits.

As we have seen with many other policies brought in by this government, it is more likely to benefit high income earners and, in a very limited number of cases, people who earn a lot of money during

a period in which they are receiving the maximum employment insurance benefit.

In my home province of New Brunswick, like in many rural areas of Canada, people do not have the opportunity to receive the maximum amount of benefits or to work full time and earn \$600, \$700 or \$800 during a week in which they are receiving maximum EI benefits. The examples the government used to claim that it would benefit everyone really relate to people with higher earnings, who receive the maximum EI benefits and the highest incomes from part-time employment.

● (1320)

Here is a very specific example. In my riding, there is a seafood processing plant located in the town of Bouctouche. A woman called my constituency office in Shediac to explain her situation. She was stunned to learn that she was being penalized for agreeing to work half a shift. It was the only work available in Bouctouche and she was penalized as a result of the changes to the EI program.

That woman's entire income so far this year is \$7,868. Clearly, she is not a high income earner. She probably earns just a little more than minimum wage. As we all know, employment insurance is 50% of one's weekly earnings. Her weekly income, when she was working, was \$562. Since she was getting 55% of that amount, she got \$309 in EI every week when she was forced to turn to EI benefits.

This time, she was asked to work six hours and earned \$62. Under the former system, as my colleague from Cape Breton—Canso explained, she would have been allowed to earn up to 40% of her benefits—40% of \$309—or \$123.60. She could earn \$123 in wages without causing a reduction in her employment insurance benefits. Unfortunately, under the new system, the \$62 she earned by working six hours were reduced to \$31 because 50% of the \$62 was deducted from her EI. Instead of finishing up the week with \$371—her EI benefits plus the \$62 she earned—she took in \$340. As my colleague from Malpeque said, the idea of working six hours for \$31 does not make sense. These workers are often women, who have to have someone look after their children. They have daycare expenses. The cost of gasoline in my riding and throughout Canada is very high. These people travel 30 to 60 minutes to get to work.

With these changes, the government is discouraging this woman from going to work when the only work available in her area is a six-hour shift per week.

This also puts employers in my region and across Canada at a disadvantage. This does not penalize only those who receive employment insurance benefits. In fact, employers, such as Mills Seafood in Bouctouche, will have a very hard time finding employees when they have work available for a day or a day and a half a week.

Business of Supply

It is the same thing in the tourism industry, where, back home, companies operate a few weekends in November and December, to organize Christmas celebrations, for example. In this case, employees will hesitate to go work because they will be punished as a result of the harmful changes made by the current government.

The solution is simple. Instead of punishing a nurse who decides to work eight to 12 hours in a week while she is receiving parental leave benefits, the government should reinstate the old system that encouraged people to work and that helped employers find workers during certain periods of the year when it is often difficult. The changes brought in by the government will have the opposite effect of what they keep claiming. They do not understand the challenges faced by real families and small- and medium-sized businesses across Canada.

We are opposed to these changes. Other proposed changes to employment insurance worry us. We are pleased to vote in favour of this motion, because we believe that the government must do better for Canadian workers.

• (1325)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question for my colleague is about how important this issue has been and how the minister has not seemed to recognize its actual impact.

We have seen a number of our colleagues raise individual cases to provide very tangible examples so that the minister would hopefully understand the ramifications of her government's decisions.

Would the member want to comment on why it is important for people to be suggesting changes to the government with examples, particularly as the minister does not seem to understand what she is doing on this particular file?

[Translation]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Winnipeg North is absolutely right.

[English]

The minister gets up during question period time and time again. Her parliamentary secretary provides equally sad performances. They continually regurgitate talking points written by bureaucrats in an office tower in Gatineau, Quebec.

They do not understand the reality of everyday living in small town and rural communities across the country, or even in larger urban centres like Winnipeg, represented so ably by my colleague from Winnipeg North. People may be encouraged to take part-time work during the year when perhaps there is no work available when they find themselves laid-off through no fault of their own or while they are receiving the parental or compassionate leave benefit.

The minister clearly does not understand the changes she has made. She consistently reverts back to the high-income earner examples, the people receiving maximum EI benefits and working part-time for \$600 and \$700 a week. That is not the reality in many communities across this country and the minister should do better for those people than simply regurgitate lame talking points.

• (1330)

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I certainly concur with the member that the minister does not seem to understand her own project. The information we have received in the House during question period and debate shows how much misinformation there is and how contradictory the government's responses have been.

However, I do know that the Liberal member for Cape Breton—Canso was initially very positive about the working while on claim provision in May. In fact, he congratulated the minister at committee for that program. I wonder if the member could illuminate us about what has happened since May, when I think at least one Liberal member thought it was a good program.

What changes have taken place that now lead the Liberals to understand the problems with the program and the harms that are being caused to many people on EI? It is something that we have to deal with and hold the government to account for.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, like my colleague from Cape Breton—Canso, initially I thought that the changes, which were vaguely described in the budget document, were intended to increase to 50% the previous pilot project. As has been said many times, the previous pilot project allowed someone receiving EI benefits to earn the greater of either \$75 or 40% of their EI benefit, without the earnings being clawed back dollar for dollar. In the example I gave of someone making \$309 a week on employment insurance in my riding, that person would have been able to work up to 40% of that EI benefit for \$123 without a clawback.

However, that example no longer exists. The government was very deceitful in talking about an increase to 50%. It did not say that it was changing the base on which that percentage was calculated. It is not based on the amount of one's EI benefit; the government changed it to the amount of income one earned separately and apart from the EI benefit.

Therefore, if the base of the calculation is changed and the government starts clawing back earnings dollar for dollar, it perversely and severely punishes low-income earners and, of course, continues the Conservative way of benefiting the highest income earners among us. That is what they like. That is not what we like on this side of the House.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise and add a few of my thoughts to this debate and thank the member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles for introducing this motion.

This is an extremely important discussion that we are having today. As a result of this discussion, maybe we can begin to get to the bottom of why the government on the one hand is making claims that it is doing such great things for unemployed Canadians, but on the other hand the fact that a great number of Canadians, hundreds of thousands of them, will be worse off as a result of this decision.

I will be sharing my time with the member for Churchill.

Business of Supply

When the government first introduced these changes and said it would move forward with this working while on claim pilot project, it told us that the intent of the program was to decrease the amount of clawback of employment insurance, so that people who take a part-time job and are still able to claim EI are encouraged to continue to work.

It is a laudable intent and one that we support. As information about the pilot project dribbled out and we became increasingly aware of what was happening, we began to ask questions, as did many Canadians who called my office and, I am sure, the offices of the members opposite to get the details of exactly how the program would affect them.

We started to ask questions here in this chamber of the minister and the parliamentary secretary. The minister said, first of all, that the changes would affect everyone and benefit all Canadians on EI. We began to raise some discrepancies with what she was saying, and then she said it was going to help the majority of EI recipients. We started to bring more information forward, and then the minister started to change her tune again. She said that the vast majority of EI recipients would be better off as a result of this project. That is basically where the government stands.

Members may recall that I brought a case forward last week of a woman in my riding who was trying to make ends meet by picking up a few hours of work. Before this program, while on an EI claim, she was able to keep almost \$110 per week, but now that is being clawed back to \$75.

It was in such contrast to what the minister and the parliamentary secretary have been telling us here in this chamber that my staff called Service Canada to give the details of this case directly to it and to find out what the circumstances were. It was not that we did not believe our constituent who was raising the issues, but we just wanted to double check the information, because it flew in the face of the answers that we were getting here in the chamber. Service Canada employees told us that in fact what we had told them was correct, that the woman would be receiving \$35 a week less as a result of her part-time efforts.

The government states that the intent of the changes is to encourage people on EI to take part-time work, to find any employment opportunity because, as the minister said, they will feel better if they are able to work even a few hours and it might provide an opportunity for them to make connections and find a full-time job. While that is not an ideal situation, it is not completely untrue.

● (1335)

New Democrats are not opposed to this type of incentive, as long as it does not hurt people who through no fault of their own are unemployed and receiving EI. However, that is not the case. We have brought all of these cases to the attention of the minister. If the government's intent was to make things better for unemployed people, why does it not recognize that it has screwed up, made a mistake and needs to go back to the drawing board to fix the problem?

The government brought forward something that was an improvement over the old system, but rather than being to the benefit of 100% of EI claimants, it may be to the benefit of 60% at

most. Most of the unemployed, those with the lowest incomes and earning the least money, are the ones being most disadvantaged. It is wrong-headed for the government to be moving in this direction and I urge it to make a change.

The government fails to recognize that it is not just attacking the people on employment insurance but also the seasonal industries. Here I will talk about the region I come from, the Atlantic region. It is not unique, as there are seasonal industries across this country. However, in Atlantic Canada, whether it be in the fishing industry, tourism and hospitality or forestry, there are increasingly industries that fail to operate 12 months a year, particularly because of the changes in the fishing industry. Because of the move from multi-species licences to single licences, people are only able to work four, five, or maybe six months of the year. For them to stay in their communities and be able to continue to work on traps and be there the next year for the lobster season, it is important that there be some way for them to pick up part-time work.

It is also important for seasonal employers, whether it be agriculture, fishing or whatever, to draw on residents in their communities who are available to do the work. However, under this system and the other changes the government is planning to make to employment insurance, it wants to drive all of the people who support seasonal industries away from Atlantic Canada to Fort McMurray or other places where, supposedly, they may find year-round work. That is great for the industries in those areas where they are able to provide full-time work, but what about the seasonal industries that make the world turn in places like Atlantic Canada? They are not going to have the workforce to draw on. I suggest that this further penalizes Atlantic Canada and its seasonal industries and those across the country. That is wrong. This is not a one-industry country but a country with a diverse economy, and the government has to begin to recognize that.

I have some hope having witnessed the incredible opposition and the call by tens of thousands of inshore fishermen, their families and communities in the last couple of weeks to get the government to support the owner-operator fleet separation policy. The minister and the government said that they would not. They were silent. They were hesitant to support fishermen.

● (1340)

As a result of increasing pressure, they have now stood up and are supporting those fishermen. I believe that if members in the House and people from across this country recognize this problem and communicate it to the Conservatives, they will do the right thing and fix the mess they have made.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the remarks and I agree with most of what the member had to say. I will relate an example to the member, just so that people will understand how serious this is in other areas beyond just people's income. In fact, this is the most outrageous example of hurt from a government decision. I could think of nothing less than just pure stupidity in terms of its implications.

Business of Supply

I have a constituent who is on parental leave. She is a nurse. For scheduling at the hospital, she is being brought in for a four-hour shift to complete what is a normal twelve-hour shift, so she is only getting four hours of work. However, she is doing the work and it is not that much income. She is not there for the income but it keeps her skills sharp and she is in the system so when she goes back to work she will be up to speed. When she goes in for that four-hour shift she drives 40 minutes each way and she has to hire a babysitter or sometimes her mother-in-law looks after the child.

The implication for that person is that when she goes in for four hours of work she only gets paid for two, but the implication for the health care system is real in that there is a nurse who is now getting scheduled. I wonder if the member could comment on the implications going well beyond employee and employer. In this case, they impact on the health care system and it could be easily fixed.

• (1345)

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, there is no question that the changes the government would make to the employment insurance system, which is funded by employees and employers and not by the government, would create real problems for people who are unemployed and for employers who depend on a seasonal labour force being available. Increasingly, there is a casualization of work, whether it be at hospitals or with major employers, where employers are unloading full-time employees and increasingly depending on part-time employees.

If the government keeps moving in the direction it is going, there are going to be fewer people available to fill those part-time and casual jobs, and maybe those employers are going to have to move out to Alberta as well.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sana Hassainia (Verchères—Les Patriotes, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to congratulate my colleague on his speech, and I have a question for him.

The Conservatives are emphasizing the people who will benefit from the changes they are making to employment insurance. Does my colleague think this is how things will really work for the most vulnerable workers?

[English]

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, the member is right that the Conservatives are making the claim that everyone will be better off. However, what we have heard in the House, what the member has heard and what I have heard in my office in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour is that the most vulnerable people, those who are unemployed through no fault of their own who are earning the lowest amount of money, are the ones who are having their meagre earnings clawed back the most.

The lengths to which the government will go to further shift the burden onto the most vulnerable people in our communities is unbelievable. It is wrong. It is up to us to stand up and push the government back and ensure that Canadians know the government is not representing them. It is representing someone else, and we are going to be there for them.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to stand in the House to speak to the NDP opposition day motion, which truly serves to represent the many Canadians who are worried about their futures in so many sectors of our economy and communities across our country. Those Canadians are voicing that concern not just to us but also to their members of Parliament and certainly members of Parliament on the governing side.

We are seeing a government go as far as to dismantle what is a critical foundation in our country, part of our social safety net, as many call it. This foundation serves to hold us up and to hold up the kind of quality of life that we as Canadians have fought for. The fact that Canada has been known in history as being one of the best countries in the world to live in did not just happen. It is because women and men across this country have fought for it, whether for our health care system, our pension system, our education system or our employment insurance system. In one fell swoop, the government is trying to dismantle, frankly, all of these, but with the real target of employment insurance.

My colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour commented in his speech that the fundamental notion we must all respect is that employment insurance is our money, that it is Canadians' money. It is not the government's money. It is not a corporation's money. It is all of our money.

The language the current government has used to describe people who access EI, who need to use the EI fund that we helped build, is offensive and frankly it is against the kind of ideals that we believe in as Canadians. The fact is that it is there to benefit all of us when we fall on hard times or when we fall through the cracks or when we are participating in a seasonal industry, which holds up our communities and builds our regions, in the season when that industry cannot be done in the same way.

I just want to start off by speaking to the government's true agenda, whether it is on the working while on claim program or on its systematic cuts to EI both in the omnibus budget bill and overall. I want to quote a statement made by the Prime Minister in 1997:

In terms of the unemployed, of which we have over a million-and-a-half, I don't feel particularly bad for many of these people. They don't feel bad about it themselves, as long as they're receiving generous social assistance and unemployment insurance.

That jogs my memory about a very recent statement that we heard from the gentleman running for the presidency of the U.S., Mr. Mitt Romney, who talked about the 47% of Americans who do not feel sorry for themselves and that he cannot help in power.

This is the kind of language that we see republicans espouse in the country to the south of us, a kind of exclusionary, critical eye on what is really about all of us. This is not about one group of people but who we are as Canadians. We believe in these programs. We believe that these programs should exist and we believe they should be supported. That is why we all contribute to them.

Yet, the Prime Minister of our own country has made such disparaging statements.

Here is another quote, from 2009:

We do not want to make it lucrative for them to stay home and get paid for it, not when we have significant skills shortages in many parts of the country.

Statements by Members

That is a statement made by the Minister of Human Resources.

One quote after another from various ministers and from the Prime Minister himself speak to the underlying idea that employment insurance, frankly, in their minds, should not exist.

However, what they fail to say is what the alternative is for people in an economic cycle, in any economic cycle, who do fall out of work. What they fail to say is that the burden will be, first, on the unemployed themselves, on seasonal workers and on the families who depend on this work, and, second, on the provincial welfare system.

• (1350)

The reality is that the provincial welfare system would be further overloaded, as it has been due to further restrictions on employment insurance in recent years, and would be struggling to support people who will, as a result, fall further down in terms of their quality of life.

I can speak to the region of northern Manitoba that I represent. We started a petition this summer that was signed by thousands of people. Most of them come from communities that depend on seasonal work. I would invite the Prime Minister, the Minister of Human Resources and the Minister of Finance to come to my riding.

The Prime Minister came to Churchill, a community that depends on seasonal work as well. From what I understand this issue did not come up because there was no opportunity to sit down with local people to hear their concerns, to hear about the fact that entire communities depend on seasonal work and to hear the fear people have when they cannot access EI.

What will happen to the seasonal work that maintains their communities? These are not make-work projects. These are things like lake fishing, which helps to feed communities, helps to feed our country and is also part of Canada's export business.

These are things like tourism. The community of Churchill is known as the gem of the north in terms of tourism and its polar bears. The people we need to work there are seasonal workers. Here is a news flash: polar bears do not hang around northern Canada the whole time. They only stay for a while. We need people who can work when the polar bears are there for people to see them.

These are details that are being overlooked and I would like to say by chance. However, there is an insipid and systematic attack on people who do seasonal work and depend on employment insurance.

Perhaps one of the most egregious examples of seasonal work where people are very concerned about what the changes to EI will mean for them is forest firefighting. Every year communities across Canada, such as the ones I represent, are gripped by the fear and the risk that forest fires pose to them. The people we depend on most at the eleventh hour are seasonal forest firefighters. They cannot hang around to do this job all year, because most of the year is winter and we really need them in the spring and summer.

The cuts to EI and the difficulty for seasonal workers to access EI, which they have paid into, put our communities, public safety, the safety of our communities and the safety of entire regions at risk in a very real way. That is not what the role of a government should be.

We hear brash statements about the government's concern for Canada's economic growth. We also hear proud commitments to Canada's north, part of which I have the honour to represent. Yet it does not add up.

We see the attack on employment insurance. We see the attack on seasonal workers and on communities that have helped build this country, communities that are raising the next generation, communities that are helping to diversify the economy to what we ought to have in Canada. Yet the government is not at the table. It is sitting back, ready to bring down everything that we have worked for, that social safety net, that ultimate notion that we all have to be part of finding the solution in good times and bad.

Canadians have an official opposition on their side that will speak for them and work with them in calling for justice on EI and on all the issues that the government is taking the wrong path on.

I stand here proudly with my colleagues in the House on behalf of Canadians to say that we hope that the motion is supported by all of our colleagues. We hope that the government will, once and for all, stop its attack on workers in Canada and ultimately stop its attack on what we are all so proud of, the programs that we have built, the country that we have built and the future that we all hope to be able to contribute to.

• (1355)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There will be a five-minute period for questions and comments for the hon. member for Churchill when the House returns to the motion later this afternoon.

Statements by members. The hon. member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

POLICE AND PEACE OFFICERS' NATIONAL MEMORIAL DAY

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the 35th annual Police and Peace Officers' National Memorial Service took place on Parliament Hill. I want to pay tribute to the service and sacrifice of the Canadian officers who have paid the ultimate price.

Today, I stand with the families who have lost loved ones in the line of duty. With my own son being an RCMP officer, I know the sacrifice and dedication it takes to be in the force, but none know that sacrifice more personally, more profoundly or more painfully than the families and colleagues of a fallen officer.

I especially want to express my sincere condolences to the family of Constable Vincent Roy of the Bromont Police Service in Quebec who was honoured at yesterday's ceremony after being killed on December 1, 2011, during a routine traffic stop.

Last, I thank all police officers from across our great nation for ensuring that our communities and our families are safe. Through their work and dedication they make us proud.

* * *

[Translation]

NATIONAL SENIORS DAY

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is National Seniors Day. It is a day to celebrate the contributions of Canada's seniors.

Unfortunately, the Conservative government has a sad way of honouring seniors: just this year, the Prime Minister talked about the aging population as a problem that could hurt our economy. What is more, Canadians were surprised to learn that the government has decided to change the age of eligibility for old age security from 65 to 67, when experts are saying that this program is viable the way it is.

The government can do better for the financial security of seniors. The NDP disagrees with the attitude of this government, which, far too often, pits generations against one another and promotes ageism.

Whether they are part of community organizations, political associations, boards of directors or social groups, as volunteers, experienced workers or mentors, seniors make an invaluable contribution to Canadian society.

That is the message I want to send Canadians on this National Seniors Day.

* * *

●(1400)

[English]

WORLD HABITAT DAY

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today on World Habitat Day in support of Habitat for Humanity Canada.

Here in Canada, Habitat for Humanity has been working with over 50,000 volunteers to build safe, affordable homes across the country since 1985. In fact, in my riding I am happy to report that we have just finished a home in Collingwood and we are building two more in Angus.

Supported by community-minded businesses and volunteers, like the chair of its nation council, Annette Verschuren, Habitat for Humanity has lifted countless low-income partner families out of poverty and into home ownership.

In my riding of Simcoe—Grey, it is the hard work of volunteers like Fred Sproule and Iona Tough in Collingwood who know I am terrible framer from our build last year; and Susan Fitzimmons and Paul Cormier who work tirelessly for Habitat for Humanity in Alliston.

With its “hand up, not hand out” approach, Habitat for Humanity Canada and its affiliates are supporting the government's goals of empowering Canadians through the dignity and pride of home ownership.

Statements by Members

I ask everyone to please join me in celebrating World Habitat Day with Habitat for Humanity Canada and its partnership families. Thanks go out to all the generous volunteers for everything they do for Canadians.

* * *

NATIONAL SENIORS DAY

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today is National Seniors Day, a day intended to recognize the contributions made to society by seniors in every region of Canada.

While I am pleased to offer my thanks to the millions of seniors who work hard to help build Canada, I would prefer to show that appreciation.

Canadian seniors continue to struggle. Inadequate pension rates, low income thresholds, unfair clawback rules and living expenses that are increasing faster than payout rates are each contributing to less and less gold in one's golden years.

Seniors have ensured that the next generation of Canadians will inherit a better nation. Let us hope their example will finally nudge the government to start showing, not just saying, that seniors truly matter.

* * *

BRUCE GREY CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES FOUNDATION

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity today to congratulate the Bruce Grey Child and Family Services Foundation on a very successful fundraising event in my riding of Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

This past Friday night, Bruce Grey Child and Family Services, with the generous support of Bruce Power, was able to bring former Maple Leaf captain, Wendel Clark, to the riding to speak at the event. Grown men lined up like kids at a candy store to meet No. 17, or Captain Crunch, as he is affectionately known to his fans.

The event also showcased the talents of Johnny Gardhouse, a local comedian who also acted as the MC for the evening. Finally, an auction of sports memorabilia also helped to raise funds.

I am proud to say that this event raised \$26,000. This money will help support children throughout Bruce and Grey counties. A November draw on Air Canada tickets will more than double that amount.

I congratulate the foundation on a job well done. I thank all the sponsors, volunteers and attendees at this event and a very special thanks goes to Cindy Wheeler. Without her it would not have happened. Well done to all involved.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

MUNICIPAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. François Pilon (Laval—Les Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for several months now, through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, a growing number of Canadian mayors have been calling for a new agreement with Ottawa in relation to federal infrastructure programs.

I even asked a question regarding this matter last spring. The response I received at the time, as is too often the case with this government, had nothing to do with my question. So I will try again. In the city of Laval, for example, which is represented by me and three of my NDP colleagues, water treatment infrastructure needs to be improved. Furthermore, many other water filtration projects that are much cleaner and more environmentally friendly are waiting for funding for the current program to be renewed so that they can be developed on a larger scale.

I therefore urge the government to listen to our mayors and invest more in our communities instead of leaving them to fend for themselves.

* * *

• (1405)

[English]

UNIONS

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, section 2 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects freedom of speech and yet we are not forced to speak. The same section protects freedom of religion and yet we are not forced to be religious. Yet freedom of association somehow forces people to associate.

In Canada, employees in unionized workplaces are forced to pay union dues even if they do not want to join. Force and freedom are opposites but the former swallows the latter when it comes to unions. It must be so, say the union leaders, otherwise “free-loaders” would enjoy the benefits of unions without having to pay for them. What benefits? Do federal public servants benefit when their union backs separatist parties that would destroy federal jobs? Does a Jewish worker benefit when his union spends money on an Israel boycott?

I do not see the benefits, but it is not my choice. Workers should decide. Is it not time we gave them the choice?

* * *

OUTDOOR HERITAGE

Mr. Garry Breitkreuz (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's outdoor heritage is under attack again. Recently, the Shaw Media Global television network announced that it will stop airing all hunting shows on December 31 of this year. This is astonishing news given that millions of Canadians not only participate in Canada's great hunting tradition but are known to be some of the most respected leaders in wildlife conservation.

Recreational hunting in Canada contributes billions of dollars to the economy each year. Popular shows that promote the sport and educate Canadians, such as *Angler & Hunter Television*, *Canada in The Rough* and *The Canadian Tradition* have been unceremoniously pulled from the Global lineup. Many large, well-funded international

groups want to shut down not only hunting but other outdoor heritage activities as well. This unfortunate decision smacks of bias against Canada's hunting and sport shooting traditions.

As co-chair of the Outdoors Caucus, I encourage all Canadians who value Canada's traditional outdoor heritage sports to speak out against this decision. Hunting is part of our cultural fabric. We must protect it.

* * *

[Translation]

FOOD PRICES IN THE NORTH

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the privilege of representing one of the largest ridings in Canada, which means that I have a number of communities to visit.

[English]

The summer months gave me the chance to visit many of those communities in Nunavik, Eeyou Istchee, hearing their concerns firsthand. In every community I visited, the one issue raised over and over again was the price of food and the cost of living in the north. Citizens of Canada's north have seen their food prices rise tremendously since the Conservative government cancelled the food mail program without any regional consultations.

In response, over 20,000 people have joined the Feeding My Family Facebook page and northerners have held protests across the country.

[Translation]

And yet how did the government respond? With indifference, Mr. Speaker. The Prime Minister visited the north, but he ignored this problem, and the Minister of Health seems to be ignoring the issue as well.

[English]

We New Democrats believe that the north cannot reach its full potential until those who live there can get access to affordable quality food. It is time for the Conservatives to take this issue seriously and act in the best interests of northern Canadians.

* * *

MENTAL ILLNESS AWARENESS WEEK

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this week marks Mental Illness Awareness Week. It reminds us of the importance of positive mental health and its role in helping each of us to live longer healthier lives.

Statements by Members

Our government understands the importance of mental health for Canadians and their families. That is why today the Minister of Health announced important new mental health research projects. The private sector will be matching federal funds, doubling the impact this investment can have.

Every budget we have tabled since we formed government has invested significantly in mental health research and promotion. We established the Mental Health Commission of Canada. The commission recently released a strategy that is a resource for all levels of government, industry and the volunteer sector on how we can improve mental health in our country. We have invested more than \$319 million in mental health research since 2006.

Through research, we are addressing the inequities in aboriginal health and developing a national network of patient-focused depression research and intervention centres.

Mental Illness Awareness Week presents an opportunity to consider how each of us can promote positive mental health in our daily lives and support those who are affected by mental illness.

* * *

100TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, constituents throughout my riding of Hamilton Centre have recently had the good fortune to participate in 100th anniversary celebrations, not just once, not even twice, but three times this past month.

Early last month, I was pleased to attend the 100th anniversary of the founding of St. Stanislaus Church. St. Stans continues to provide spiritual leadership and guidance and is a cornerstone of the Polish community in Hamilton.

Last week also saw the 100th anniversary of the ArcelorMittal Dofasco Hamilton operations. Anyone who knows anything about Hamilton knows the important role that steel and ArcelorMittal Dofasco have played in the development and history of our city.

Finally, this past weekend I joined with Cathedral High School as it celebrated a century of excellence. The full weekend of events brought former staff and students back to the school and highlighted Cathedral High School's many significant achievements.

I congratulate these three outstanding organizations on their historic anniversaries and I wish them all another 100 years of success.

* * *

● (1410)

[Translation]

POLICE AND PEACE OFFICERS' NATIONAL MEMORIAL DAY

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Saint Boniface, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the 35th Canadian Police and Peace Officers' Annual Memorial Service was held yesterday.

I am honoured to pay tribute to the lives, service and sacrifices of these Canadian police officers who have given their lives in the line of duty.

Police and peace officers play an important role in keeping our streets and communities safe.

[English]

More than 820 officers have had their names engraved on the honour roll in the Memorial Pavilion just steps away from the House. Every year, all Canadians hope that no more names will be added to this memorial. Unfortunately, this was not that year.

I would like to pay tribute to Constable Vincent Roy of the Bromont Quebec Police Service who gave his life last December. Our thoughts are with the Roy family and the families of all those who have given their lives in the line of duty. On behalf of our government, we would like them to know that we are forever grateful for the lives, the service and sacrifice of their loved ones.

For our currently serving police and peace officers across the country and serving abroad, I express my deep gratitude for their dedication to keeping our families safe and making our communities better places to live.

Stay safe.

* * *

RAYLENE RANKIN

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today with a heavy heart. Raylene Rankin, of the internationally acclaimed Cape Breton musical family, the Rankins, died yesterday morning after a long and courageous battle with cancer.

Raylene and her siblings, Cookie, Heather, Jimmy and the late John Morris, were at the forefront of a resurgence of an entire culture when they took Cape Breton Celtic music mainstream about two decades ago.

However, that is not her only legacy. Raylene was, who we are as Cape Bretoner, and she showed that resilience with the personal strength she displayed in her fight with this incredibly cruel disease. Raylene's signature song as a vocalist was the Cape Breton anthem *Rise Again*. When she sang it, she brought a lump to our throats and she made us all stand taller as Cape Bretoners.

I am proud to have called Raylene a friend and I know there is a beautiful voice in Heaven's choir today.

On behalf of myself, Cape Bretoners everywhere and the entire House, I offer my deepest condolences to Raylene's husband, Colin; her son, Alexander; and her entire family.

* * *

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a great day. October marks Women's History Month. This year's theme "Strong Girls, Strong Canada: Leaders From the Start" focuses on the historic contribution of girls in the same month as the first annual International Day of the Girl.

Oral Questions

From Girl Guides to hockey players and from entrepreneurs to artists, girls have truly been and continue to be leaders from the start. There is also a growing recognition around the world that support for girls and their basic human rights is the key for healthy communities. In other words, strong girls will help build a strong Canada that is safe, innovative, economically prosperous and a leader around the world.

During Women's History Month, we honour Canadian girls, past and present, who have done incredible work across all communities, taking on great challenges and opening doors so that others may follow.

I encourage everyone to participate in their communities. There is much to learn about the achievements of Canadian girls, past and present.

* * *

PARLIAMENT OF CANADA

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Parliament is a very old institution with very old traditions and we all have the responsibility of ensuring the standards of this institution. For example, it is very unparliamentary for one MP to call another MP a liar and yet we see in the 41st Parliament how there has been a serious slide where it has become not only okay to lie in Parliament and okay to repeat the lie in Parliament but somehow unparliamentary to call the lie for what it is.

Therefore, we end up with backbenchers who, instead of talking about the work they should be doing for their communities, believe that if they repeat a lie often enough people will start to believe it.

Canadians are smarter than this and the New Democrats will push back against a lie because it does not matter how much carbon they put on it, how often they use the word "tax" or how many Commies they think are under their beds, the parliamentary lie is not only undemocratic and unparliamentary but it is un-Canadian.

* * *

•(1415)

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me take a few moments to set the facts right and remind all Canadians what the NDP members opposite have said about their plans with respect to a job-killing carbon tax.

The NDP leader said, of course, that he has "a cap-and-trade system that...will produce billions"; the member for Edmonton—Strathcona said, "We've taken the stance that the most important thing is to put the right price on carbon"; and the NDP House leader remarked, "...the point of the exercise is putting a price on carbon". Of course, we have all seen the NDP platform, where they clearly outlined their plan to raise \$21 billion in revenue with their job-killing carbon tax. When it comes to their support for a job-killing carbon tax, the NDP members opposite can run from it, but they cannot hide from it.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

FOOD SAFETY

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, with regard to the tainted meat issue, the Minister of Agriculture told the House that no tainted products had made it to store shelves. Yet people are sick because of this tainted meat.

The minister also said that no cuts were made to food inspection, but his own documents reveal that cuts were made to funding and staff.

Why did the Conservatives not take the tainted meat issue seriously?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadian consumers are still the top priority when it comes to food safety.

The Minister of Agriculture will continue to hold those responsible for food safety accountable in order to ensure that the CFIA responds quickly and effectively.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, how could the minister claim that tainted meat had not made it to grocery store shelves? That is the question.

How could he put Canadians in danger by telling the opposite of the truth?

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency's 2012-13 report on plans and priorities is clear: \$46.6 million in cuts were made over two years and 314 employees were laid off.

The minister must stop claiming that no cuts were made. There have been cuts.

Does the minister not realize what a serious impact his cuts will have on the health of Canadian consumers?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I repeat: the Minister of Agriculture will continue to hold those responsible for food safety accountable in order to ensure that the CFIA responds quickly and effectively.

[English]

Let us be clear. Under this government we have actually seen an increase in inspectors. We have actually seen 700 food inspectors added to the roll since 2006, including 170 particular to the subject of meat inspection.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, why are the Conservatives continuing to claim there are no cuts when their own financial documents say just the opposite? Are their financial documents not accurate?

This is the same minister who mishandled the listeriosis outbreak in 2008, and joked about "death by a thousand....cold cuts". It was not funny then, and it is not funny now. Is this the best they have to offer Canadians who are worried whether the food they are giving their kids is safe?

Oral Questions

The minister stands in the House and keeps making misleading statements. Will there be no accountability for this new tainted meat scandal?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the House the Minister of Agriculture is working very hard and is working sincerely to ensure that this issue is dealt with appropriately, including ensuring we have more food inspectors, more meat inspectors.

It goes further than that. We have new legislation that has been introduced, safe food for Canadians, to help CFIA respond to food safety situations quickly.

What has happened? When we have tried to do this, made new investments, brought new legislation forward to improve safety for Canadians, that leader and that party have opposed it all the way.

• (1420)

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is simple. Canadians want safe food for their families, and it is the Minister of Agriculture's job to make sure they protect it.

September 3 was the first positive test for E. coli, yet it was not until September 26 that the XL plant in question had its licence suspended. Here we are, with 12 beef recall notices encompassing 1.9 million pounds of suspect E. coli-contaminated beef.

Why did the Conservatives' new regulations not work to protect Canadians? Will the Conservatives now admit that self-regulation does not work?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I must point out that this member has no credibility on this issue.

Earlier last week, this member said that there were no CFIA inspectors in the plant. This was untrue; there were 46 CFIA inspectors at the XL plant. That is a 20% increase over what there was three years ago.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us be clear. It is the government's cuts and policies of self-regulation that have failed.

In this case, XL failed to protect food safety. By the time the CFIA inspectors got involved, the contamination had spun out of control.

Yesterday, CFIA's director of meat programs division called this "an unprecedented situation". He is right.

When will the Conservative government start taking responsibility for its failed policies?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to reinforce that Canadian consumers are always a top priority for this government when it comes to food safety. The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food is very much on top of this file, and he is holding CFIA's feet to the fire to ensure that it responds quickly and effectively.

The truth of the matter is that our party, our government, has put forward legislation to increase funding to the CFIA by \$150 million over the last two budgets. That party has voted against it. We have hired an additional 700 net new inspectors.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, perhaps one could ask the question: When was the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food informed of the problems at the XL plant?

If the Canadian consumer is so much at the forefront of the government's concern, can the government please explain why it was that the Canadian consumer in Alberta and elsewhere was not informed for a full two weeks by the Government of Canada with respect to the problems at XL?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Liberal Party was in the House and he knows that the minister has held officials accountable with respect to this issue. The minister has been working throughout this process to ensure that we have more food safety capacity.

We have more legislation now. We have more investment directly into the issue of having more inspectors. We have increased the CFIA's budget by \$156 million during our time in government. There are more front-line workers and more safety for Canadians.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, also there are at least nine people who have been infected by E. coli, including a young girl who had an operation because her kidneys stopped working. That is the issue that the government has to come to terms with.

We had this long body of explanation from CFIA; we have the protestations by ministers; but we still have two hard realities. For a long period of time, a long period of silence, Canadian consumers were not informed; and the minister has not told us when he knew about the problem at XL. Those are the facts.

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our thoughts are certainly with anyone affected by this issue, and I know that is where the minister is concerned first and foremost. That is why we have continued to put consumers first when it comes to the priority of food safety. That is why we have invested more money when it comes to the subject of food safety—more money, more inspectors and more attention to detail.

I know that the minister will continue to have his attention on this file.

• (1425)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if the government puts consumers first, then why were they the last to find out that there was a problem? Consumers are the ones who ate the tainted meat. The problem is that we have tainted meat and a government that does not respond to the consumers that it claims to protect.

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will repeat that the priority for Canada is to focus on this issue and improve the system.

Oral Questions

[English]

This is the very reason we have made these investments. During our time in government, considerable money was put directly to the issue of food inspection. That is why a recent OECD report ranked Canada as among the best performing countries in the world when it came to food safety performance. That is why we will continue to make these important investments to address any and all safety concerns. That is where the minister is working and that is where he will continue to work to improve safety.

* * *

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, instead of reining in ministers' extravagant spending, the Conservatives decided to make cuts to food inspection, air safety, marine rescue centres and our border services. Their cuts are targeting services that are essential to the safety of Canadians, the very services that a responsible government usually provides to the public.

Why are the Conservatives rejecting their responsibility to protect Canadians?

[English]

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and for Western Economic Diversification, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as was clearly shown in Canada's economic action plan 2012, we found fair, balanced and moderate savings measures to reduce the deficit. Overall, the savings we found represent less than 2% of program spending. These savings will be implemented over a three-year period, so full savings will not be realized until 2014-2015. Departments continue to communicate with unions and those who are affected.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, New Democrats were proud to vote against these reckless Conservative cuts. Unlike the government, we will vote to protect the services that keep Canadians safe.

The Conservatives voted to cut airline safety, to cut food safety, to cut search and rescue centres, to cut the Coast Guard, to cut border services. Why are Conservatives cutting front line services that keep our families safe? How can they celebrate deregulation on the same day Canadians are getting sick from tainted meat?

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and for Western Economic Diversification, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned, economic action plan 2012 is our plan for jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. An important part of that plan is returning to a balanced budget through fair, balanced and moderate savings measures. We have outlined some of those savings measures in the budget. Departments will continue to receive communications, unions will continue to receive communications and employees affected will also continue to receive communications.

[Translation]

FOOD SAFETY

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for months we have been telling the Conservatives that food safety is not negotiable. Their response has been to claim that the budget cuts have no impact and that E. coli contamination is not serious. The Conservatives are the ones who accelerated the food inspection process last spring. Why? To save money.

It is not complicated: does the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food understand the consequences of the budget cuts for food safety?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us look at the facts: since 2006, we have hired more than 700 food inspectors, including 170 meat inspectors. That is more than before. Under the latest budget we brought down in the House, the CFIA's budget will increase by \$150 million, and the NDP voted against those measures.

* * *

[English]

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government's decision to close the Kitsilano Coast Guard station is causing great worry, but the Minister of Canadian Heritage blames those who voice concern, attacking the mayor of Vancouver, claiming, "He has never phoned me...never contacted the prime minister". In fact, Mayor Robertson did write to the Prime Minister in June. He complained about the lack of consultation and how these cuts might hurt lifesaving search and rescue efforts.

Instead of blaming local officials, when will somebody on that side take responsibility?

● (1430)

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I assure the member that the top priority of our Canadian Coast Guard is the safety of mariners and that the Canadian Coast Guard will continue to provide safe and effective search and rescue services in Vancouver. We have reorganized or are planning to reorganize the search and rescue network of resources. When we put in place the new hovercraft and the inshore rescue boat station and strengthen partnerships with the Royal Canadian search and rescue, we are confident we will have the necessary resources in place to provide the service we need.

[Translation]

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, another example of an irresponsible budget cut is the closure of the search and rescue centre in Quebec City. This centre responds to roughly 1,500 maritime distress calls a year and it is the only centre that provides bilingual service in Canada.

Oral Questions

In his report, the Commissioner of Official Languages clearly states that there is a risk that distress calls made in French will not be handled properly if they are handled in Halifax or Trenton.

Why risk the safety of fishers, mariners and boaters by closing the Quebec City search and rescue centre?

[English]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we have said many times before, we are doing this transition and consolidation of the sub-centre into Trenton very carefully and ensuring we have the necessary linguistic services. We are confident that we will be able to do that. That is why we are going slowly, though. We have already done the other one. This will not be until next spring, to ensure we do have the necessary services in place.

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AIRLINE SAFETY

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Conservatives' budget cuts to airline safety are putting Canadians at risk. The Auditor General reported one out of three air safety inspections were not being done because there were not enough inspectors to do the job. The Conservatives plan to cut another \$9 million from aviation safety programs in the coming year. These cuts would increase the safety risk of Canadian air passengers. How does the minister justify these risky cuts when air traffic is increasing?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is false. We do not have cuts in inspectors. Security and safety are very important.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, considering the relevance of the minister's answers, I must insist.

Last spring, the Auditor General was clear: the civil aviation inspection system contains some serious flaws, and Transport Canada has no plan to improve its monitoring program. These flaws could put the safety of millions of travellers at risk. What is the Conservatives' solution? To cut Transport Canada's budget even further. It is completely absurd and, frankly, very, very dangerous.

Can the Conservatives explain to us how cutting services will translate into enhanced safety for passengers?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, those statements are completely unfounded and are meant to scare people, which the NDP has a tendency to do.

Aviation safety is extremely important to our government. We are regarded as a model in many parts of the world. Many organizations, such as the pilots association and COPA, praise the Canadian system. We do not want to engage in fearmongering, but rather to find solutions. That is what we are doing.

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, instead of strengthening the border, increasing efficiency, the government decided to cut and slash border services to Canadians. It is cutting front-line border officer jobs, including 40 intelligence officers, and the detector dog programs.

When we cut \$143 million from border services, we get thickening of the border, longer wait times and an open invitation for organized crime to enter and exist Canada.

Why is the government risking the public safety of Canadians in border towns? Why is it watching all our jobs be lost by thickening of the border and longer wait times at the border?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, since coming to office, our government has increased front-line border officers by 26%. We have taken steps to make the border faster and more efficient for law-abiding Canadians.

However, what I can tell members is the continuous opposition to working together with our American partners in order to ensure that criminals and other undesirables do not enter into our North American perimeters is in fact delaying matters.

I would ask that member to consider his own constituency instead of continually speaking against his own interests.

● (1435)

[Translation]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would invite the minister to come to my riding to see first-hand that the numbers he just gave are not at all effective.

Budget cuts have consequences. Ignoring the problems, as the Conservatives are doing, will not make them go away. What did this government do for border security? It cut \$143 million from our customs budget. This translates into the following: more crime in border communities, increased risk that our children will come into contact with drugs, and more illegal weapons on our streets—all contributing to a more dangerous Canada.

Can the Conservatives tell us why they have walked away from their responsibility to protect border communities?

[English]

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me repeat. Since coming to office, our government has increased front-line border officers by 26%.

Oral Questions

When we bring in legislation to toughen up our laws in order to ensure that criminals, in fact, dangerous and violent criminals, spend time behind bars, that member stands and votes against it.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, twice last week the human resource minister told the House that anybody collecting EI benefits and working while on claim would lose every cent they earned after \$75.00, which is patently wrong.

I gave her a little quiz, a true or false. She did not do that well. Today, I am going to try a multiple choice.

The minister's answers have been wrong because: (a) she does not know her files; (b) she does not care about her files; (c) her answers are tactically misleading; or (d) all of the above?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I suggest the hon. member get with the times.

We are focused on helping connect Canadians with the jobs that are out there. We have employers right across the country, even in areas of high unemployment, looking for skills and labour. We are trying to connect Canadians with those jobs through advancing and multiplying our job alerts program, through broadening the job bank.

I do not understand why the NDP is so focused on the past when we are trying to help Canadian build a future for them and their families.

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last week the minister responsible for employment insurance was non-committal regarding the future of the employment insurance program for fishers.

Given the frightening experience that people are having with the government's working while on a claim program, fishers are justifiably concerned that the government will gut the employment insurance program to which they are having access.

Will the minister confirm that the Conservative government has no plans to change any part of the employment insurance program that the fishers now access, today or in the future?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am not quite sure where the hon. member was last week if she did not hear me say that the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and I had spoken on this at length. There are no changes to the EI fishers program.

That being said, they are beneficiaries of the EI program, which does require that for the right to access EI benefits, people have a responsibility to be actively looking for work. We expect all claimants to be doing that and to accept reasonable work within their geographic area if it is offered to them while they are on claim.

* * *

SERVICE CANADA

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Prince Edward Island is the only province without a passport office. Prince Edward Island is the only province without a citizenship and

immigration office. Prince Edward Island is the only province without a district office to serve veterans. Prince Edward Island is the only province with no counter service at Revenue Canada. Prince Edward Island will be one province severely punished by changes to employment insurance.

Would it be too much to ask for someone, anyone in the cabinet over there, to stand up to the Prime Minister and defend Prince Edward Island?

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member should know, the island is currently being serviced by five locations of Service Canada. Islanders can apply for passports at each one of those locations.

* * *

• (1440)

[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this morning, the Minister of Foreign Affairs took advantage of his time in New York City to lambaste the United Nations.

This comes on the heels of Canada being the last western country to repatriate an inmate from Guantanamo Bay. The return of Omar Khadr was inevitable, but the Conservatives dragged their feet and tried to score political points at the expense of our relationship with the United States.

How does attacking the United Nations and alienating our main ally serve the interests of Canadians?

[English]

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member should know by now, Canada's policy is no longer to please every dictator with a vote at the United Nations. We have taken a strong, principled position to promote freedom, human rights and the rule of law and we will continue to do so.

The member may have heard the Minister of Foreign Affairs make his address to the UN General Assembly this morning, where he said:

Our commitment to the United Nations has been tested and is proven. Not in spite of our commitment, but because of our commitment to this body, we cannot and will not participate in endless, fruitless inward-looking exercises.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, finger wagging at the UN and alienating our closest ally is a heck of a way to get along with our closest ally, the United States—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Ottawa Centre has the floor. The parliamentary secretary needs to come to order.

The hon. member for Ottawa Centre.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, I know it is a sensitive issue for the Conservatives because they are not representing our interests on the world stage.

Conservatives delayed Mr. Khadr's case for years at a great cost to taxpayers. The government admitted that the U.S. pressured Canada to stop dragging its heels. Secret American documents were leaked, a serious breach of trust.

How is mishandling the Omar Khadr case and alienating the U.S. good for Canadians' interests with our U.S. friends and our reputation on the world stage?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me be clear. The Government of Canada was not in possession of the transcript of the interview that was leaked and did not create one. Access to this material was strictly controlled in Canada. I can assure the House that Canadian officials did not leak this material.

What I can also say is that the transfer of Omar Khadr occurred following a process initiated by the American government and conducted in accordance with Canadian law. It did not include consideration of foreign relations.

* * *

[Translation]

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we can all agree that dysfunctional diplomatic relations are just one example of the Conservatives' mismanagement on the world stage.

Aid to the poorest countries in the world is another example. Now the Conservatives are cutting funding to a school in Kandahar, Afghanistan. For the past five years, women have been risking their lives to attend their classes and at the last minute, the United States had to step in to save the school.

Why are the Conservatives turning their backs on female students in Afghanistan?

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadian taxpayers' investments through CIDA continue to deliver real results for the people of Afghanistan most in need. Canadians are proud to align Canada's development efforts toward the full participation of Afghan women and girls in building their country. Afghanistan's last instalment has not yet been fully exhausted.

In all projects a sustainability plan is top priority for CIDA so that the organization may continue to deliver results independently.

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, development is about being there for the long haul, not paying lip service to talking points.

Education—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou has the floor.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Mr. Speaker, education is the signature project in Afghanistan, but the government is reneging on it. The fact of the matter is that the minister had an option to renew the funding but chose not to.

Oral Questions

I have a simple question. Why are the Conservatives abandoning what was supposed to be Canada's legacy in Afghanistan?

• (1445)

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the simple answer is that we are focusing Canadian taxpayers' investments where they can have the greatest impact for those most in need in Afghanistan.

* * *

[Translation]

SENIORS

Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today, we are celebrating the second annual National Seniors Day. The government created this special day to officially recognize and celebrate our seniors and all that they have done to make Canada a great country.

[English]

Could the Minister of State for seniors please tell the House what other action our government has taken to support seniors, who so richly deserve it.

Hon. Alice Wong (Minister of State (Seniors), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has been working hard to increase access to services and benefits for seniors while promoting ways for them to stay active, engaged and informed. However, there is more.

We have increased funding for the new horizons program, taken action against elder abuse, increased the GIS by biggest amount in 25 years, and put OAS on a long-term sustainable path.

Our government is standing up for seniors and we will continue to do so.

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for two weeks now, the Minister of Human Resources has been repeating that no Canadian will be penalized by her employment insurance reform, but we know that this is not true. Part-time and seasonal workers are still the victims of the minister's ill-advised reform. This time, the Conservatives are directly attacking unemployed workers through the working while on claim program.

Does the minister hear the public outcry and will she put an end to this vindictive reform?

Oral Questions

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is a shortage of workers across the country. Employers need skilled workers. We are there to connect unemployed workers with jobs that are available in their skills range in their geographic area. We are trying to ensure that unemployed workers are better off when they work part-time while receiving employment insurance benefits.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, with the minister's proposed changes, employment insurance claimants who find part-time work will have less money in their pockets. Once again, it is the poorest Canadians who will be hit the hardest.

The Conservatives announced \$130 million over one year for this project and then, in the end, they cut that amount in half and extended the funding over two years. And they have the nerve to say that this is not a budget cut.

Why do the Conservatives refuse to help unemployed workers and to come up with a real plan for job creation?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over 770,000 jobs have been created in Canada since 2009. That is the truth. However, there is still a shortage of workers. That is why it is very important to connect unemployed workers with employers who have jobs available in their geographic region. That is what we are doing by improving the job alert program and promoting contact through the temporary foreign workers program. We are encouraging people to work.

[English]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, two sides of the country, two different stories from two different Conservatives.

In May, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans claimed that the goal of EI reforms was not to force Atlantic Canadians to move away from their home communities, but then last week the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources went to Alberta and said that the goal of the changes was to force unemployed people to relocate.

Why should Canadians trust the government when its story changes according to where its audience lives?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has been very clear that we are not requiring people to relocate across the country to find a job.

In the past, this country was built on people moving to where the jobs were. However, we are making sure that if people cannot find a job in their skills range in their geographic area, employment insurance will be there for them, just as it always has been.

We believe that the best way to help the unemployed is to help them get a job. That is why we are increasing the information they get about jobs in their skills range in their geographic area.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to see the minister backtrack from the comments of her parliamentary secretary, because there is no shame in making a

mistake. The only shame is in failing to acknowledge it and correct it.

For days now, we in the NDP have been bringing to the House cases where working while on claim has been detrimental to the lowest income Canadians.

Will the minister do the same thing again and stand up in the House today and say there was an error in the program design and correct it here today?

• (1450)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our goal is to make sure that EI claimants who work while on claim are always better off working than not. That is what this program does.

Quite frankly, we are always working to make sure that our programs fulfill a goal. However, what the NDP has been putting forward, not just for several days but for several years now, is the notion that we should move to a 45-day work year.

That is unacceptable because we have skills and labour shortages right across this country, even in areas of high unemployment. We need to help Canadians get connected with the jobs that are available for them right there at home.

* * *

SENIORS

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government claims that chipping away at the OAS, the cornerstone of our pension system, will somehow help future seniors. This regressive plan is brought to us by the same minister who says that cutting EI will somehow help the unemployed.

Slashing pensions to help the elderly and cutting health transfers to help the sick is no way to pay tribute to the people who built this country.

Canada's seniors are a hardworking bunch and we all know that, but now they are worried both for their future and the future of their children. When are these attacks on our seniors and our most vulnerable going to stop?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member does have her facts completely backward. It is our government, unlike the Liberals when they were in power, that has actually increased health transfers to the provinces by 6% a year. The Liberals slashed \$25 billion from transfers to the provinces.

We are the ones who are making a difference for seniors by lowering their taxes and increasing their exemptions. Unfortunately, the Liberals voted against all of that help for our seniors. We will continue to provide it in spite of them.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

AFGHANISTAN

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives showed their true colours when they eliminated funding for the Afghan Canadian Community Centre in Kandahar, a school for young Afghan women. Last year they were saying wonderful things about the school; now they are abandoning this initiative, which has reduced poverty and offered hope to young Afghan women. The United States government, which is more enlightened than the Conservatives, is keeping its school open.

How can the Conservatives abandon young Afghan women after all our soldiers' work and sacrifices?

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the reality is that Canadians want to see the Afghan people succeed in their struggle to become a free and democratic society.

Canadian taxpayers' investments through CIDA are achieving results. A couple of examples include the 1,400 health care workers trained and the 7.8 million children vaccinated against polio.

We will take the necessary steps to ensure that the sacrifice of our Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan have not been in vain and we remain committed to helping the Afghan people.

* * *

[Translation]

SENIORS

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is National Seniors Day. Unfortunately, many seniors have nothing to celebrate because the Conservatives are making seniors shoulder the burden of their cost-cutting measures. The Conservatives have raised the eligibility age for old age security from 65 to 67, reduced provincial health transfers, and the list goes on.

Can the minister tell us why the Conservatives have chosen to cut services to seniors?

[English]

Hon. Alice Wong (Minister of State (Seniors), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to supporting seniors.

We have taken action, including the biggest GIS increase in a quarter century. Our low-tax plan has helped remove almost 400,000 seniors from the tax rolls completely. There is additional funding for affordable housing for seniors, increased funding for the new horizons for seniors program, and we continue increasing awareness of elder abuse and have introduced legislation to ensure there are tough sentences for those who abuse seniors.

I would like to encourage Canadians to visit seniors.gc.ca as a resource to help guide them to the services and benefits they deserve.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, very few of the government's recent decisions will help seniors. Furthermore, I would like to add that increasing the

eligibility age for old age security is equivalent to cutting services for seniors. I can understand why the minister would be ashamed to talk about it today because this is National Seniors Day.

As for employment insurance reform, she is causing us to fear the worst for older workers who lose their jobs.

• (1455)

[English]

These workers will have to accept lower pay or work far from home. Why will the Conservatives not help seniors who want to keep working?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what we are doing, and the NDP is opposing every single step we take to make sure that happens.

The NDP opposed increasing the guaranteed income supplement, the largest increase in 25 years, destined for the poorest of our seniors. The NDP opposed increasing the age exemption, not once but twice. The NDP opposed pension income splitting for seniors.

The NDP opposes everything we are doing to help seniors keep more money in their pockets and to keep our labour market alive and well.

* * *

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP has a plan to impose a carbon tax that would raise the price of everything and hurt the Canadian economy and job growth.

The NDP's \$21 billion cap-and-tax scheme would punish job creators, raise the price of gasoline and diesel, and essentially tax everything made in Canada.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans please inform the House how the NDP's hidden tax agenda will punish fishing communities in Canada?

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague raises a very good point. In fact it is shameful that the NDP is targeting Canada's fishermen with its carbon tax plan.

Fishermen have told our government that it is a tough business, and we agree with them. The NDP wants to increase their fuel costs even more. It just does not make sense.

What does make sense is our government's unequivocal support for fishermen. For example, under the economic action plan, we contribute to jobs, growth and economic prosperity by investing in hundreds of fishing harbours across the country.

The NDP carbon tax would keep fishermen down while our government builds them and their harbours up.

*Oral Questions***NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this question is for the Minister for Status of Women, the Minister of Public Works and the acting minister of defence.

Was she aware that in 2006 the air force submitted a statement of requirements that was based on inadequate information and stilted in favour of F-35? Further, was she aware when she was used in a 2010 photo op that the F-35 program was in deep trouble?

Now that she is effectively the acting minister of defence for procurement, will she require the air force to resubmit its statement of requirements?

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member knows that we have an ongoing process in place right now.

The National Fighter Procurement Secretariat has been set up in order to ensure the level of transparency that we believe is necessary and the level of due diligence that has been asked for by the Auditor General, while we make our decision to replace the CF-18s.

At this point, no funding has been spent on the purchase of any new aircraft and no money will be spent until the secretariat independently verifies the costs necessary to replace our aging CF-18s.

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[*Translation*]**HOUSING**

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, the entire world is recognizing World Habitat Day, but there are no celebrations here in Canada.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is imposing excessive penalties on housing co-operatives that need to finance renovation work. The CMHC wants the Village Canadien Housing Co-op in Winnipeg to pay an additional \$5.5 million. The Mondragon co-operative in Brampton, Ontario, is being asked to pay an additional \$140,000.

Why do the Conservatives not allow housing co-operatives to figure things out for themselves instead of standing in their way?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the CMHC has been doing exactly that for many years. It has been supporting affordable housing co-operatives across the country. We provide support for more than 600,000 affordable housing units, including co-operatives. We will continue to work with them to ensure that they are successful.

* * *

[*English*]**SMALL BUSINESS**

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, small business organizations estimate that unnecessary red tape costs the Canadian economy \$30 billion every year, costs

paid by small business owners that hinder their ability to grow their business and create jobs.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and for Western Economic Diversification tell this House what steps our government is taking so that small businesses can focus on filling orders and not filling out government forms?

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and for Western Economic Diversification, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government was elected with a mandate to keep Canada's economy a world leader in growth and job creation. Red tape inhibits economic growth and job creation. That is why our government is proud to launch the red tape reduction action plan, one of the most ambitious regulatory modernizations in the world that addresses systemic reforms and some 90 specific changes that would provide common sense solutions to bureaucratic irritants that affect everything from tax and payroll to labour, transport and trade.

While our government is reducing unnecessary burdens and expenses on small businesses, the NDP wants to impose a—

● (1500)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a report from Public Safety Canada indicates that the number of aboriginal women behind bars has skyrocketed. Aboriginal women make up one-third of the prison population despite being just 4% of the Canadian population. The report notes that these women will not receive the attention nor the resources needed to address the multiple issues that they are facing.

How long will aboriginal women have to wait for the minister to address this crisis?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, our criminal justice system does not target anyone from any racial group. What it does do is target criminals.

To suggest, as the member has, that the police are going out and targeting aboriginal women, is simply shameful.

Our government is committed to taking concrete steps on some of the personal issues that our prisoners have. The issues of mental health, access to treatment services for inmates and the training for staff have all improved as a result of the leadership of this government.

Routine Proceedings

[Translation]

ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on September 26, 2012, at the Charbonneau commission, all of Quebec saw a video showing that builders had ties to the Mafia. Although the RCMP has had overwhelming evidence since at least 2004, these builders continued to prosper for years without any worries about the police.

How is it that the RCMP did not submit its evidence to Quebec's police force after the Colisée investigation? Was it incompetence, negligence, political interference? Could the Minister of Public Safety respond—

The Speaker: The Minister of Public Safety.

[English]

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will not comment on any particular investigation involving the RCMP, but our government does take corruption and white collar crime very seriously. That is why we have taken strong actions, such as ending early parole for those convicted of white collar crimes.

I would point out that the Charbonneau inquiry is within the jurisdiction of the province of Quebec and it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any matter currently before it.

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PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Hon. Judith Guichon, Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

TABLING OF DOCUMENT

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to give the Minister of Canadian Heritage an opportunity to correct the record.

The Speaker: Order, please. If you are asking for unanimous consent to table a document, I will hear that.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Mr. Speaker, I have the letter from the City of Vancouver, as well as the Prime Minister's response to that letter. If I could enter that into the—

The Speaker: Order, please. Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to table this document?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

An hon. member: No.

[English]

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS**COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE**

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Orders 104 and 114, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 30th report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs regarding membership on committees of this House. If the House gives its consent, I intend to move concurrence in the 30th report later today.

* * *

● (1505)

CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-445, An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act (genetic characteristics).

She said: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca for seconding this bill today. I also thank the former member for Burnaby—Douglas, Bill Siksay, who first brought this very important issue before Parliament when he was a member of Parliament. I also thank the Coalition for Genetic Fairness which has done a tremendous amount of work to bring forward this very important issue about Canadians who have genetic diseases and who often face discrimination.

The bill has a simple purpose. It would enact an amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act to add genetic characteristics as a prohibited grounds of discrimination.

Many people may think that this is not something that affects a lot of people but it does. There are very real cases of people who have experienced discrimination from insurance policies or different kinds of disability policies based on their genetic history.

Now that we live in a day and age where we can have genetic testing, this becomes an even more important issue. It is very important and timely that we have a debate in Parliament about the issue of genetic discrimination and we look to this particular amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act as a way of giving people the valuable protection they need as we do for all Canadians.

I hope when this bill comes forward for debate that members will engage in that debate and understand the seriousness of this issue.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the House gives its consent, I move that the 30th report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, presented to the House earlier today, be concurred in.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to propose this motion?

Routine Proceedings

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions among the parties and I believe if you sought it you would find unanimous consent for the following motion:

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Charlesbourg-Haute-Saint-Charles, all questions necessary to dispose of the motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to Tuesday, October 2, 2012, at the expiry of the time provided for Government Orders.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Hull—Aylmer have the unanimous consent of the House to propose the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

[*English*]

PETITIONS

ARTICLES FOR THE BLIND

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions to present today. The first petition has been signed by many constituents concerning the supply of articles for blind individuals.

E-PETITIONS

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is in support of a motion I have currently tabled before the House concerning e-petitions. The e-petitions motion sets out to increase democratic participation across Canada, which is currently at an all-time low, by giving Canadians better access to the petitioning process. Of course, if 50,000 signatures were gained on an electronic petition, it would trigger an automatic debate in the House of one hour.

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present four petitions.

The first petition deals with the issue of alleged election fraud in an effort to mislead voters through robocalls. The petitioners mostly come from within my riding from the community of Mayne Island and they call for a public inquiry.

● (1510)

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition comes from residents of the Vancouver area calling for a legislated tanker ban to protect the coast of British Columbia from bitumen and crude spills.

The third petition is related to the northern gateway pipeline project and it comes from residents of British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec. The petitioners urge the government to drop its lopsided approach to this and actually have full hearings.

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the fourth petition is from residents of my communities of Saanich—Gulf Islands. The petitioners call for the reform of our first past the post voting system to one that will ensure that every Canadian's vote counts.

VISITOR VISAS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I bring forward a petition in regard to visitor visas where individuals are asking for the government to recognize the importance of weddings, graduations, birthdays, funerals and other types of family gatherings, and that we need to do more to allow for family members to visit with their families during these special celebrations and beyond.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present signatures from hundreds of people calling upon the Government of Canada to enact a Canada public transit strategy that seeks to provide a permanent investment plan to support public transit; to establish federal funding mechanisms for public transit; to work together with all levels of government to provide sustainable, predictable, long-term and adequate funding; and establish accountability measures to ensure that all governments work together to increase access to public transit.

[*Translation*]

EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition signed by Canadians who are calling on the Government of Canada to recognize the importance of the Experimental Lakes Area and to reverse its decision to close the research station, a unique, internationally renowned infrastructure designed to protect our fresh water.

[*English*]

RIGHTS OF THE UNBORN

Mr. Randy Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to present a petition from constituents of mine who believe that the current 400-year-old definition of a human being is contrary to 21st century medical evidence.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons and Parliament to confirm that every human being is recognized in Canadian law by amending section 223 of our Criminal Code.

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE

FOREIGN INVESTMENT

The Speaker: The Chair has notice of an application for an emergency debate from the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands. [Translation]

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to request an emergency debate on an issue of great importance to the future of Canada.

During the Prime Minister's visit to China in February 2012, we learned of the existence of the Agreement between the Government of Canada and the Government of the People's Republic of China for the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments, an agreement with far-reaching implications for Canada's sovereignty, security and democracy.

[English]

This agreement that we first learned of in February was then signed by the Prime Minister in Vladivostok at the APEC summit on September 9 but tabled before the House on September 26, the first time any parliamentarians had the chance to see the text.

A 21-day clock is running on sitting days, which means we are now down to 18 sitting days before, as a matter of automatic decision-making within the Governor in Council, an agreement with far-reaching implications for the sovereignty of the country will become law. It is a treaty with the effect of legal force for a minimum of 15 years. If any future government wishes to get out of the onerous terms of this agreement with China, it would take a written notice of one year. It is not reciprocal but lopsided in the interests of Chinese rights to overturn and challenge Canadian laws and to seek damages from us. If any future government serves a one-year notice to get out of the agreement, any existing Chinese investments at the point of that notice would be further protected for another 15 years.

The agreement is sweeping. I know that with 18 days remaining one might say where is the urgency. The urgency is that the governing party plans no debate in the House. There will be no vote in the House. I note that the official opposition has an opposition day motion tomorrow touching on one specific deal, the proposed takeover of Nexen by CNOOC, but that will not touch at all, in pith nor in substance, the far-reaching implications of a mandate for the Government of Canada to encourage Chinese investments in Canada. It is a mandate for the Canadian government to give national state-owned enterprises of Communist China equal treatment to any Canadian enterprises, but to give Chinese state-owned enterprises superior rights to any Canadian corporation in the case of any laws passed in our country and to have arbitration over

Business of Supply

claims for damages that will remain secret. The Canadian public will not know of them.

I am shaken to my core by the depth and breadth of this motion that will not come before this House but merely before cabinet, and bind Canadians, municipal governments, provincial governments and federal governments for 15 years,

Mr. Speaker, I beg of you to allow an emergency debate in the House.

● (1515)

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for raising this issue. I appreciate the importance she attaches to the issue, but I do not find that it meets the test set out for emergency debates.

Orders of the day.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: Before question period there were five minutes left for questions and comments for the hon. member for Churchill.

The hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my friend from Churchill talked about the effects that the government's policies are having, not just on individuals in Canadian society who find themselves unemployed from time to time—and the government has shown its uncaring glance in their direction—but also on small businesses and industries. Many of them, in northern and rural parts of Canada, rely on seasonal employment. What the government has now proposed under this new draft of employment insurance is making a bad situation worse for those small business owners who need to have some sort of certainty that there is going to be a group of Canadians able and willing to work in their seasonal industries, the ones that do not consistently run 12 months of the year.

I wonder if my friend could talk about the realities for those communities and business owners she represents? I think they may be representative of communities right across Canada. Economies have taken huge hits to some parts of the natural resource sector, as is true in my friend's case in Manitoba, and are now relying on a diversified economy. What will be the effect of what the government is proposing for employment insurance on her and her constituents?

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Mr. Speaker, indeed, both of our constituencies and much of northern and rural Canada share a real concern when it comes to the government's targeting of employment insurance. There is an absolute domino effect when people fear they will not be able to access EI while doing seasonal work. Some look at moving away and others look at the provincial welfare system, which is already overloaded.

Business of Supply

Let us take the case of first nations, where there are rates of 85% unemployment. In some cases, the only work available is seasonal work. This is not, as I said, make-work. This is about fighting forest fires, fishing and procuring food resources that we need and export. This is tourism that brings people from around the world to enjoy the beauty we have. It is in those sectors that we need jobs.

Let us look at forestry, an area that has suffered greatly. People working in the lumber industry often do seasonal work. We are seeing a government systematically go after sectors of the economy that sustain communities and regions. Earlier in the House we heard a reference to moving on to other parts of the country. The question is what kind of Canada we want to build. Do we want to focus on one resource at the exception of all others? I do not think so. Countries around the world that are comparable to us maintain that diversity is the way to go. We used to be good at that, but under the current government we are getting worse and the price is going to be paid by Canadians.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley, when referring to the speech by the member for Churchill, talked about the “hits” to the natural resource economy in her constituency. I would point out to the House that Manitoba is under the dead thumb of an NDP government and many of the difficulties in the natural resources industry in her constituency are because of NDP policies, primarily in the mining industry. In fact, Manitoba's mining industry performance is among the worst in the country.

Can she comment on the effect of the dead hand of Manitoba provincial NDP government policies on the dismal performance of the Manitoba mining sector and, hence, the effect on employment in her constituency?

• (1520)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's great gusto in talking about the provincial government in Manitoba, but I would remind him we are in the federal House of Commons discussing federal issues, so maybe we ought to use our energy to discuss them. I would be interested in hearing from his constituents in first nations and rural communities who also depend on seasonal work and will suffer as a result of the changes to employment insurance that his own government is bringing forward. I would like to hear from the people in Dauphin or Swan River or the first nations he represents on how they feel about his government's actions.

Let us talk about wanting to pursue economic development, whether it is mining or forestry. I can safely say that the federal government is nowhere near the table when it comes to working with first nations to work through some major challenges around resource development in our region. They are not there to talk about the commitment necessary in employment and training, the training that so many northerners and people in rural communities need, to be able to grasp these kinds of opportunities that exist in our region.

I caution the member that, before he gets up in the House with great passion, he should redirect that passion to representing, frankly, some of the people he should be representing.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I would like to

advise you that I will be splitting my time with the member for Mississauga South.

I am pleased to speak today to the motion that has been introduced by the NDP in regard to the employment insurance working while on claim pilot project. It would be nice to get some facts on the record instead of just fearmongering.

While the opposition parties continue to pursue their misguided economic policies, such as a 45-day work year or a \$20 billion carbon tax on everything, our government remains firmly focused on jobs, growth and economic prosperity. That is why we are aiming to help Canadians be better off working than not, with our changes to the employment insurance program. In economic action plan 2012, we introduced a number of improvements to the EI system, which I must remind folks is a temporary income support for Canadians who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

[*Translation*]

The measures we announced ensure that the employment insurance system is better adapted to the needs of Canadians, and is more flexible and fair. These measures also ensure that the system helps Canadians remain active in the labour market and find a job more rapidly.

[*English*]

A new national approach to calculating EI rates will come into effect in April of next year to replace the old “best 14 weeks” pilot project, as it was known. Building on and learning from that pilot project, as we always try to do, the new approach will finally mean that regions with similar employment levels will be treated similarly. That only makes sense.

We are also stepping up our efforts to better connect Canadians with jobs that are available within their range of skills in their local area and to clarify their responsibilities while on EI. In addition, we announced a new working while on claim pilot project, which came into effect on August 5. As I have said all along, this pilot project aims to increase how much Canadians can work and earn while collecting EI. After all, we truly are facing significant skills and labour shortages in every part of this country, even in areas with high unemployment, and we need all of our talent at work.

We need to encourage Canadians to work, not discourage them. We know that the previous pilot project did discourage people from accepting more work because of the low-level cap that was placed on how much they could earn and still protect their EI benefits. Therefore we made efforts to change that, and it has been proven in study after study that people can find a permanent job much more rapidly if they continue to be active in the labour market. That part-time work, I should point out, often leads directly to full-time work for them. Our intention with the working while on claim pilot project is to promote workforce attachment by encouraging people to accept available work while they are on EI. That only makes sense.

I remind hon. colleagues that this pilot project provides the opportunity to test measures designed to encourage unemployed Canadians to work more while on claim. I will explain.

• (1525)

[Translation]

Under the system's previous provisions, employment insurance claimants who found a part-time job or occasional employment saw their benefits reduced by \$1 for every dollar earned, once they earned the equivalent of 40% of their benefits or \$75. The maximum applied. Everything they earned after that had to be given back to the government.

From a financial standpoint, it was not advantageous to them to accept work that paid more than this threshold.

[English]

Essentially, this meant that after one day of work while on claim, working additional hours or days did not pay at all. In fact, in many cases, the worker incurred expenses such as travel for putting in that extra work effort. No wonder then that workers were reluctant to take part-time work when this often led them to being no better off than they were before.

The opposition loves to use examples regarding this project, so let me use one.

Take Tracy, a salesperson who gets laid off and receives \$264 in EI benefits per week, which represents 55% of her previous salary. Tracy finds three shifts of work that pay her \$12 an hour, around minimum wage, for a total of \$288 per week. Under the old rules, Tracy could earn the equivalent of 40% of her weekly EI benefits before having her pay clawed back dollar for dollar. This meant that despite having found a job that could pay \$288 a week, Tracy had no incentive to earn more than \$106 a week, or 40% of her weekly benefit. Why? Because her EI would be deducted dollar for dollar after that amount. Therefore, her combined income from temporary employment and EI would come to a total of \$370. Under the new rules, Tracy gets to keep 50% of every dollar she earns. Using the same example, her combined weekly income would be \$408. That is \$38 more than under the previous regime.

If they have the choice, Canadians would rather work. As I have said before, statistics show that those who stay connected with the labour market stand a much better chance of finding full-time permanent work than those who do not.

The opposition is against our efforts to help connect Canadians with jobs available in their regions. We know that the best way to

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fight poverty is to ensure people have jobs. This is why we are proud of the 770,000 net new jobs that have been created since the end of the recession.

Our overall strategy with this pilot, and with all of the measures that we have announced in budget 2012, is to strengthen the EI program as well as the economy. We will always work to ensure that our programs fulfill our goals. The working while on claim pilot makes it possible for Canadians to get more money working than they would if they were to collect EI alone.

[Translation]

We will continue to work to ensure that it is always better for Canadians to work than not.

[English]

What we will not do though is allow the NDP to impose a job-killing carbon tax that would ensure that Canadians would have to pay more for their heat, their gas and their food. That will not make them and their families better off.

This pilot though is a perfect example of how we are making things better, better for recipients, better for their families and better for their communities.

[Translation]

This measure encourages Canadians to remain active in the labour market and eliminates factors that deter people from finding a job.

• (1530)

[English]

That is why our government will not be supporting this flawed and misleading motion.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, here is what was said by the Mouvement autonome et solidaire des sans-emploi or MASSE, which knows what it is talking about:

...while this new national pilot project may benefit some claimants, it will put the lowest paid workers at a disadvantage...

And by the way, we do admit that it will be beneficial for some claimants.

...in comparison to the previous measure, which allowed claimants to keep the equivalent of up to 40% of their weekly benefits.

Under this measure, the poorer you are, the poorer you will stay. How can the Conservatives not see this about the system they are proposing?

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, the problem with the old system was that claimants could work and earn up to \$75 or 40% of their weekly benefits, whichever was greater.

For most people, that meant that they could work one day a week and then every dollar they earned after that was clawed back dollar for dollar from their EI benefit payment. This discouraged people from working. We want to encourage people to work.

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[English]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have asked a true or false question and I have asked a multiple choice question. I am going to go with an either or question now and I would be happy if she answered either or.

The first one would be what measurement she used. Because she has gone from it is going to help all people, to the vast majority, to the majority. One of the members over there said the other day that it would help most people.

However, in order to fix the problem, there has to be some kind of measurement that is referred to. Therefore, to help me understand why this decision was made, what measure did she use to determine who would benefit and who would not?

Then I have another one, and I will give her a choice.

She has used three examples in the House, all stemming from three days of work. Does she have an example if somebody only gets two days—

The Speaker: Order, please. I will have to stop the member there to accommodate more questions and comments.

The hon. Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development.

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, as I have said so many times to the hon. member, our country is short of workers. We have employers that are begging for skills and labour, even in areas of high unemployment.

The old system, the old pilot project, discouraged people from working more than one day a week. That is not helpful. It is not helpful to those employers and it is not helpful to the communities to which those employers are providing services.

Our goal is to ensure that someone who works while on EI is always better off working than not. That is why we have changed the system.

When the hon. member refers to the old program, there are cases, yes, where somebody was better working on day one but they were totally discouraged from working two, three or four days. We know that the employers would be better off if those people were working, because they have the skills. We want to ensure that the workers and their families are better off working those extra few days as well. We know that beyond the financial benefit, those people who work part time are much more likely to find full-time employment, where they will be even better off and so will their families.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister very much for what I think was a very straightforward explanation about what the government has been doing and how a number of these programs work.

There has been a lot of fear-mongering and finger wagging on the other side and not a lot of facts.

I would like to give the minister an opportunity to give us a few more examples of how the working while on claim program works and how it is benefiting those on claim to receive benefits as well as find jobs.

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, we have done a number of things to help people and some of these have been misrepresented.

EI will always be there for individuals who have lost their job through no fault of their own. With the benefit, with the privilege and the right to EI comes a responsibility to look for work within their skills set, within their geographic region, within a reasonable job price range and to accept that work. That is important for them and it is important for employers and communities that we have all the talented work we possibly can.

• (1535)

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today on behalf of the government to respond to the motion by the New Democrat Party in respect to the working while on claim pilot project.

This pilot project will allow people receiving employment insurance benefits to keep 50% of what they earn while receiving benefits. We believe this will encourage Canadians to accept more available work while on benefits and will ensure Canadians are better off working than not.

Our government is making improvements to Employment Insurance so it will work better for all Canadians. For too long there have been too many disincentives in the EI system that discouraged Canadians who want to work from getting back to work.

The purpose of this EI pilot project is to test an approach and allow the Conservative government to determine whether more Canadians are encouraged to accept available work while receiving benefits.

This is a pilot project to encourage EI claimants to pursue and accept all opportunities to work. We are working to ensure EI fulfill the objectives of the Conservative government.

The intent of the working while on claim pilot project is to help EI claimants stay connected to the labour market, while they are looking for permanent full-time work.

Page 147 of the economic action plan 2012 states, “This new pilot project will cut the current clawback rate in half and apply it to all earnings made while on claim”.

Under a previous pilot project, EI recipients who had part-time or occasional work saw their benefits reduced dollar for dollar once they earned \$75 or 40% of their weekly benefit amount, whichever was greater. Once they hit this cap, their wages were clawed back 100% from their benefits. As a result, many workers were not interested in accepting available work beyond the 40% threshold.

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Canada cannot afford such disincentives to working. While on EI benefits, Canada needs people working. Canada is already facing labour and skill shortages in many regions and occupations. Overall, the Canadian population is aging. Canada has led the G7 in economic growth and that is creating jobs that need workers.

The shortage of workers is not only in Alberta. In Labrador City, for example, there is such a shortage of workers to fill jobs in new mining projects that restaurants cannot stay open and the municipality cannot find enough people to maintain the roads.

Canadians are pleased with the Conservative government's approach. They see the modifications to working while on claim as an improvement that helps workers transition back into the labour market more smoothly.

We believe this pilot project will motivate people to work more since work will pay at the same rate no matter how much income is received.

We want to encourage Canadians on EI to work because study after study shows that part-time work often leads to full-time work. Having a job to go to, even if it is only for a few hours a week, helps workers maintain their skills and keeps them in touch with developments in their fields. It offers the opportunity to make contacts and to hear about other available jobs.

These changes cannot be considered in isolation. This Conservative government has brought in several changes to EI recently to strengthen the initiatives to accept all available work.

For example, under the connecting Canadians with available jobs initiative, we are enhancing the content and frequency of job alerts and labour market information bulletins for people on EI. Sadly, the New Democrats and the Liberals voted against this much needed and important initiative.

We are also improving coordination between EI and the temporary foreign worker program so Canadians can learn about job vacancies and be considered for positions before employers hire foreign workers.

While it is clear that this Conservative government's focus is on jobs, growth and long-term prosperity, the NDP and its leader are fixated on a job-killing carbon tax that would raise the price of everything for Canadians, including gasoline that they need to get to work. Sadly, the people most affected by this would be lower income Canadians.

This Conservative government has worked hard to reduce taxes for all Canadians. That is why we are proud to say that we have taken over one million Canadians off the tax rolls.

The EI program is designed to be a support on the job market, not an alternative to it. Surely my colleagues on all sides of the House will agree that Canadians would rather be working than not.

• (1540)

Unfortunately in some regions that are heavily reliant on seasonal economies, employment insurance is a much-needed support measure. I want to assure Canadians in those regions that employment insurance benefits will be there for them. We have made changes to the best weeks program to ensure that they are not

penalized for working partial weeks in the off-season or if they take a lower paying job just to bring in some extra income.

The Conservative government has found the balance between providing adequate income to the unemployed and encouraging them to get back into the workforce. Pilot projects like working while on claim do just that.

Canadians are always better off working than not. We need to remove the barriers that prevent people from fully participating in the labour market. This Conservative government is committed to making targeted common sense changes that encourage Canadians to stay active in the job market and remove the disincentives to work.

That is why I will not be supporting the opposition motion put forward today.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for her speech. In it, she emphasized the importance of working, even if it is only a few hours a week because this allows workers to maintain their skills and remain active in the labour market.

I completely agree with her in that regard. However, the Conservatives' employment insurance reform will penalize workers who work a few hours a week while receiving employment insurance benefits. In fact, four out of 10 employment insurance claimants will be at a disadvantage. Their income will be cut in half.

Is the hon. member aware of this? If so, how can she explain to these workers, who work one or two days a week, that she supports a bill that will cut their income in half?

[*English*]

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Mr. Speaker, what the opposition member does not realize is that this pilot project specifically addresses that problem. In fact, this government is working hard to connect Canadians with well-paying jobs.

There is a labour shortage across this country and we need a program like this. We need to find out if it works and I believe it will, which is exactly why I am not supporting the motion. We need to assure Canadians that we understand what the problems are with the current system as it is. I believe that this pilot project does exactly that.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in my colleague's comments she indicated that anyone, even if they only work a couple of hours a week, is much better off. I have gone through all the computations and it does not work out.

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Let us take this out of the debate: if someone works, that is good and he or she does not need the help. If they are healthy, they do not need the hospital. This is for people who are trying to feed their families when they are out of work. Under the old system, if they worked a couple of hours, they would benefit. The member said in her statement that under this program even a couple of hours a week would be a benefit.

Does the member actually believe this? Having looked at these programs, the old one and the new one, can she say to the House that people are better off under this program than the old program? It is a simple question.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Mr. Speaker, that is an interesting question, coming from the member for Cape Breton—Canso.

On May 4, he said:

I'm going to give the government kudos...what they're doing with the best 14, and the working while on claim, they were two good provisions within that.

Maybe the member does not remember that he said that or that at one time he thought this was a good pilot project.

It is important to remember that this pilot project enhances the flexibility and fairness of the EI program. I think the member actually knows that.

• (1545)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a very simple question.

The minister and various Conservative members have given us a lot of examples of people who are able to find good jobs with good wages. These people will benefit from the new program.

However, I would like my colleague opposite to explain what will happen to someone who manages to earn \$75 a week. Under the old system, this person could keep \$75 before any money was deducted from his employment insurance benefits. Under the new system, this person will immediately lose 50% of his income. How will the new system help this person?

I would like the member to provide an explanation for this exact example, without reverting to the talking points we have already heard, which have been rehashed over and over in the House.

[*English*]

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Mr. Speaker, we need facts on this debate and not fear-mongering. When people get to keep more of the money they earn while on EI, then obviously that is an incentive to keep doing that. The opposition should realize that this pilot project is going to work for Canadians and that letting people keep more money in their pockets is what will help, especially with regard to the labour shortage in our country, which we have to address.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time here today with the hon. member for Burnaby—Douglas.

That said, I would like to answer the question myself.

Someone who earns \$75 will make less money at the end of the day, that much is certain. I did the math regarding someone who earns \$300 a week, and that person would have \$30 less per week. So the answer to that question is that that individual earns less money, not more. That is clear. The Conservatives should learn how to count.

I am pleased to rise here today to speak to the NDP motion moved by the hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, the official opposition EI critic. I would like to thank her on behalf of my constituents in Hochelaga.

My colleagues from La Pointe-de-l'Île and Honoré-Mercier could definitely join me in speaking at length about the current situation in the east end of Montreal Island, where many residents and their families are still suffering from the effects of the last recession and the many plant closures in the manufacturing sector.

I cannot help but think of the impending closure of the Mabe plant in my riding of Hochelaga. Over the next two years, several hundred more high-paying jobs—700 jobs—will disappear. This is in addition to the closure of the Shell refinery in Montreal East, which also employed many skilled and highly paid workers.

It goes without saying that the changes made to EI by the Conservative government in its Trojan Horse bill do nothing to help workers and their families. On the contrary, they continue the work started by the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney, which was carried on by the Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin Liberals.

It is quite interesting to go over some of the history of the misappropriation of the unemployment insurance system, which, ironically, is now called the “employment insurance” system.

In 1990, the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney permanently withdrew from funding employment insurance, clearly showing the government's unwillingness to intervene in problems having to do with unemployment and employment. From then on, workers and employers had to fund the program on their own. Changes to employment insurance also significantly changed the rules of eligibility for benefits.

On March 26, 1993, the Liberal leader, Jean Chrétien, who was the leader of the official opposition in the House of the Commons at the time, wrote the following, and rightly so I might add, in a letter to opponents of the Conservative bill to amend the Unemployment Insurance Act:

The Liberals are dismayed by these measures. By reducing benefits and further penalizing those who voluntarily leave their jobs, clearly the Conservative government cares very little for the victims of the economic crisis. Instead of attacking the real problem, it is attacking the unemployed.

Nonetheless, hopes raised by these comments and the 1993 election campaign were dashed. When the Liberals came to power, they changed their tune entirely, proclaiming that unemployment insurance created unemployment and that the legislation needed changing in order to deal with those who “stay home drinking beer”. I am quoting what the Prime Minister said in an article published in *Le Devoir* on April 21, 1993.

The government walked away from its responsibility to create jobs. Unemployment became an individual responsibility. In other words, the unemployed had only themselves to blame.

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In 1996, the fatal blow was dealt to the Unemployment Insurance Act. It was abolished and replaced with the Employment Insurance Act, which once again narrowed eligibility criteria and reduced the benefit rate.

To add insult to injury, since the mid-1990s, the Liberal and Conservative governments have been misappropriating tens of billions of dollars from the employment insurance fund in order to balance their budgets, when this fund should be used to compensate the unemployed. First the government hijacked the purpose of the system, then it attacked the fund.

As a result, the fund became unstable and to correct that, employer and employee contributions were increased.

Let us be clear: when premiums go up, when eligibility is restricted, and when the money gets used for purposes other than the intended ones, it looks a lot like a tax.

What are the consequences of all these counter-reforms today?

In July, 508,000 claimants were receiving regular employment insurance benefits, but 1.38 million Canadians were unemployed.

• (1550)

That leaves 870,000 unemployed people without any benefits to make up for their loss of income. That means 57% of unemployed workers are not currently entitled to benefits. This historic record was reached through changes made by successive Conservative and Liberal governments. It is unacceptable.

What are the Conservatives doing to deal with this situation? We cannot truthfully say they are doing nothing, since they really have gone even further in limiting access to the EI system. What are they doing to help workers avoid reliance on the EI system, aside from limiting access to it, of course? Nothing.

The government can brag about creating jobs, but the facts are clear: 300,000 more people are unemployed than before the crash in 2008.

The Conservatives' 2012 omnibus budget, which they brought down in March, amended dozens of acts having nothing to do with budget implementation, and also amended a number of EI regulations.

For example, the new definition of "suitable employment" means that claimants are obliged to accept employment in another field of work than they worked in previously, and they must accept work quite far from their homes or accept a much lower salary than they were earning before. My colleagues have presented many examples of the unbelievable situations cause by this new interpretation.

And then the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and her parliamentary secretary ask us why we voted against their budget.

All these examples make me a little skeptical of the Conservatives' good faith when it comes to helping workers. Are they completely out of touch with reality?

As for the working while on claim pilot project, it ought to enable EI claimants to add to their income while receiving EI benefits. Pardon us for doubting the minister's words when she states, as she

has a number of times, that most claimants who work while receiving benefits will be better off because of this pilot project.

Obviously, she has never been able to provide us with the numbers to back up her statements. On the other hand, she always gives numbers related to people who work more or who earn higher wages.

Here are the facts. The recovery formula used in the current 2012-15 program is likely to discourage many claimants from part-time work or low-wage work, because some of them will earn less than under the system that was in effect from 2005 to 2012.

The proof is in the amount of money provided for this program. Here are the numbers: in 2009, \$141 million was earmarked for the project; in 2010, this amount was \$132 million; and in 2011, it amounted to \$130 million.

So when the Conservatives say that the new program is better but only \$74 million over two years—or \$37 million per year—is allocated in the 2012 budget, we have obvious reasons to be skeptical.

The employment insurance system was designed to help workers and their families in the event that they lost their jobs. What I have talked about today clearly shows that the system's initial purpose has been hijacked. The employment insurance fund must be used to provide benefits to unemployed workers and not to balance a budget or impose an additional tax on workers and employers.

I hope that the government will listen to reason and revisits its policies, which clearly attack unemployed workers more than unemployment and have swollen the ranks of the unemployed to more than 1.4 million, including nearly 900,000 workers who have no access to benefits. Otherwise Canadians will have to wait until October 2015 for the first NDP government to deal with the real problems of our society.

• (1555)

[*English*]

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Hochelaga for reminding members present of one important fact that seems to get lost in the debate around employment insurance, and she mentioned it early on in her speech, which is that it is not the government's money.

The EI fund, since 1990, has been comprised exclusively from contributions by employers and employees to provide income maintenance for those who are unfortunate enough to lose their jobs.

Where does the government even get off, making unilateral and arbitrary changes to eligibility, benefits and clawbacks, changes that it willy-nilly throws around, seemingly without much research and without much impact study. Where does it even have the right to do this without consulting the very people who pay for the fund?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, I completely agree. The government should not have the right to touch that money because, as my colleague was saying, it is not the government's money. Furthermore, there is less and less money in this fund for workers.

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In the 19th century, families and religious groups would help people. I think we will have to go back to that because government help for the unemployed is dwindling. The social safety net is eroding, even disappearing. We will have to go back to having large families with lots of children and to helping everyone.

[English]

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out to the House that Mathew Wilson, the vice-president of national policy of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, stated:

If fewer Canadians are relying on EI because they have found employment, which is the ultimate goal of the program changes, there will be less of a financial burden on the system.

Our government's top priority is creating jobs and long-term prosperity for Canadians. Why will the opposition not support these initiatives to help the Canadian economy?

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, I knew that the hon. member would ask me that question. The Conservatives are assuming that everyone can find a full-time job, but that is not true.

I know plenty of people who are working in the museum community or as guides on Parliament Hill, for example. There are plenty of people who cannot get a full-time job because such jobs do not exist in their field.

At the museum where I used to work, there are technical support employees who work only during events, but events are not held 35 hours a week. Events last only a few hours and are held only a few nights a week. These people cannot work full-time.

People who have a part-time job at a convenience store in Hochelaga are not going to go and work in Alberta's oil fields. Not everyone can go from a part-time job to a full-time job. It is not realistic.

[English]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, again, the comments coming from the Conservatives are that they are all about jobs. That is wonderful. Everybody in the House would like to see every Canadian have a job. We would like to see all Canadians healthy, but not all Canadians are healthy. That is why there are hospitals and health services. Not all Canadians have a job. That is why there are these social safety nets like EI.

I want to ask my colleague this. They recited over there that I supported the initiative. I supported best weeks, and I spoke in favour of this provision because it was a successful pilot program. However, in typical Conservative fashion, what they did not say at the time was that it was doing away with the allowable earnings provision and moving the 40% of the EI benefit to 50% of overall earnings, which changed the whole plan. They did not announce that until August, three months after I had said it was a good initiative.

Does the hon. member recall the Conservatives giving us the fine details back when they were making these grand announcements—

• (1600)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. The hon. member for Hochelaga.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, as my colleague said, it is true that the program helps some people who make a better salary or who work more hours, but there is also the other side of the coin. We later learned that the program is not better for people who do not earn big salaries, as is the case for many people in Hochelaga and the people I used to work with who work part-time.

We can only support a program that is good for everyone, not one that is only good for some people. We oppose a program that is worse for those who are less fortunate.

[English]

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her wonderful speech and also for splitting her time, allowing me to speak to this important motion. I also thank the member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles for bringing forth this motion. I have had the great pleasure of working with her in the past on the natural resources committee, and I am also pleased to support her fine work here today.

While I was doing my research for this speech, and of course the researchers are very helpful in this area, I happened upon a CANSIM table that looks at the percentage of unemployed people receiving EI regular benefits, stretching from 1976 right through to the current 2012. In 1976, 90% of those people who were unemployed were receiving EI regular benefits. That 90% figure dipped for a while through the 1980s, but also in 1990, 90% of the unemployed were receiving regular benefits. Then we entered into a free fall. We went from 90% eligible down to 80%, down to 70%, down to 60%. In the 2000s, we were under 50%, and currently we are under 40%. That is, only 40% of those people who are unemployed are receiving regular EI benefits.

That really is worrying to me. We are seeing a slow erosion of our social safety net programs. This is very disturbing. We are not seeing it just in this area. We are also seeing it in the old age security program and, looking at the other side, with young people and tuition levels and student loan allowances. It really is an erosion of our social safety net and it is punishing those people who are least able to make up for this lack of help.

Of course I support our motion. It is very important for the Conservatives to reassess what they are doing, not just on this pilot program but in all areas of the social safety net, to make sure Canadians' equality does not span just between groups in the current time but also over time, so that the people born today and in the future have the same opportunities and benefits that Canadians had before them. I am very worried that these programs are eroding what I would call generational justice.

Business of Supply

I remind the House of the motion, which states that the new working while on claim pilot project is not benefiting many EI recipients who are able to find employment. In fact for many it creates a disincentive to take part-time work. It is leaving low-income Canadians worse off than before, and really the government needs to take steps to immediately fix this working while on claim project.

The motion stems from Conservative changes to the working while on claim pilot project. Early versions of this program had a clawback formula, which is really what we are talking about. In that, allowable earnings while on claim were equal to the greater of \$75 or 40% of weekly benefits. For example, if weekly benefits are \$300, the allowable earning would be \$120. Earnings above that level were clawed back dollar for dollar. Under the new clawback formula, there are clawbacks of 50¢ on the dollar for every dollar up to 90% of the weekly insurable earnings. Any amount above that 90% of weekly insurable earnings is clawed back dollar for dollar.

It is a bit of bafflegab. We see these things written and they do not make a lot of sense, but when the rubber hits the road that is what really makes the difference. According to the Conservatives, these changes would incentivize all EI recipients to accept new work.

However, we found that the new pilot program discourages part-time or low-paying work for many EI recipients, and many of them will be making less than under the old system. For example, in 2010-2011 the average EI regular benefit was \$360 a week; that is for the average person collecting this. That means previous earnings for the EI recipient were about \$670 per week.

• (1605)

Under the new system the average EI recipient will have no incentive to accept new work unless that person earns over \$300 per week. If the recipient takes one day of work or something like that and does not earn \$300, of course he or she is not going to make any money. For example, if the person who made under \$300 a week accepted work earning \$150 per week, he or she could potentially lose \$70 under the new system compared to the old system. Contrary to what we are hearing from the government, the new system would hurt the average EI recipient.

I am particularly concerned about the low earning EI recipient and will let the House know why in a minute, but would first like to clarify the details of the program.

If an EI recipient previously earned \$300 per week, then that recipient could earn \$165 per week when unemployed and receiving EI. Under the new system the recipient would have no incentive to accept new work unless he or she earned over \$125 per week. That means that if this person, a low earning EI recipient, accepted work for \$75 per week, he or she would lose \$30 under the new system. It does not sound like a lot of money, but in the community where I grew up and to a lot of my constituents in Burnaby—Douglas, losing \$30 is a lot. If we talk to anyone who is unemployed, \$30 often makes a difference between fresh vegetables and something that is canned, for example.

This also does not include work-related expenses, such as transportation and child care. If these additional expenses were

factored in, very few EI recipients would benefit from accepting new work, especially low earning EI recipients.

The effect on low income earners is something I understand very well, because I was once in this category myself. In my early twenties I lived in Nova Scotia. I worked at minimum wage jobs for a few years and then at one point I was laid off. I looked for work but could not find any. Lots of my friends were in the same situation. Lots of people would get a job, work hard, but the job would dry up. They could not find any other work, so like me they would apply for what was then called unemployment insurance. That helped us pay our bills while looking for work. It is not like we had trust funds that we could tap into, or something like that. It is not, as the Conservatives have alluded to, that people were lazy. It is just that the area where we were living did not have any work.

Of course, when I look back I could see that it was because we were youth. Youth unemployment is especially high. Right across Canada youth unemployment is 15% now, but in particular regions it can be 20%, 30% or 35%.

This was not a period that any of us felt good about. In our early twenties, my friends and I felt somewhat like failures. We had gone through high school, where we had done pretty good work. Some of us had received university degrees from the local college. However, none of us could really find work, so we would go on what was then called UI.

Every day while on UI we would go to what was then called a manpower centre. We often had to hitchhike or cycle there because it was so far away. It was not that we were not looking for work or trying hard. We made a lot of effort to do that. Back in the old days before computers, the manpower centre had little cards stuck on bulletin boards and sometimes there would be no cards there. Ten of us would show up after hitchhiking, cycling or walking there, only to find there was no work available and to be told to come back the next day. Sometimes there would be a little card on the bulletin board indicating that one day of work was available shovelling gravel, laying sod or something like that. We would play rock-paper-scissors so that we would not compete against each other for the one job and bother the employer. Or whoever needed the money the most could apply for the job. Often these jobs did not make much difference because sometimes the money was clawed back, and that was discouraging.

Business of Supply

That is why we have to be careful with these programs. When sitting in a place like the House of Commons and making a good salary, it is easy to lose track of what it is actually like, or to have what fancy academics call an experiential perspective. Having an experiential perspective is to look from the perspective of the people who are actually affected by these programs. That is perhaps what has been lost here.

• (1610)

It is easy to look at the numbers, the graphs, the Statistics Canada data and all of that, but we should really be talking to the people on the ground and asking how this is affecting them. We have been hearing these stories in Parliament. We are respecting people's last names, but we have definitely been hearing calls in members' offices by people who are saying that a local person is losing a certain amount of money. The person had one cheque stating one amount and comes back with another cheque with a different amount, and there is definitely some money being lost. We can do the calculations and see that they are right.

This program therefore needs to be re-evaluated. The Conservatives should also be careful in their statements not to insult the hard-working people of Canada who are looking for work.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the member's statement as well as some comments made by the member for Winnipeg Centre, who said that it is really the stakeholders in the EI system who should be deciding how these programs should run. Let us hear from one of them. Let us hear from Catherine Swift, the president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, who represents employers. Employers pay half of the money into the EI fund. Let us hear what she said:

We believe the changes to defining suitable employment, based on how frequently EI is claimed, will help to remove disincentives to work and hopefully make it easier for small firms to find the people they need.

The working while on claim program is about allowing people to continue to claim EI benefits and gain valuable work experience so that they can move toward the full-time jobs that many of Ms. Swift's members want.

Why does the NDP continue to attack a program that encourages people to work?

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, if the CFIB had its way, it would probably get rid of all social programs. That, to me, is not a great resource to draw from.

An hon. member: People are avoiding—

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Not the spokespeople for the CFIB.

The point about consultation is that there has been none. The Conservatives go off and talk to a couple of their great friends, but they do not talk with the people who are affected by these cuts, clawbacks and mistakes made in this program.

The minister should do the right thing. She should admit that she has made a mistake and redesign the program so that it works properly.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I said from the outset today that I hoped that all members engaging

here today would work together to try to find some kind of solution to what is an obvious problem.

To lay this on the table, not everyone is being hurt by the changes being made. There are some instances where the changes are actually beneficial, but from what I can understand, these instances are minimal.

I asked the minister what she had predicated the changes on, what measurement was used. If we want to fix something, we have to be able to measure it. I asked what measurement she had referred to, but she came up with nothing.

We know that the median income of part-time workers in this country is \$223 and that those who earn anything under \$260 working while on claim are being hurt. I am wondering if my colleague from the NDP has seen in his research any kind of a measurement that would make sense out of the changes that have been made.

• (1615)

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, the first statistic I read out is what we should really pay attention to. Under both the Conservatives and Liberals, the percentage of unemployed people eligible for EI has collapsed. We have gone from 90% in 1976 down to under 40%. Both Liberal and Conservative governments have a lot to answer for, and that is why an NDP government is needed to set this straight.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was quite interested in what the member was saying in his speech about the fact that he would bike or hitchhike to find work. I think that is common among the vast majority of Canadians.

I do not want to make any accusations, but there seems to be a sense that Canadians are being treated as if every one of them leeches off the system and therefore every one of them needs to be slapped back into place by instituting measures that punish them before they have actually done something wrong. It might have something to do with the fact that once upon a time this program was called unemployment insurance, that is, insurance against unemployment, insurance to carry people through the times when they are looking for work. Now it is called employment insurance and it is being used right now as a battering ram against the perceived abuses of the system by the vast majority of Canadians. I would venture a very safe guess—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please.

The hon. member for Burnaby—Douglas, a short answer, please.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, of course Canadians want to work. If members were to talk to anyone, they would see that he or she wants to work. They want to work in jobs that they enjoy and that fulfill them. That is what employment insurance is supposed to do, to help people between gaps in jobs. That is what it is doing. To mess with the program and make it help people less is the wrong thing to do. That is why I support the motion we have put forward today.

Business of Supply

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): 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 member for Scarborough—Guildwood, National Defence; the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan, Aboriginal Affairs; the member for Guelph, Agriculture and Agri-food.

Resuming debate, the member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

[*English*]

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

As my colleagues on this side of the House have previously stated, I, too, will not be supporting this motion. I find it disingenuous of the NDP to be moving this motion when its \$21 billion carbon tax would kill tens of thousands of Canadian jobs and drive thousands of Canadians into poverty. Today we are talking about the very important pilot project to improve employment insurance.

As the Prime Minister has said many times, Canada is an emerging energy superpower. Whether it is the oil sands in Alberta, natural gas in B.C. or off-shore oil in Newfoundland, hundreds of thousands of good paying Canadian jobs rely on the energy sector, jobs that would be in peril if the NDP ever gained power. Thankfully, Canadians understand that they can trust the Prime Minister's low tax plan for jobs and growth over the tax and spend plans of the opposition parties.

It is an inconvenient truth for the members of the opposition that poverty has never been lower in Canada than it has been under this Conservative government. That is something to be celebrated. Whether it is adult, child or seniors poverty, the rates have never been lower in Canadian history than under our strong, stable, national, Conservative, majority government.

This is because Canada has the strongest employment growth by far among the G7 countries. Thanks to the strong leadership of our Prime Minister, Canada has created over 770,000 net new jobs, 90% of which are full-time positions. That is worth celebrating. That puts Canadians back to work. In fact, there are more Canadians working now than at any point in our history. Currently there are over 350,000 more jobs today than at the highest point in 2008 before the recession. That is quite remarkable.

Statistics Canada revealed that there were 250,000 jobs in our country that remained unfilled this past spring. These are not even in top of mind locations such as Alberta. In Labrador City there is such a shortage of workers to work in their new mining projects that restaurants cannot stay open and the municipality cannot find enough people to maintain the roads.

That is why the new working while on claim pilot will allow Canadians to keep more of their earnings. Under this new program, the majority of people who work while they are on claim will benefit and will be better off.

Previously, claimants could only earn either \$75 or 40% of their weekly benefits. That is not much money. Any earnings above that threshold were reduced from the benefit payment, dollar for dollar.

The new pilot project allows EI claimants who are receiving regular, parental or compassionate care benefits to keep half of their earnings from the first dollar earned. This will ensure that EI claimants will always be better off working than not working. It will also allow more Canadians to keep more of what they earn while on EI. This is a pilot project to encourage EI claimants to pursue and accept all opportunities to work. We are always working to ensure our programs fulfill our goals.

At the same time, we recognize that there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work, particularly in the off-season in parts of the country where much of the economy is based on seasonal industries. Our government is working to help these Canadians find jobs in their local area appropriate to their qualifications. For those who are unable to find employment, employment insurance will always be there for them as it has always been.

Because of an aging population, we can expect skills and labour shortages to become even more severe over time. That is why we need Canadians to contribute their talents to the economy as much as possible. Unfortunately, our government receives no assistance from the opposition parties as we work to solve these challenges. That is what we are doing, working to solve these challenges.

Indeed, not only did both the Liberals and the NDP vote against these changes to working while on claim, they also voted against the youth employment strategy, the EI hiring credit, the targeted initiative for older workers, and the list goes on and on.

• (1620)

Sadly, the NDP seem to be more concerned about implementing a \$21 billion carbon tax on the backs of Canadians. That is okay but it is not okay to try to solve the EI problem.

Having voted against countless initiatives that we have put in place to help Canadians get back to work, I cannot help but wonder why the NDP is against helping Canadians return to work, find jobs, become productive and feel good about themselves because they are working.

Our economic action plan is achieving results. The 770,000 net new jobs proves that, but we know we can do better to connect Canadians to available jobs.

Business of Supply

Currently, Canadians on EI only get three job alerts every two weeks from the Job Bank website. We are changing this so that job alerts are sent out daily. This is what Canadians need. We have heard about the gentleman who biked to work and picked cards off the wall. That is what used to happen. Now we have to do better and that is why these job alerts on a daily basis are so important. Job alerts will not only provide EI claimants with information about job opportunities within their area and field of expertise, but they will also include information on related occupations to which their skills might be put to good use.

We are also increasing information sharing between the temporary foreign worker and EI programs to ensure Canadians have the first shot at these jobs before employers can hire foreign workers. We are taking care of Canadians.

Let us look at some of the measures the opposition has opposed so far.

Young workers entering the workforce face uncertain job market prospects. Budget 2012 invested \$50 million over two years to enhance the youth employment strategy to help more young people gain tangible skills and experience, and to connect young Canadians with jobs in fields that are in high demand.

Despite the fact that the youth employment strategy helped over 57,000 youth get the job skills and work experience they need to successfully enter the labour market, the NDP members voted against this investment for our young people. Not only that, they are proposing, as I said, a \$21 billion carbon tax that would raise the cost of essentials for these young workers that they need to transition into the workforce, such as basic groceries and public transit.

How about the older workers? When we increased funding to the targeted initiative for older workers to meet the needs of unemployed people 55 to 64 years old who live in communities with a high rate of unemployment, the opposition voted against that.

How about Canadians with disabilities? No government has done for more for persons with disabilities than this Conservative government. We recognize that Canadians with disabilities are at times disproportionately impacted by economic turbulence and encounter unique challenges in finding jobs during a period of economic recovery. That is why budget 2012 also invested an additional \$30 million over three years in the opportunities fund to enable Canadians with disabilities to obtain work experience with small and medium-sized businesses. Again, the opposition voted against this measure.

It is pretty clear what the pattern is: Our Conservative government invests in Canadian workers and the opposition opposes it, whether it be the needy, the vulnerable or those facing barriers or entering the workforce. The opposition continues to oppose these measures.

The contrast is pretty simple. On this side of the House, we have our low tax plan for job and economic growth. This plan has led to the highest number of workers in Canadian history with the lowest percentage of people in poverty in Canadian history. Across the way, we have the NDP that wants to impose a \$21 billion carbon tax on Canadians that would kill jobs and increase poverty among the vulnerable. How the NDP feels that such a tax would be beneficial to Canadians looking for work is beyond me.

Our government will continue with our plan and that is to ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not.

● (1625)

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, since I have been elected, I have had scores of people come into my office with problems with EI. They are having trouble getting through to the call centre and their claims have been messed up. It takes up a big part of my constituency office budget to help these people through the system and deal with changes such as have been made here.

I wonder if the member has had many EI claimants come to her office and ask for help.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Mr. Speaker, I sympathize with what the member opposite said because that is part of the job of a member of Parliament, to take care of these problems. That is why our government is addressing this problem.

We set up this pilot project because we want people to go back to work. We want people to be hands-on, right in the workforce so they can connect and network. No one person does just one thing. They can do many things. In this job market, people need to have the opportunity to do that. This new improvement to the EI program is very important.

● (1630)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will do the televangelist for those who are watching at home today so they can understand what this is all about.

The motion today is to help a group of Canadians who have been placed in hardship by a change that was made, whether it was intended or unintended. There are people being hurt by a change in the provision for working while on claim.

The government has criticized the NDP about the green carbon tax and it has talked about this program and that program. What we are trying to do today is help some of the most hard-pressed in this country. There was a pilot program that we had before that worked well. The government changed the way it is being administered and now low wage earners are being hurt. It is a disincentive. People could earn between \$75 and \$195 under the program.

How can the member explain to somebody who made \$80 on the program pre-August 5, that they will now lose half of that \$80 and will only make \$40? How are people benefiting from that? I wish her good luck.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Mr. Speaker, the member mentioned the \$21 billion carbon tax. That is huge because everybody would pay more money for everything they eat, drink or travel in.

Business of Supply

Under the previous pilot project, claimants could only earn up to the greater of \$75 or 40% of their weekly benefits. Any earnings above that threshold were reduced from the benefit program dollar for dollar.

The new pilot program allows EI claimants who are receiving parental or compassionate care benefits, or any benefits, to keep half of their weekly benefits for every dollar they earn up to a certain amount; 90% of the weekly insurable earnings used to calculate the EI benefit rate.

I will give the member an example. If a salesperson who has been laid off and is receiving EI benefits of \$338 a week finds part-time work in a store that pays him—

An hon. member: Oh, oh.

Mrs. Joy Smith: I am trying to answer the question but, unfortunately, I cannot give this example because the member opposite is closed to the solution.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to have shared my time today with the member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

As many of my fellow government MPs have indicated, we cannot support the motion, which would take away from the good work the government is doing to help workers, improve the economy and reduce poverty. Our government has been very clear. We will ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not working.

The new working while on claim pilot project is meant to encourage EI claimants to pursue and accept all opportunities to work. I do not think anyone can argue with that concept. I can assure all members of the House that under this new program the majority of people who work while they are on claim will benefit and will be better off.

Sadly, it is clear that the opposition does not want anyone to benefit from working while on claim. In fact, the opposition voted against significant funding for this new working while on claim pilot project, funding that goes toward putting money back into the pockets of hard-working Canadians who want to keep their skills active by working while on claim.

This is not the only measure to help Canadians return to work that the opposition has voted against. The opposition voted against increasing funding to the youth employment strategy to help our youth gain work experience and successfully transition into the labour force. The opposition voted against the EI hiring credit, which rewards small businesses by reducing their EI premiums if they hire new workers. The opposition voted against the apprenticeship incentive grant, which provides direct financial assistance to people taking skilled trades in order to help us address the looming skills shortage.

On that, a gentleman came up to me at the hockey game the other night and told me about how his business was booming, but he was having trouble getting skilled workers. It is prevalent in my riding and I know it is across the country.

The opposition also voted against the creation, and then the extension, of the targeted initiative for older workers. By doing so, it voted against helping older workers in single industry towns find new skills and employment after a major employer shut down. The opposition voted against the tool tax credit that helps skilled tradespeople cover the cost of the tools required to carry out their professions. Both of these initiatives, the opposition voted against.

To add insult to injury, the NDP is proposing a \$21 billion tax on everything. This NDP carbon tax would increase the cost of everyday essentials, such as groceries and home heating, a cost low-income Canadians can ill afford.

Canadians voted for a Conservative majority government in the last election because they know we understand the needs of Canadian families. They trust us to handle this delicate economy in these fragile economic times.

The changes that we made to the employment insurance program are meant to be taken as a package. Therefore, the focus of today's debate should be larger than just the working while on claim portion.

Overall, Canada's economic performance is strong. In fact, we have the strongest employment growth among G7 countries, creating 770,000 jobs, new jobs, since July 2009.

The EI program is a vital resource to Canadian workers during times of transition. It provides temporary income support to those who are not working because of job loss, childbirth, illness and various other reasons. The program must also encourage those receiving EI benefits to take the jobs available to them and to remain actively engaged in the labour market. Why? Study after study shows that those who remain connected to the labour market can more easily find permanent employment, and getting Canadians back to work on a permanent basis is really what Canadians want. It is what this government wants. It is what we should all want. I think even my colleagues opposite should agree with me on this.

This new working while on claim pilot project removed the previous disincentive to accepting all available work by removing the cap on the wages employees can keep. We are doing this by allowing a person receiving EI to keep 50% of every dollar they earn while on claim.

Under the previous system, claimants could only earn up to \$75.00, or 40% of their weekly benefit amount, whichever was greater. Anything they earned beyond that threshold was deducted from the benefit payment dollar for dollar. This meant that often after one day of work while on claim, working additional hours or days did not pay at all.

• (1635)

This was a fundamental problem with the previous model. Simply put, it discouraged claimants from accepting more work beyond the 40% threshold.

Business of Supply

Our new working while on claim project removes that disincentive and in most cases provides a higher weekly income to EI claimants. More important, it keeps a strong labour market attachment for people in the workforce and helps them keep their skills up to date, giving them a better chance at finding a stable job faster. This is an important change for Canadians, a change that keeps more money in the pockets of EI claimants who are looking for work. Unlike the NDP's job-killing carbon tax, which would take more money out of their pockets in the form of a \$21 billion tax.

Our government is committed to making targeted common sense changes to the EI program. This new pilot project is just one example of recent improvements to EI. We have also taken steps to connect unemployed Canadians with available jobs. Sometimes people do not know where the available jobs are. Using resources such as the job bank, we are sending job alerts twice a day to people receiving EI. Previously, EI claimants received three job alerts every two weeks, so that has improved drastically.

In addition, we are linking the temporary foreign worker program with the EI program to help identify available jobs and to ensure that Canadians always have the first crack at local jobs before foreign workers.

We are also introducing changes to the best weeks pilot program. In areas of high unemployment, workers will be able to cherry-pick a smaller number of weeks to set their average earnings. This will ensure that in areas of high seasonal unemployment workers are not penalized for working more half weeks and accepting lower paying work in the off season.

A lot of members of Parliament can relate to that. I have some areas in my riding that due to the high prevalence of tourism, which is the second biggest industry, there are a lot of people doing seasonal work. We recognize that and this program should hopefully help these people.

Lastly, we are clarifying what is meant by "suitable employment" so that claimants understand what is expected of them when they are looking for work. We will no longer have a one-size-fits-all definition but a carefully considered approach that accounts for the varying circumstances of those receiving benefits.

We understand that in some regions there is only seasonal work available, as I have alluded to. For those regions with high seasonal unemployment, EI will still and will always be there for them, as it has always been. These changes, including the new working while on claim project, will strengthen employment insurance for all Canadians.

What astounds me is that both the Liberals and NDP oppose every single measure we put forward to help Canadians who are on EI. Not surprisingly, the NDP plans to threaten tens of thousands of Canadian jobs with a job-killing carbon tax. Just look at the NDP's platform where it proposed that \$21 billion tax.

This government has brought in this new pilot project to genuinely try to make EI better. At the end of the pilot it will be assessed, as all pilot projects are. We should all wait to see if these changes do what they are meant to do.

No one can profess to get it dead on every time, but when we know a system is not working we have to try to fix it and we have to have an open mind. The bottom line is, at the end of the day, I cannot support the motion today. I urge my comrades and colleagues in the House to do the same.

● (1640)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question for the Conservative member has to do with teachers. I am a high school teacher. A new teacher can spend long years being on call. This is what happens: you got a degree, you went to university, you took out loans and got bursaries, and then you end up being glued to the phone waiting for a call. Sometimes you get a call at 7:00 a.m. the day of, and you have 30 minutes to get to the school. Weeks can go by without a call.

In the meantime, you have to pay back your loans. You have to live with your family and you cannot work just anywhere. We are professionals and must work on our careers as teachers. What do we live off in the meantime? Employment insurance.

After six weeks, if the teacher has not received a call—it can sometimes take months—the teacher will go work elsewhere, and we lose a teacher. That is what is important. This is about our children's education. These are professionals who studied for years.

What does my Conservative colleague have to say to professionals like me, to teachers, who are sometimes in precarious situations?

[*English*]

Mr. Larry Miller: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if the member means that as a member of Parliament she is working in a precarious profession but I would hope not. I hope she takes it seriously and I am sure she does.

I have had a new daughter-in-law of a couple of months now who is teaching. She does not have a full-time job but very fortunately, since school started at the beginning of September, she has taught every day, with the exception of one or two days. Yes, it is stressful at times for her, but until she gets more time in or more positions open up, she knows that she has to deal with that. It was a decision she made when she went to teachers' college. She knew that could be the case and she is dealing with it.

At the same time, for the member here, not everyone gets to work in the profession he or she went to university for. People try other things, but hopefully she will get something in the field that she studied at university.

Business of Supply

•(1645)

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for outlining his thoughts on this important issue. We heard earlier a quote from Catherine Swift who represents a huge number of independent business people, largely small businesses. We heard the opposition members' reaction to that, which was total indignation against small business. We can look back at *Hansard* but they said something to the effect that her organization has no idea about employees and what their needs are. That is an insult to small business people in this country.

For a party that has gone out and said that we understand small business, I would like your thoughts on small business. I know your background and I would like you to outline what we have done and what we have put in place in EI programs for small businesses.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Before I go to the hon. member for an answer, I would like to remind all hon. members to direct your comments and questions to the Chair rather than to your colleague.

The hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

Mr. Larry Miller: Mr. Speaker, my good friend and colleague from Brant is right. I know that he also comes from a business background. I will stand to be corrected on this but I believe 80-some per cent of all jobs in Canada are supplied by medium and small businesses. That speaks volumes right there.

As I alluded to in my speech, I was watching my local junior A team playing hockey on Saturday night and I asked a guy that I know how business was and he talked about it and the shortage of skills. We got on to our EI changes and he was hoping that some of those were going to help him over the winter. He has been very fortunate.

To the member for Brant who just commented about small business and small enterprise, this country would not be what it is today without them.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to the NDP motion before the House. I know we have been in the House all day debating this very important motion and we are getting toward the end of the debate today, so I am happy to have an opportunity to speak.

I thank the member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles who brought forward the motion, as well as the member for Hamilton Mountain. I know both as our EI critic and as our HRSDC critic, they have worked really hard on this file.

I have been listening to the debate all day and it is very interesting to hear the mantra, the message, the narrative, the talking points of the Conservatives who are saying that all the opposition does, the NDP and the Liberals, is oppose everything. I really want to set the record straight. This motion is an opportunity to deal with something that is very specific, and that is the working while on claim pilot project for EI. It is a very specific motion. The reason it is very specific is because we are trying to address something that is clearly not working. Therefore, for the Conservatives to come out with this blanket black and white statement that the opposition is opposed to

everything, is simply not true. It is sort of the big lie technique, as I heard one of our members say earlier.

I remember a few budgets ago where the NDP successfully convinced the Conservative government to make changes to EI and to include additional funds. As a result, we voted for those measures. We look at legislation, budgets and motions before the House based on their merit. If the working while on claim pilot project were actually working for people, we would be supporting it.

The whole point of today's debate is this. We have been inundated in our offices across the country by real people who are on EI and who have a terrible time with this so-called pilot project that is meant to help them. Let us be very clear about this. This is not a motion just to oppose the government for the sake of opposing. This is a motion to demonstrate and focus the attention of the House on a project that is really important to hundreds of thousands of people and the fact that it is not working for them. We want it to work for them.

I will read the motion. It states:

That, in the opinion of the House, the new Working While on Claim pilot project is: (a) not benefiting the vast majority of EI recipients who are able to find employment; (b) creating a disincentive to take part-time work; and (c) leaving low income Canadians worse off than before; and that the House call on the government to take steps to fix Working While on Claim immediately.

The motion is very straightforward. It is looking for a pragmatic approach to say to the government that its claims that the project is helping just about everyone is not true.

I forgot, Mr. Speaker, to mention that I will be sharing my time with the member for Beaches—East York.

The motion is for us to draw attention to something that is very important.

We have heard the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development repeatedly claim, "the vast majority of EI recipients working while on claim will benefit from the new pilot project". It has to be on the record. The facts are irrefutable that this is not the case. Many people are not only not benefiting, they are hurting and taking home less money now than they were under the previous program. There is something wrong with that picture.

Members of the House do not have to take my word for it. The Canada Employment Insurance Commission is an independent body that analyzes what goes on with EI. It submitted a report to the government on these changes in May, so it is a very recent report. It estimates that while 403,000 Canadians would benefit, 240,000 would be negatively affected.

•(1650)

If we do the math on this, we can see that it means that nearly four in ten EI recipients will be negatively affected by this pilot program. Any idea that this will help the vast majority of EI claimants is simply not true. It is really a cruel thing to keep saying that people are being helped when in actual fact they are not, certainly not the vast majority. This debate is focusing very much on the facts.

Business of Supply

The parliamentary secretary, the member for Simcoe—Grey, claimed on September 24 “those who work more will be able to keep more when it comes to their employment insurance”. As we see from the report from the commission, and as we our constituents, this is simply not the case.

I hope members across the floor recognize that we are not just doing something to oppose for the sake of opposing. We are trying to be proactive and constructive by bringing forward a motion for correction.

My colleague from Hamilton Mountain earlier today gave a wonderful outline of why she knew it would be very unlikely that the motion would work. It is unfortunate and in a way sad and disappointing that the government is not willing to acknowledge the problems that exist with this program. It begs the question as to what really lies underneath these program changes.

Many members have made the point today that employers and workers contribute to the EI program. It is not a government program, but it is an important part of Canada's social safety network. Unemployed Canadians need to be able to rely on it when they are in difficulty. It begs the question as to why the government would do such a shoddy job in bringing forward a program that will not in any way live up to the goals and objectives that those members themselves have put forward. That is why we have the motion today.

Many of us could speak at length about the overall situation with EI just from our experience in dealing with constituents. It is really incredible to see how this program has taken a dive over the years. My colleague from Burnaby—Douglas pointed out earlier that some research done by CANSIM showed just how much the EI program had changed in the country. We know now that less than 40% of unemployed Canadians receive EI benefits. That number is higher for women and seasonal workers. Women are often in part-time work so they fair even less well than that general statistic. Surely this should raise concerns for us.

In the 1990s, 70% to 90% of Canadians who were unemployed were eligible for EI. The rules were relatively fair and they did the job that they were designed to do, and that was to help people through difficult periods of unemployment. We have seen a downward spiral, which started with a Liberal government that made reforms, but things became worse. Now we are at today's situation where even a so-called pilot project that is designed to help people keep a bit of money while working is hitting the people who are most vulnerable, the people who are making the lowest wages. That is patently unfair.

I hope the members of the Conservative government across the way will consider the motion on its merit. I would like to prove the member for Hamilton Mountain wrong. She gave a great speech earlier. I hope she might be wrong and the motion might go through. I hope the Conservative government will recognize that there is a genuine attempt here to show what needs to be done to the program. The motion calls on the government to make the changes so unemployed Canadians can receive the help they need.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I really admire my colleague's optimism.

On the other hand, I have to wonder if the Conservatives live on the same planet as the rest of us and if they know Canada as I know it. It seems they often tend to ignore reality.

For instance, for someone who lives in Watson Lake, in Yukon, there is a town on both sides of it—one is six hours away and the other is seven hours away. That is a little far to go to work in the next town. The same is true for many towns at the end of peninsulas, at the other end of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, for instance.

In the day-to-day reality of people's lives, things do not work the way the Conservatives predict they will.

Does my colleague think this is a question of ignorance or apathy on the Conservatives' part?

[*English*]

Ms. Libby Davies: Mr. Speaker, we do try to be optimistic. I have a feeling the member for Hamilton Mountain will be proved right when we have the vote tomorrow night.

I think there is a deep problem here. We have a government that is suspicious of people. There is always this assumption that people are trying to get away with something. The fact is that most people on EI, or any income assistance program, are there because of genuine need and they play by the rules.

The new rules that have come in, whether it is having to work much further away, or this pilot project, are really designed to frustrate people. That is really regrettable. Surely the system should work for people. It should be accessible, it should be understandable and it should be available when people need it.

• (1700)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to share with the House an email that came to my office today.

I have been back and forth with this gentleman, Mr. Pink, although he says that his father's name was Mr. Pink, not his. He was in the fish business for 30 years, mainly in Louisbourg, which has a strong, proud tradition of being a very successful fishing port.

He has said that the businesses are going through a great difficulty retaining skilled workers. They have been drawing from communities around them for the last while. When they are trying to develop new product, sometimes it is just a day or a day and a half of work. People have to drive all the way to Louisbourg, which can be a considerable drive away from those other communities. He says that people cannot be blamed for not driving to Louisbourg with the price of gas.

He asks how this is ensuring claimants always benefit by accepting available work? That is what we are trying to get at. He goes on to say that the minister is clearly showing she has no idea what she is talking about on this pilot project.

Business of Supply

The question for my colleague, from Mr. Pink, is this. How does this ensure claimants always benefit by accepting available work?

Ms. Libby Davies: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is it is not giving that assurance at all. I know what the member means. I think we have all shared the frustration that the minister does not really seem to be aware of the actual impacts or consequences of the program.

Had the government bothered to talk to people on EI and find out what the heck was going on, maybe we would have a better program and we would not be here debating it today.

As we have seen in so many instances, and to answer the fellow who wrote the email, the government did not bother to go out and consult with people or even employers. There are in fact disincentives in this pilot program that mean, particularly for lower paid workers or workers who get just a day, a day and a half or two days of work, people are losing money. Why on earth would anybody do that?

This is a terrible flaw in the program. We are asking the government to address the problems and make it work.

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise in the House today to speak in favour of the motion put forward by my colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles. I am also very honoured to share the time with my colleague from Vancouver East, although I am not sure if she reciprocates. She just about forgot me, but never mind, I am up now.

The motion that we are talking about today focuses on the Conservative government's provisions to the working while on claim pilot program and calls on the government to take steps to fix the program immediately.

Some heady claims have been made about the government's revisions to this program. The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development has been quite adamant on two claims: first, that the vast majority of employment insurance recipients will benefit from these revisions; and second, that everyone who works will keep more. Her parliamentary secretary, the member for Simcoe—Grey, has been equally unequivocal in these very same claims for the revised working while on claim pilot. However, all is not what it is claimed to be.

According to a recent publication of the Mowat Centre for Policy Innovation entitled, "What the New EI Rules Mean":

EI beneficiaries with earned incomes that are around half the size of their weekly EI benefits (or smaller) will generally see a decrease in total income. This is because they will experience a 50 per cent clawback on income that was previously exempt from any clawback. EI beneficiaries with earned incomes that are greater than roughly half the size of their weekly EI benefits will generally experience an increase in total income, because they will experience only a 50 per cent claw back on income that was previously subject to a 100 per cent clawback.

So much for the claim that "everyone who works will keep more".

What about the "vast majority" benefiting from the revisions?

According to a May 2012 report by the Canada Employment Insurance Commission, 240,000 EI recipients stand to be negatively impacted by these revisions. That is about 40% of all EI recipients,

which is a far cry from the vast majority by any reasonable definition.

The commission expressed its concern about disincentives built into these revisions and notes:

...claimants who currently work a few hours a week while on claim, below the current allowable threshold, may decide to not work these potential hours as they would be subject to the 50% earnings exemption from the first dollar earned.

Compounding the problem here is the fact that those who are adversely impacted by these changes are those who can least absorb this financial setback. It is those who earned income that was less than half their claim who will be penalized under these changes.

It is not the operating assumption or principles of the NDP that workers on EI need incentives to look for and secure work. However, what the working while on claim program is meant to do is remove disincentives to work. In this, the revisions to the program fail miserably in that it has put in place, by way of removing the shift in clawback, a very obvious penalty for about 40% of EI recipients seeking to get back into the labour market. This is moving backwards at a time when employment insurance, properly managed, would provide an opportunity to move forward for Canadians.

With 1.4 million Canadians still unemployed, and I would note 300,000 more than pre-recession levels, we should be extending EI stimulus measures to wrestle down current unacceptably high levels of unemployment in this country.

With most Canadians living paycheque to paycheque, we should be eliminating the two-week waiting period. It must be remembered that employment insurance is not available to those who voluntarily leave their work. Therefore, there should be nothing punitive in a system that is intended to provide support to those who find themselves involuntarily without work. This, after all, is an insurance scheme that workers have paid into in an effort to save themselves from financial ruin should they lose their livelihoods.

• (1705)

Further to this point, and to ensure that EI provides meaningful benefit levels, the rate of benefits should make their way to 60% of insurable earnings.

It has also been noted by many that periods of unemployment are getting longer. This signals the need for improvements in the quality and monitoring of training and retraining programs.

As the last proposition, I would propose that we return the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours of work, irrespective of the regional rate of unemployment. This is a critically important proposition. Since the mid-1990s, the number of unemployment persons eligible for EI benefits has fallen by half, from about 80% to 90% down to about 40%. It has been estimated that Liberal government policy changes to the Employment Insurance Act in the 1990s are responsible for about half of this decline in EI eligibility.

Certainly there has been an obvious and precipitous decline in eligibility in the wake of the stricter eligibility requirements introduced by the Liberal government.

Business of Supply

The other part of the equation that explains this rapid decline in eligibility are the long-term changes in labour market that have been ignored by both Liberal and now Conservative governments.

We should consider the following: Since 1976, the number of multiple job holders has increased by 150%; the number of part-time job holders has increased by 55%; and self-employment has increased by 29%. As one expert on employment insurance, Professor Leah Vosko, said:

Workers least well-protected [by EI] are clustered in part-time and temporary forms of paid employment and self-employment, and in sectors of the economy long viewed as ancillary but experiencing considerable growth in recent decades, such as sales and services....

This is a particularly important analysis for my riding of Beaches—East York and my city of Toronto. The changing labour market has reshaped my riding and my city socially and economically. I would note that while there has been a 59% increase in the number of temporary and contract jobs right across this country over the past decade, over that same decade there was a 68% increase in Toronto. Part of this story too has been the loss of well over 100,000 manufacturing jobs in Toronto, even pre-2008 recession.

Again, Professor Vosko was quoted in a recent study on the EI system as follows:

A notable overarching finding is that EI's entry requirements disfavour part-time workers. For instance, in urban areas and metropolises, where entry requirements tend to be highest, more than 50 per cent of workers in this group do not meet the 700 hour threshold.

Insensitivity of regular benefit requirements to the changing nature of employment in this formula contributes to disenfranchisement of workers falling outside the norm of the full-time permanent job in low-unemployment regions where workers in part-time and temporary forms of employment face high entry requirements.

So it is that, in Toronto, less than 25% of unemployed workers are even eligible for EI benefits, far less than the national average for eligibility, which hovers around 40%, and well below the pre-Liberal reform levels when 56% of unemployed workers in Toronto were eligible.

There was a time in our history that employment insurance played a critical social and economic role by countering poverty and limiting income disparity in this country. Over time, successive Liberal and Conservative governments have undermined the effectiveness of our employment insurance system to accomplish these goals which has been done both through deliberate changes to the system and by way of the sheer failure of successive federal governments to adapt the system to changing labour market conditions.

This, of course, is to say nothing of the failure of successive federal governments to ensure that Canada has labour markets that provide good, productive jobs, jobs that can support families and keep Canadians out of poverty.

In the meantime, I urge the government to fix immediately the harm it has caused with its revisions, the working while on claim program.

● (1710)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have more of a comment than a question but I will throw a question in at the end.

If this is something deliberate, then I am missing what the rationale is behind why the Conservatives made this change. If it came to their attention that they were hurting the most vulnerable, I would think a caring government would want to make a change. Yet, it continues to attack the NDP. The Conservatives are talking all around it over there today and not addressing the problem.

We are sort of befuddled. We think this can be fixed and, obviously, the official opposition does too, which is why it brought forward this motion today. What can the government do to fix this problem so that people will no longer be hurt?

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, we in the official opposition know this can be fixed. However, as I have sat here and listened all day to the commentary, I am a little more on the side of the member for Hamilton Mountain than the member for Vancouver East. Although I respect my colleague for her optimism, I do not think one needs advanced degrees in semantics and pragmatism to listen to this language and understand that what the government is trying to do is force low wage workers off the EI system and into the workforce. I think the language the government uses is “encouraging low wage workers off the EI system”, but it is based on the presumption that there all kinds of jobs in this country that are empty and want to be filled. However, the latest statistics I have seen show that there are six unemployed persons for every vacancy in this country, so I am not sure what labour market the government is looking to.

● (1715)

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my colleague's comments about the nature of work. He talked about people often having multiple sources of income as if that is a bad thing, or the nature of a job being much more flexible and different.

My question is a sincere one. The nature of work in 2012 is very different from 1912. We now have the Internet, mobility, the ability to work from home and all of those things, especially in my constituency where many people have multiple sources of income and are happy to do it. They log, farm or perhaps work at a local tourist lodge and their lives are built around that kind of economic activity.

I would like a comment from him about the nature of work in 2012. Perhaps there are more opportunities out there than in the older model that was in place, let us say, in 1912.

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, the opportunities for folks in Toronto in terms of the labour market are as I described in my speech. When we talk about part-time and contract work, we are generally speaking about low wage work in the service industry. The fact that people have to cobble a number of low wage jobs together becomes very difficult in a city like Toronto where the government just turned down a very sensible, practical and economically viable motion by my colleague for Trinity—Spadina for a national public transit strategy. To get from one side of the city to the other in Toronto these days takes an extraordinarily long time.

Business of Supply

To have to cobble together low wage part-time jobs in the city of Toronto is an enormous problem, especially for people trying to raise families in what is the most expensive city to live in Canada. In Toronto from 2000 to 2005, prior to the recession, we saw a 42% increase in the working poor. I am talking about the working poor. Those are the kinds of jobs that are now available to people in Toronto. There is a hollowing out of the middle-class in Toronto and that is the job market reality for people in Toronto.

This is not about hunting, fishing or logging. This is about people working in minimum wage jobs in a big, expensive city and trying to raise families. It is impossible.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to speak to the opposition motion today. I will be splitting my time with the member for Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette and I am happy to hear what he has to say, after my 10 minutes.

I would like to make a couple of introductory comments.

I have been here all day, listening to the discussion and the debate on both sides of the House. I think what is important for Canadians to understand, and for us here in the House to understand, is that this is a pilot project. By the nature of a pilot project, we are looking at what we can do to make things better. Instead of rolling something out that is a *fait accompli*, we are rolling out a pilot project, making some changes, making some improvements, trying to make things better for all Canadians. In this case, through the EI system, the employment insurance program, we are trying to make improvements. We are trying to make sure there is an opportunity for Canadians to gain full-time employment. It is really about opportunity. That is the end goal. It is the end goal for all of us here. It is the end goal for most Canadians, most family members. They would like to provide for their families through full-time employment.

That is not the case in every part of the country, or at any time of the year, or during what we have had recently with the recessionary aspects of what has happened to the economy worldwide and throughout parts of Canada. Therefore they have to take up part-time work. They have to take opportunities that are available. Some of them are for one day, some three days and some four days.

I am not going to get into the semantics of arguing, taking a specific case or a case where somebody works two days or one day, this many hours or that many hours. The concept here is that we are trying, through a pilot project on working on claim, to get people to be able to keep more of their money when they are working while they are also on employment insurance.

Under the previous system, there was a disincentive to work. Under this system that we are piloting, we are trying to encourage people to work.

The whole concept is an incentive to work, so that if people are only working a day or two a week and there is an opportunity, now we are hoping that they will be able to work three or four days a week, maybe five days a week. Before, they were able to keep so much of their money. It may mean one or two or three part-time jobs. I know it is difficult. It is a balancing act for families and individuals who have to do that. I know it is a lot of work. In my community of

Burlington, there are a lot of people who are doing that. They are juggling different jobs to be able to make ends meet.

The concept here in this pilot project is to encourage that, promote that, so that in the end, in most cases, in many cases, often part-time work leads to full-time employment. It is better for your resumé. It is good experience. It brings income into people's homes. It also gives them an opportunity to have more money and to further themselves and their career.

I am not going to get into the discussion about what the NDP would do. We all know that the NDP campaign had a carbon tax in it. It had the \$21 billion piece in there. But that is not what we are here today to talk about. However, that is the kind of thing the NDP was promoting. We all know that the more taxes people pay the harder it is on the lower-income individuals in this country because it will be applied to everything, whether it is gasoline, groceries and so on. Those are essential needs, not luxury items, and that carbon tax, that additional tax the New Democrats have been promoting, will be a tax on everything.

What we need to talk about is getting people back to work, making sure we have a tax system that is fair and that we move forward.

Through our economic action plan, we have been able to create a little over three-quarters of a million jobs, net new jobs, in this country. That is a net of the job market that was available prior to the recession.

The economic action plan has been very aggressive and very active in the marketplace. It has been successful. It has been able to deliver jobs, deliver opportunity.

What is really important about those jobs is that they are not all part-time jobs. They are mostly full-time employment. That is what we need, that is what families are looking for and that is what will help the economic growth, the productivity of this country.

● (1720)

Often we compare ourselves to other countries, and one area in which Canada is lagging behind, in my view and in the view of many economists, is productivity. These programs we are doing here, including the programs we have put through EI, have assisted in our productivity. We are trying to make Canadians and the Canadian economy more productive, efficient and effective than other economies around the world and we are being successful, not just because of the government's programs but because of Canadians' will to work, to make a difference and to add value to their families, to their country and to their community.

I applaud all Canadians who are out there looking for work and doing what they can and taking up part-time jobs. There is no doubt that it is a difficult task, whether juggling family commitments or other commitments in terms of being in certain places at certain times and moving to different jobs. That is why our EI programs are important, to make that happen.

Business of Supply

Earlier today I heard that it is not our money. That is absolutely right. It is not our money. It is the employers' and the employees' money. However, the vast majority of employers in this country, which supply funds to this program, do not lay off people. They do not collect themselves. It is for the potential of their employees losing their jobs or being laid off. The vast majority of employees of this country never collect EI. They pay into the system all their working lives and never have to collect, because it is an insurance program.

I do not want to collect EI and I do not know many Canadians who want to collect EI, but it is an important social net that Canada has developed and it is a good social net. Somebody needs to make sure we manage the money and the program so it works for those who actually need it. We need to speak up and be able to develop programs to make sure that pool of cash is there. We as a government have decided, and rightfully so, that EI money should be used for EI. That is unlike previous governments, which have used the EI fund for other purposes. It is now the law that EI money has to be used on EI programs.

The other area in which I am very proud of our government is that we have done a lot in the area of poverty. EI is an insurance program that is a bridge between jobs and opportunities and things that are happening. However, it obviously affects the income levels of Canadians and it is an important safety net for us as an income support program. We have done a lot and I am very proud of this government. We have the lowest poverty rates in Canada of any government in the history of Canada, and I am very proud of that.

My community is mainly made up of small and medium-sized businesses. The largest business in my community is 800 people and the vast majority are small and medium-sized businesses. People in my riding have come to see me who have relied on the EI system.

In terms of poverty in my area, I am very proud of this government's support for seniors. This is National Seniors Day and on the housing side, supporting low-income seniors, we have been able to develop a couple of new housing developments in my riding to help support seniors. On National Seniors Day, I thank the government for its efforts on that.

• (1725)

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will share a reflection and ask the member to comment on it.

If the aim of these changes in the program is to encourage people to work, then why do that through a process of threats as opposed to answering some of the issues that have been problematic with Service Canada and the EI system accessibility for quite a while now, for the last year, by making it easier for people to access EI services both online and through direct help?

There has been talk from the member's side about people not knowing where the jobs are and so why not put more of an effort to making sure they understand and see where those jobs are, because as my colleague said earlier, the nature of work has changed and that is not a bad thing? Why is the government not making it easier, as opposed to penalizing people who are trying to use the EI system?

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Speaker, I do not see where the Conservative Government of Canada is threatening individuals on EI.

In fact, we have enhanced the program in the sense that if people are on EI and looking for work, there are job alerts in terms of what opportunities might be available in their area or skill set that they indicated during the EI process. They get that twice a day now. It used to be once a week, maybe every couple of weeks, that people would hear from the EI office.

We are encouraging people. Encouraging people is not threatening people. We have an EI hiring credit. We have brought in an apprentice incentive grant. There are opportunities for apprentices who need tools, some support for that. Everything we are doing is supportive.

We are not threatening even one soul. We are making sure the system is there so people can take advantage of the opportunities in this country as they become available.

• (1730)

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the crux of the issue today is that in the past people could work and earn up to 40% of their EI benefit and not have any of that clawed back. Now in the new system, 50¢ of every dollar is clawed back. What that amounts to is a 50% marginal tax rate on income. That is a disincentive for people to work.

I would like my hon. colleague to comment on that. I have heard a lot of weeping and wailing about the carbon tax from the other side of the floor, and now the Conservatives plan to impose a 50% marginal income tax.

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Speaker, in actual fact this pilot program is giving people the opportunity to work more hours and keep more of the money they earn and still continue to collect EI.

It has gone from where people could keep some of it, to a maximum, to now where they can actually keep more of it, on a percentage basis. It is not a disincentive. It is actually the opposite. It is an incentive for people to find more work. People might be only working one day a week, six hours a day, which might be what is available, but if they are able to find more work, even if it is part-time, up to three days a week, they will be able to keep more of the money they earn under this pilot project. It is an incentive to work, not a disincentive.

[Translation]

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my Conservative colleague mentioned a little earlier in his speech that employment insurance should serve as a bridge for someone who has just lost his or her job.

I do not disagree with that, but it raises the following question: why will the Conservatives not adopt the NDP proposal to eliminate the two-week waiting period? That delay prevents people who have lost their jobs from meeting their families' needs, because it takes several weeks for the first EI cheque to arrive.

I think this is an excellent measure that the Conservatives should adopt.

Business of Supply

[English]

Mr. Mike Wallace: Mr. Speaker, I just want to remind my colleague opposite that it is an insurance program, and it is a normal process to have a two-week waiting period.

I do agree that we should continue to do what we can from an administrative and effectiveness point of view to make sure that individuals who do need EI, after their waiting period, get their cheques as quickly as possible.

I know the minister has been working on making sure we improve our processes to be able to make that happen quicker.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I begin my remarks on the topic at hand I want to say how disappointed I was in the response to my question by the member for Beaches—East York. The contempt that he has for rural communities and natural resource industries was proudly on display. I guess the rest of the caucus has been infected with the mission and message of its leader, who wants to bring natural resource industries to their knees via a carbon tax and excess regulations.

I would remind the member opposite and all members of the House that at the current time it is the natural resource industries that are carrying the country. I proudly represent a natural resource constituency. The member for Hamilton Centre often extolls the virtues of Hamilton's steel industry and so on. I would remind members opposite that the steel has to come from somewhere. It is dug out of the ground in mines in rural Canada. It would behoove members opposite, especially members of the NDP, to remember this.

As the final government speaker of the day regarding the topic at hand, I would like to talk about why the motion should not be supported by the House.

We heard from the relevant minister, the parliamentary secretary and several government members about how successful our economic action plan has been. We are talking about over 770,000 net new jobs, 90% of those being full-time jobs. As of last Friday, it was shown that our GDP continues to grow, in fact beating market expectations. There are 350,000 more Canadians working in Canada today than at any previous point in history. Poverty for seniors, adults and children has declined from 40 year highs under the previous Liberal government to historic lows. Over one million Canadians have been removed from the tax rolls completely because of our low-tax plan for jobs and growth, and that is truly a remarkable achievement. These are all indications that Canadians are better off under our stable national majority Conservative government. Now is certainly not the time for risky economic experiments.

Members opposite sneer and laugh when we bring up their proposed \$21 billion carbon tax as if that is some big joke. It is not a joke. It was in their platform, that \$21 billion comes from them. Canadians are going to know that if the NDP had its way, it would do what it does best, pick their pockets.

Canadians understand that the global economy is fragile. There are challenges around the world. We can see what happens when a country's finances get out of control by looking at what is going on in Europe on our TV screens every night. That is why Canadians

voted in the last election to put their trust in our Conservative Prime Minister's low-tax plan for jobs and growth.

The changes to EI that were announced in economic action plan 2012 continue through with the good work we are doing to ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not. Under the new working while on claim pilot project, we are encouraging EI claimants to pursue and accept all opportunities for work. As is always the case, we are working to ensure our programs fulfill our goals.

I talked earlier about the constituency I represent. My people are free people. They farm. They log. They ranch. They are self-employed. They are proud to be free, proud to be self-reliant and proud to be independent. The dignity of work is something that my constituents truly appreciate.

I can assure the House that under this new program the majority of people who work while on a claim will benefit and will be better off. The changes we are proposing are designed to help Canadians get back to work more quickly.

As a result of the strong leadership of our Prime Minister and our Minister of Finance, who by all accounts is considered the best finance minister in the world, Canada is leading the G7 in job growth. I never tire of saying 770,000 net new jobs, most of them permanent jobs. However, we are still currently experiencing job and labour shortages in many occupations and regions of this country. In short, we cannot afford to have Canadians sitting at home unaware of the demand for their talent and skills. This skills and labour shortage will only be magnified by our aging population and by competition from other nations for skilled workers.

● (1735)

This is part of the reason the government is working to coordinate the temporary foreign worker program with the EI program to help connect unemployed Canadians with available jobs in their local area.

The jobs are out there. According to Stats Canada this spring, there were over 250,000 job vacancies each month across the country. In my own constituency, the potash mines and the trucking industry are crying for workers. Indeed, when one goes further west from where I am in Saskatchewan, and in Alberta in particular, worker shortages are of great concern to employers and governments.

Business of Supply

We know that some employers are hiring temporary foreign workers while Canadians with the same skills in the same community or region are claiming EI benefits. For example, in January, 350 people in Alberta who cited significant experience as food counter attendants had claimed for EI benefits. At the same time, employers in the province were approved to hire more than 1,200 foreign workers for the same jobs. In Ontario, over 2,200 general farm workers submitted EI claims while employers received approval to hire over 1,500 foreign nationals for the same occupation.

We believe Canadians should always have the first opportunity to fill jobs in their local communities. How will we ensure that Canadians are given the first crack? By linking EI and the temporary foreign worker program we will be alerting Canadians to these job opportunities through the job alert system. We are also increasing the frequency with which we are sending out job alerts to Canadians on EI. Before, it was three job alerts every two weeks. Now it will be two job alerts every day. As we face unprecedented skills shortages across the country, it will be critical that we work to help Canadians find available jobs and keep them.

EI is an important program here in Canada and will continue to be. These improvements introduce much needed common sense efforts to help Canadians get back to work faster.

Let me be clear. These changes are not about forcing people to accept work outside their own area or to take jobs for which they are not suited. For example, we will not be asking those with manufacturing experience in Ontario to move to Alberta to work in food services. We will not be asking administrative professionals in British Columbia to move to Ontario to work on farms, although I must say, as a farm owner, working on farms is very often a rewarding and pleasant occupation. What we are doing is connecting Canadians with local jobs that require a similar skill set. The suite of changes we announced in the economic action plan 2012 will support Canadians in their return to work.

Beginning in 2005, under the Liberals, the previous version of the working while on claim pilot tested to see if allowing claimants to earn more while receiving EI benefits would encourage people to accept all available work. Under the previous pilot project, EI recipients who had part-time or occasional work had their benefits reduced dollar for dollar once they earned \$75 or 40% of their weekly benefit amount, whichever was greater. To put it another way, once they hit this cap their wages were clawed back 100% from their benefits. This discouraged many of them from accepting available work beyond the 40% threshold. Why would Canadians accept further work if they were not going to be paid for it? This often meant that after one day of work while on claim, working additional hours did not pay at all.

We need to encourage Canadians to work, not discourage them. We know that the previous pilot did discourage people from accepting more work because of the cap that existed on how much they could earn, so we changed that and removed the cap. We are building on what we learned from that pilot and are making further improvements to work incentives through this more moderate clawback rate over a greater range of earnings. I would remind members that the purpose of a pilot is to do a test. Under this new pilot, EI claimants can keep more of what they earn.

The choice is clear. There are two paths being proposed here today. There is our low-tax plan for jobs and growth, which is clearly working, and then there is the option put forward by the NDP, a return to the failed policies of Pierre Trudeau, with high taxes and out of control spending. I think it would be wise for members to stand up for Canada and support our economic action plan.

The motion is factually incorrect. It fails to take into account all the changes we are making to EI to ensure Canadians are always better off working than not. It is contrary to our economic action plan, which is delivering. For these reasons, the government will be voting against the motion.

● (1740)

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, just as a matter of clarity, the only thing I have contempt for is the ignorance exposed by the question that draws an analogy between labour markets and working life in rural Canada and that in the city of Toronto. I also have contempt for the malice that underlies this program.

Perhaps the member could tell us how these revisions to the working while on claim program benefit people in urban Canada.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Speaker, again, it is our firm belief that working is better than not working. As I pointed out in my remarks, there are 250,000 jobs that are going unfilled right across the country. These jobs are in rural, suburban and urban areas. We are encouraging people to work and acquire the dignity of work.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I just cannot understand what the member is talking about when he says that people want to work. Of course, people want to work. If someone is working on a potato farm one day a week for five months of the year packing potatoes, that is the only work that person has in that rural community.

The member says that he is a promoter of natural resources. However, people in these communities only have one day of work a week. I do not know how he thinks that these people will find jobs for the other four days because those jobs are not in these rural areas. For a part-time snowplow operator, if there is only one snowstorm a week, what are they going to do the other four days?

The work is not there. If the work was there these people would be working.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member that under this program the majority of people who work while they are on claim will benefit and will be better off.

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However, it is clear that opposition members do not want anyone to benefit from working while on claim. In fact, they voted against significant funding of \$74 million for the working while on claim pilot project. Indeed, the opposition voted against countless initiatives we have put in place to help Canadians get back to work.

• (1745)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while listening to my colleague's speech, I forgot for several minutes that we were still debating the opposition motion. In fact, how can he talk about creating jobs or about taxes, when right now we are debating reforms to employment insurance? I did not hear him mention the real topic of today's debate once. He did not talk about how the government can propose reforms that will take away income from so many people.

I would like to give him an opportunity to correct some things he said and to get back to the topic of debate today. My colleague might like to correct what he said and explain who, exactly, will see their income go down, because there will be people. I would like to allow him to correct what he said.

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Speaker, again, the key to economic development, economic growth, job creation and job retention is having a public policy environment in place that creates wealth and jobs.

It is interesting that opposition members voted against all the measures that we have put in place to help Canadian workers. They voted against the youth employment strategy, the EI hiring credit, the apprenticeship incentive grant, the targeted initiative for older workers, tax credits, the pan-Canadian framework for foreign credential recognition and the foreign credential recognition micro loans program. The list goes on and on. It is all about creating wealth.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I know my colleague is a man of science. Using some kind of science or measurement, I would think that if one is going to change something for the better then there must have been a time when it was worse.

The stuff about “our party is all about working” is great. Everyone is for working and creating jobs, but when there are no jobs then there has to be a safety net. That is what this debate is about today. When people are sick, there is a hospital. When people are unemployed, there is EI.

What measurement did the Conservatives use? The reference was made several times, for the last two weeks probably, that the vast majority are benefiting. Give us a number; any number at all, pick one. It can be plus or minus ten on either side. I would be comfortable with that.

How many are benefiting, how many are being hurt and what is the measurement?

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Speaker, this is a pilot project to encourage EI claimants to pursue and accept all opportunities to work. We will always consider refinements to ensure it achieves these goals.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin my presentation today by congratulating the member opposite, the hon. member for Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette.

I too represent a rural region. We certainly do not have any iron smelting plants back home. The mines closed a long time ago, but we still have primary industry, such as the fishery. We have fish processing plants. Our colleague across the way said that employment insurance will ensure that those people can continue to work all year long.

I can assure you that if people were to fish all year long back home, the fishing industry would not be around for very long. It would not take very long before the resource was depleted. A seasonal industry cannot magically be converted into a permanent industry that lasts all year. That is certain. There is no mistaking that many regions in Canada depend on seasonal industries.

Employment insurance has always been there to support these industries, and that is not for nothing. It is not because people do not want to work during the winter or because they are not interested in working. The inescapable reality in Canada is that we have a winter season to contend with. In the winter, a number of industries slow down drastically. There is nothing anyone can do about it. The hon. member from the third party told us about a snowplow operator who might remove snow only one day out of four. A person like that cannot make up work.

I should have mentioned that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier. I am telling you now, because I will be stopping in about 10 minutes.

To come back to the issue of seasonal work, I would add that the nature of the industry in our regions is such that we cannot just magically create an industry that operates year-round. Employment insurance has a very important role to play in our regions. It is wrong to think that people are not interested in going to work. EI allows our industries, our small and medium-sized enterprises to work to their fullest during the summer and to operate effectively during that time. EI allows regions with a seasonal economy to enjoy a smooth-running, profitable economy during the summer months.

I can tell you that, in the Gaspé, the Magdalen Islands and a number of regions in Canada with seasonal industries, the summer industries—often tourism, as is the case in my area—are profitable not just for small and medium-sized companies, but also for the government, which collects taxes. These industries create employment and wealth and unfortunately require support.

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We can do nothing about the fact that tourists do not visit our area in the winter. There is very little in the Gaspé of interest to tourists in the winter. Naturally, if my colleague from Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette can find a magic solution to make winter profitable, we will listen. However, until we find a solution, all we can do is find a means of keeping workers in the winter. Then, at the start of the tourist season, in the summer, the trained workers who are familiar with our region are available for work and can start right at the beginning. They are trained workers.

If we lose these workers because of reforms to employment insurance, if they are forced to move to other parts of Canada because they do not have the support of employment insurance, we will not be able to train other employees. It is very expensive for small and medium-sized firms. They do not have the money.

If there is no money for employment insurance, we will have to find other programs to support small and medium-sized firms in the regions. Quite frankly, it will cost much more than the employment insurance program.

I would just like to make a small comment. We are told that everyone who wants to work will find a job and that this reform will not impoverish these people. That was mentioned, but I want to mention it again.

● (1750)

In the past three years, the pilot project to support people working while on claim cost \$130 million. This year, it is estimated that it will cost \$74 million. If this amount is reduced by almost 50%, how can the government say that it will not affect the income of these people?

The people most affected by this reform will be those who make the least amount of money. If we do the math, it is not the people who work three, four or even five days while on EI who will be most affected by the government's proposed pilot project. The people who work only one or two days stand to lose the most with this reform.

In my riding, those who benefited from the pilot project in the past while they were receiving benefits were only working one or two days a week, not four or five. They were filling in at certain processing plants. From time to time, fish arrives and workers are needed for a day or two to process the stock. There is not enough work for the week, just for a day or two. These people will be affected by the reform because they will earn 50% less than they did in the past. Half the money they earn for a day of work will be deducted from their benefits. They will not make as much money as they did in the past. They will have to spend a lot of money to commute and to pay for child care. It is very expensive to work just for one day and it must be cost-effective.

The reform will do exactly the opposite. It will encourage people to refuse the work they are offered. This will have a negative impact on the region's labour force and on small and medium-sized businesses and processing plants. These plants will have difficulty finding workers and will be unable to operate. This will harm the seasonal economy. A certain kind of economy exists in our region in the winter. This will make the situation even more difficult because there will be a shortage of workers.

The hon. member for Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, who spoke just before me, said that we are not here to force anyone to

work in other regions. I would like to quote his colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, who made the following comment in the House last Thursday:

EI recipients will now get job postings twice a day for those chosen occupations within their community, as well as postings for jobs in related occupations in other geographic regions. This will enable them to make more informed decisions about how to conduct their job search.

When I read that, I do not think that claimants in seasonal work areas will benefit from the fact that they can stay at home. The government is really offering them an incentive to leave the region.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour said that claimants would be sent job postings for jobs in other regions.

I will give an example of how this translates in my region. A woman in the Magdalen Islands received a written notice indicating that four jobs were available in her region. Her region is defined as extending from Chandler to the town of Gaspé. To get from the Magdalen Islands to either Chandler or Gaspé, it takes a five-hour ferry ride and about 10 hours of driving. I do not understand how this could be profitable for this claimant, or for the small business that would have hired her. Of course there would be absences every now and then if one had to commute 15 hours each way every day. It would take 30 hours of commuting in a 24-hour day. It makes no sense.

With this reform, the definition of one's region is incomprehensible. What does it mean to offer a claimant employment in another region? The region has nothing to do with where one lives. Claimants will feel so harassed with the new system that they might give up on EI altogether.

● (1755)

Will these people have to leave their region? Will they be forced to turn to social assistance? In that case, it will not cost the federal government anything, since that is a provincial program.

My colleague just said that they do not want to take money away from claimants. Frankly, the government should be consulting claimants, because that money belongs to us, to claimants and employers.

In closing, there has been a serious lack of consultation and that is—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development for questions and comments.

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[English]

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by clarifying some of the comments made by the member opposite and some of his colleagues, particularly the member for Hamilton Mountain, which misrepresented me and misled the public based on a specific article. I would like to table that article with respect to my question, so that the House would understand what was actually said and I would no longer be misrepresented by the opposition.

Second, there are a lot of seasonal workers who work in my riding of Simcoe—Grey. Both the employers and employees are delighted with the changes we are making in employment insurance, because there are actually more jobs being made available to them in their local area, as we have specified numerous times. Therefore, I encourage people not to listen to the fabrication of my colleague opposite, who seems to think that people are not being provided with information in their local areas about similar occupations. That is what this is about. The people who want to avail themselves of EI outside of those can continue to do so, and we encourage them to do so.

I ask the member opposite, has he read the new regulations, does he know what they are and can he state those facts?

• (1800)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we go to the response, was the parliamentary secretary seeking unanimous consent to table a document?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order to table this article.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. parliamentary secretary was seeking unanimous consent to table a document?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I would ask for consent. This is an article that was referred to by the member for Hamilton Mountain.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Does the hon. parliamentary secretary have consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

[Translation]

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, I would like to explain why I oppose her tabling that document in the House.

Her comments are already recorded in Hansard. Once again, I would point out that I did not make up what I said. I quoted exactly what she said last Thursday in the House of Commons. It is quite clear.

I invite people to consult the adjournment proceedings in last Thursday's Hansard to read what I just quoted. I think what it says is very enlightening: by all accounts, the government wants to empty the regions.

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have watched the debate all day today, sometimes from the office and

sometimes here, and I am really saddened by the remarks of government members on this issue. My question is to the member who just spoke.

This is a pretty simple motion. It is calling on the government to take steps to fix the working while on claim program immediately. I heard the member for Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette say that the government would be voting against it. This is the House of Commons. This is where members stand up in their own right on an issue. The member for Egmont said she was hearing about problems.

This is an easy solution. There is a lot of cynicism about this place. This is an opportunity, on a simple motion, for the House of Commons to work on fixing a problem. I am not taking anything away from the government. All it has to do is to go to 40%. Let it happen.

[Translation]

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Liberal member for his comments.

Definitely, everyone should be taking part in this debate. It is a crucial program—perhaps even one of the two most important federal programs.

There is a clear lack of attention on the part of the members opposite. It is truly disappointing to see how little they are doing to support Canadians, especially those Canadians who need it most.

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine sees the situation very clearly. He comes from a region that is being specifically targeted, as are all the Atlantic provinces.

The government does not understand what is happening in these regions. I toured Peggy's Cove, which is near St. John's. These people are hard-working and proud, as are all people from Newfoundland, Gaspé, the Magdalen Islands and New Brunswick. All across Canada, most people would prefer to work and are proud of what they do. I am under the impression that the government is basing its decisions solely on prejudices, clichés and cynicism. To the government, I am sure that the beautiful little village of Peggy's Cove represents an expense, a dock to be maintained, bothersome people. The Conservatives believe that it is not important. However, the fishermen from Peggy's Cove are not asking for the government to help them, they are just asking it to stop—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Unfortunately, the time allocated for the question is over. I give the floor to the hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague and I truly appreciate his comments.

It is obvious that the members opposite do not understand the people from our regions at all. These people resort to employment insurance not because they do not want to work, but because they are proud of their region, and want to continue living there and contributing to the economy. It is our duty to help them.

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●(1805)

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to start by congratulating my colleague from Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine on his eloquent speech that highlighted the problems affecting seasonal workers. This is something that is very important in my riding of Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier.

The motion on the working while on claim pilot project, which was put forward by my colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, is very important. I am very proud to support it in this House today. I would also like to take a moment to congratulate the member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles on her hard work on the employment insurance file and to thank her for moving this motion.

The motion we are debating today highlights some major problems with the Conservative government's new pilot project and calls on the government to take immediate action to correct these flaws that directly affect the most vulnerable employment insurance claimants.

In theory, the objective of the new pilot project created by the Conservatives is to encourage Canadians receiving EI benefits to accept a part-time job while continuing to receive benefits, under certain conditions.

In theory, this program has a very laudable objective of encouraging Canadians to re-enter the labour market, and I cannot oppose the basic principles behind this pilot project.

Many programs targeted at encouraging claimants to take on part-time work have existed in one form or another since 2005. These programs are one way for employment insurance recipients to improve their financial situation and take advantage of opportunities offered to them.

However, the new system proposed by the Conservatives is far from perfect. Under the working while on claim pilot project, claimants who are working part-time will have to give the government 50¢ of every dollar they earn, from the first dollar earned, up to 90% of their weekly insurable earnings. Income over that threshold will be clawed back dollar for dollar.

This new clawback formula is notably different from the formula used before August 4, when the new pilot project came into force. Under the old working while on claim program, claimants with jobs were allowed to keep the greater of \$75 or 40% of their weekly employment insurance benefits. Any earnings beyond that were clawed back dollar for dollar.

From day one of this new system, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and her parliamentary secretary have been saying loud and clear that this pilot project will guarantee that every employment insurance claimant will always be better off working because they will be able to keep more of their earnings.

Unfortunately, just a month and a half into the new program, we can see that this is not the case for all EI benefit recipients, contrary to what the minister and her parliamentary secretary say. It is clear that the changes made by the Conservatives disadvantage the most vulnerable workers by reducing the earnings of those who are able to

find just one day of work a week, or those who are receiving Canada pension plan benefits while receiving EI benefits.

Workers who earn a low income or receive an old age pension are now seeing this government subtract from their EI benefits the equivalent of half their earnings from the first dollar they earn.

I will give a clear example. Earlier I asked a member from the governing party the question and I did not get an answer. I will explain myself a little more clearly, then perhaps the hon. member will be able to provide further explanations.

For example, if an EI claimant receives \$75 in earnings every week from a part-time job, fully half of that amount is subtracted from his employment insurance benefits. Under the old system, that same claimant could have kept his entire weekly salary without losing a penny of his EI benefits.

This is a clear example of a situation where an EI claimant is completely disadvantaged by the new system. If we add all the additional expenses that are related to having a job, from transportation to work to child care expenses, then it is clear that the provisions of the Conservatives' new pilot project will cause major losses of income for workers who have a low-paying job, or who can find only one day of work per week or less.

●(1810)

Under such circumstances, it is almost inconceivable that people will look for a part-time job or a low-paying job because they will be immediately penalized by this government.

Under such circumstances, how can this government continue to state that the living conditions of every individual who accepts work while receiving employment insurance benefits will improve? I just gave a very clear and irrefutable example that demonstrates that such is not the case.

Throughout the day, we have heard many of my colleagues in the opposition parties speak about hundreds of Canadians whose employment insurance benefits have been reduced and who are being punished by this government because they managed to find a part-time job to try to improve their situation. That is unacceptable.

This government must take action to correct the blatant errors that were made in the development of this new pilot project, errors that are once again punishing the most vulnerable Canadians.

For example, I am thinking of seasonal workers across the country who will be among the first to pay the price of the changes being imposed by the Conservatives. My riding of Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier will no doubt be one of those hit hard by the provisions of the new pilot project.

In my riding, the agricultural, tourism and forestry industries are particularly important to the local economy and, as my colleagues know, the survival of these industries depends in large part on seasonal workers.

During the off-season, many seasonal workers are able to find work for one or two days a week. These jobs often do not pay well, but they are key to the operation and survival of the companies that offer them.

Unfortunately, under the Conservatives' new system, the income of employment insurance claimants in my riding will be cut in half if they decide to accept one of these jobs. And it is not only employment insurance claimants in my riding who will be penalized by the new pilot project; businesses in my riding will also be put at a major disadvantage.

I hope that, now that I have said the word “businesses”, the Conservatives will listen a little more closely to what I have to say. The Conservatives are obsessed with the economy, but they ignore the human beings who support it.

Already, many employers in my riding have contacted me to tell me about the difficulty they are having finding people who are prepared to work for their company on a piecework basis—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. There is a lot of noise in the House. A number of members are speaking too loudly.

The hon. member for Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier.

Ms. Éloise Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I was saying, many employers in my riding have contacted me to say that they have not been able to find enough workers to fill positions—for one or two days a week—to keep their businesses running, because workers do not want 50% of their earnings to be clawed back. They do not want to end up with less money than what they would have earned with employment insurance alone.

How can the Conservatives think that these poorly thought-out changes to the pilot project will not have a negative impact on the economy in my region? That is unbelievable.

I am not saying that all employment insurance claimants will be negatively affected by the provisions of the new pilot project. If a claimant is fortunate enough to find a job that pays at least half of his previous income, he can keep a larger part of his earnings. That is true.

However, opportunities like that do not exist in every region. Too many Canadians will see their earnings disappear as a result of the decisions the Conservatives made without consulting employment insurance claimants and employers. These are the two groups that contribute to employment insurance. This is not a government benefit. It is not up to the government to determine what to do with the money without consulting the public. This is an absolutely unacceptable way of doing things.

Instead of always repeating the same old lines, the minister should read the Employment Insurance Commission's report on this pilot project. The report shows that nearly four in 10 Canadians will be penalized by this new program. That is almost half. So when the Conservatives say that a vast majority of Canadians will benefit, I

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say that I would like to see the numbers. We have asked for them, but I have yet to see anything because they simply do not exist.

● (1815)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 6:15 p.m., pursuant to the order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and the recorded division is deemed to have been requested and deferred until Tuesday, October 2, 2012, at the end of Government Orders.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it will be no great surprise to my colleagues that this is a follow-up question to the Prime Minister's response to a question I put in question period about the F-35.

This program literally has its wheels falling off. The gist of the question was why the Prime Minister ran an election in 2011 when he knew full well what the costs of the F-35 program would be, when he knew that the numbers that were presented to the cabinet were very similar to what the PBO had arrived at and what the Auditor General subsequently arrived at.

The Prime Minister blew me off and gave his standard answer, “I disagree with the premise of the question”, but the fact remains that Canadians were told in the 2011 election that the F-35 would be in the order of about \$15 billion, knowing full well that it would be between \$25 billion and \$30 billion.

I do not know, Mr. Speaker, if you had the opportunity this weekend to see the *Fifth Estate* program, which was an hour long and was an exposé of all of the problems with this file. There are three areas of potential problems. There is the costing, with which we have been led on a merry chase. There is the requirements of our replacement fighter for the F-18. Then there are the industrial benefits. I will leave the industrial benefits aside for the time being because we can only cover so many problems in a four minute period.

On the actual statement of requirements, there was a startling revelation in the *Fifth Estate* program, which was also in the *W-5* program, which said that in 2006, when the statement of requirements was presented to the minister of the day, there were some serious and consequential significant information missing, particularly with respect to the other competition. The statement of requirements was clearly weighted toward the F-35 and away from the others, in part because none of that material actually came to the fore.

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It was kind of curious and interesting to listen to experts actually talk about this program. One particular expert, who was a principal designer of the F-16, said that this plane was a turkey. He said, very simply, that it had a limited range, it carried a payload and it was unable to manoeuvre in any kind of a dogfight.

In consequence, we have sold ourselves out to Stealth, and nobody has actually answered the question as to why Canada needs Stealth. I can see possibly why the Americans need Stealth or even the British, but why does Canada need Stealth? What we have married ourselves to at this point is an airplane that is slow, has limited range, limited payload and a whole bunch of nations have said that they should take a look at this again.

We in the Liberal Party have been saying forever that we need an open, fair and transparent competition.

• (1820)

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me update the member on our program to replace the CF-18s.

Our government is keeping its promises with the creation of a National Fighter Procurement Secretariat. The National Fighter Procurement Secretariat is in place to ensure transparency and due diligence in the decision to replace our CF-18s. The objectives of the NFPS are to ensure that the Royal Canadian Air Force acquires the fighter aircraft it needs to complete the missions asked of them by the government.

No money has been spent on the purchase of new fighter aircraft and no money will be spent until the secretariat independently verifies the costs necessary to replace our aging fleet of CF-18s. It has taken time to assemble the right people for the secretariat, the right outside expertise, including a former auditor general of Canada who is joining the team on the secretariat, as well as all of the relevant departments.

We accept the recommendation in this spring's Auditor General's report. We accept the conclusions. That is why we are going beyond that by not only agreeing to put forward full life cycle costs but also by establishing a seven-point plan, which this secretariat will oversee.

The Auditor General has said of our seven-point plan that our government is taking "steps in the right direction". The National Fighter Procurement Secretariat is keeping the Auditor General informed of the progress being made on completing our government's seven-point plan.

Let me emphasize the role of this secretariat.

The National Fighter Procurement Secretariat established within Public Works and Government Services Canada is tasked with coordinating the implementation of the government's seven-point plan. There will be key roles with respect to transparency, impartiality and reports to Parliament and to the public. The secretariat's initial overall costs will be available this fall. The

secretariat will provide the due diligence that Canada deserves and the government is responsible for delivering in such cases.

As my colleague is fully aware, the whole question of costs is absolutely the central issue in determining what aircraft will replace the CF-18. The process of estimating the total costs of the entire life cycle of the aircraft that will replace the CF-18 needs to be carried out very carefully and very thoroughly.

We made a promise to Canadians in the House that we would independently verify all costs. We will report back once the secretariat's advice and expertise has completed this task.

Hon. John McKay: Mr. Speaker, it begs this question. Why would the Conservatives carry on an entire election on one set of costs and now, after the election, they have decided to incorporate a secretariat, which is to go around and find out what the costs are? Either they knew the costs before or they knew the costs after. My guess is they knew the costs before, but they did not tell us. Now they are trying to discredit the AG., so the KPMG folks have been hired to essentially discredit the Auditor General's report on full life cycle costs to the tune of \$600,000.

What is interesting in this entire exercise, and I asked this question today, is why the Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for Status of Women is acting minister of defence for the purposes of procurement.

Apparently the Minister of National Defence and, indeed, his associate minister are not capable of actually asking the relevant questions that are necessary to be asked in order to establish the costs. One would think, at this stage, six years after the fact, we could have actually arrived at the costs.

This plane has a minimum payload and a maximum payroll and the consequence is the taxpayer is getting hosed.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, on June 13, the government announced the establishment of the National Fighter Procurement Secretariat within public works as the lead to coordinate work going forward to replace Canada's CF-18 fleet. The secretariat is responsible for the review, oversight, coordination and implementation of the action plan.

The government also released NFPS's terms of reference on June 13, which establishes improved governance and coordination structure, strengthens due diligences and commits departments to transparency.

As work progresses on implementing the action plan, the secretariat will work to ensure that Canadians are provided with accurate and timely information throughout the process.

• (1825)

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am rising to follow up on a question I asked back in May about the UN special rapporteur on the right to food.

Adjournment Proceedings

It is a bit ironic that I am doing this on October 1, because this is the date that the changes in the nutrition north program and food subsidy list take place. As of today, a number of goods will be dropped from the subsidy list, including a number of canned goods, pasta, rice, coffee, tea, diapers and so on.

Why would we continue to raise this matter? Certainly the costs of some fresh and perishable goods have gone down, but I think the reality is that when we look at issues facing many people who live in the north, we see they are facing poverty and unemployment.

In the Inuit health survey from 2007-08, I want to read a couple of statistics because it highlights the fact that poverty is a very real issue for people who are trying to buy nutritious food.

In the north 78% of homes had children, and of those homes 40% were crowded, whereas only 3% of non-aboriginal people lived in crowded housing.

They say food insecurity is a problem in homes in Nunavut communities. Fewer than one third of the households reported that they had enough food to eat, and 35% of households reported severe food insecurity—71.4% of households with children were food insecure. Unemployment, low income and high food costs were the main reasons for food insecurity.

More than 75% of the households shared their country food with others in their community, and that is an important matter because we know the subsidies for country food are important and yet there is very little uptake on them.

They go on to say in the survey that Nunavut households spend more on food and shelter than any other Canadian household. The average household in Nunavut spent \$1,875 per month on food. For households with children, the monthly food bill was \$1,992.

This compares to the average Canadian household, outside of the north, where they only spent \$609 per month. So we can see that for some households it is more than three times the cost in the north that it is for other Canadian households.

People in the north are not sitting on their hands just waiting for the government to work with them, to help make food affordable. There is a Facebook page called Feeding My Family. There are thousands of people who are on this. Today in a story, Becky said that:

[W]e need to encourage our local stores to develop policies for how they handle outdated, rotting and expired foods...and at the same time, start educating ourselves on the purpose and limitations of best before dates.

That has been a bit of an issue up there, about what a best before date is.

This would be a good opportunity for the GN to get involved...through hosting informational sessions in cooperation with local stores. Community information-sharing like this doesn't even have to cost anything, it just takes a group of people willing to get together to learn from each other. That's where it starts.

A posting from September 18, and again it is an example of people taking charge of what is going on in the north, reads: Looking for volunteers, can you help?

Feeding My Family is looking for volunteers to write down prices of 26 grocery items that are normally found in grocery stores in the North. Our goal is to monitor the prices of dried goods and non-perishables that will no longer be subsidized by NNC after October 1, 2012 to see how much the price will increase if our stores must

fly these products into our communities. We'd like to get prices from as many Northern communities as possible, specifically those participating in Nutrition North Canada.

There is a number of issues. First of all, there is the fact that people simply do not have enough money to buy the nutritious food they need, and then there is the fact that people are very concerned about what the changes in the system, the subsidies, will do as of October 1.

I guess my question is: How will the government work with northerners to make sure they do have access to affordable, quality food?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to respond to the hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan's question.

The government is committed to supporting aboriginal people and northerners by providing them with improved access to healthy food. The Government of Canada has many programs in place that contribute to food accessibility and security for aboriginal people and northerners.

Nutrition North Canada is one of these programs. It is a retail subsidy program that improves access to perishable and healthy food in isolated northern communities without year-round surface transportation.

Since the program's launch on April 1, 2011, Nutrition North Canada has provided retailers, suppliers and country food processors with subsidies for a variety of perishable foods including fruit, vegetables, milk, eggs, meat, cheese and bread. Subsidies are also provided for country or traditional foods that are commercially processed in the north, such as arctic char, muskox and caribou.

With an Advisory Board made up of northerners to help guide the program, Nutrition North Canada currently benefits 103 remote northern communities in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

Nutrition North Canada is helping bring healthy food to northern homes and providing northerners with healthy food choices. The program follows a new market-driven model that is an efficient, cost-effective and transparent means of helping northerners access nutritious perishable food.

After the first year of operation, prices have decreased and consumption of nutritious foods has increased in the north. These positive results were obtained with the same level of funding as the former program. Costs have decreased by 37% for certain products such as two-litre cartons of milk.

Adjournment Proceedings

Finally, the Government of Canada is taking concrete action to improve the quality of life of aboriginal peoples and northern residents. It is working hard to ensure that aboriginal people and northerners have access to high-quality, nutritious food, like other Canadians. There is no question that through programs such as Nutrition North Canada, the government is proving that it remains wholly committed to improving the well-being of aboriginal peoples and northern residents in a concrete and measurable way.

•(1830)

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary's response still does not deal with the fact that food prices for many people living in the north are more than three times what Canadians are paying in the south.

One of the things that statistics have shown is that country food shipped as of March 31, 2012, was such a small amount that it did not even register into percentage points. It was \$559 in subsidies.

I wonder if the parliamentary secretary could speak to the fact that there are many people who simply cannot have the country food subsidized. They cannot afford to pay for some of these goods. Many people do not have a credit card or the cash available so they cannot arrange for shipments outside of what they can buy at the retailers.

I would like to hear the parliamentary secretary address what the government plans on doing on the large gap that exists for people who simply cannot afford to buy nutritious food, even at the subsidized rates.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, the government recognizes that it is important for aboriginal people and northern residents to have access to healthy perishable foods. The Nutrition North Canada program is one of the steps we are taking to attain this objective.

Through targeted contributions and sustainable partnerships, the government is working to improve access to healthy foods for northerners and aboriginal peoples. The Government of Canada has set aside \$53.9 million per year for Nutrition North Canada subsidies. Furthermore, because it is aware of the advantages of partnerships, it has involved northern leaders and is working with them to find real and sustainable solutions that will improve access to healthy perishable food in the north.

Furthermore, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada is working with Health Canada to take advantage of community programs on health and nutrition in order to promote healthy food choices.

•(1835)

[English]

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the two-week delay in issuing a recall on meat contaminated with E. coli clearly shows that the Conservatives' cuts to food safety are putting Canadians at risk.

Despite repeated questions last week asking the Minister of Agriculture who Canadians can rely on to be responsible for their food safety, the only clear answer we received was that the Conservatives were not interested in providing the necessary resources to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to prevent food-borne illnesses.

The Conservative government has created a vacuum through budget and program cuts and changes that have left the industry to police itself and Canadians responsible for their own food safety. It is endangering the health and safety of countless Canadians, threatening our ability to keep borders open to Canadian produce and trade and imperiling vulnerable farmers who have just started to get back on their feet after the BSE crisis.

On September 3, U.S. food inspectors at the border stopped a shipment of beef trimmings from XL Foods plant in Brooks, Alberta, and discovered E. coli 0157. American inspectors informed us of the contamination on September 4, two weeks before the Conservative government notified Canadians that contaminated meat was in the food supply and on store shelves across the country.

In the meantime, on September 13, still three days before the CFIA issued its first recall on meat from XL Foods, U.S. food safety inspectors delisted the XL Foods facility, preventing it from shipping food across the border. It took 13 days after becoming aware of contamination for the CFIA to finally issue a recall, which has since been expanded multiple times and now covers over 250 products. It does not take two weeks to do a confirming test for E. coli. It takes days.

When I asked the minister last week about the delay, he trivialized the issue, a brave choice given his unfortunate reaction to the listeria contamination that claimed the lives of seven Canadians in 2008 on his watch. The minister misled the public by stating that none of the meat had made it into the food supply. Clearly, he could not prove that. Food had been leaving that facility for weeks and it was only when the Americans caught our food safety lapses that a hold was placed on the meat. Now there are at least four people in Alberta who are sick.

The minister said that the recall took two weeks because of testing. That is preposterous. There is no way, as I said, that it should have taken two weeks to get a confirmation. Perhaps he should ask the 90 biologists who lost their jobs through these cuts whether we would be in a better position to protect Canada's food safety if the Conservatives had provided the necessary resources to our inspection officials.

The minister refuses to explain when he became aware of the problem with XL Foods. Why did it take a sudden crisis for the government to even realize how serious a problem there was at XL Foods, which has led to one of the largest recalls in Canadian history?

Adjournment Proceedings

We cannot blame the inspectors. They are doing the best they can with limited resources. By removing resources and relaxing regulations, the Conservatives are creating a powder keg wherein we have a facility with inspectors who are not all trained on the compliance verification system and those who do not know are not getting all the information.

Clearly, workers were not sanitizing their stations or the meat properly. Inspectors lost the ability to keep an eye on this when the government started handing over more and more oversight to the industry itself.

It was clear from the report issued by the CFIA on September 24 that the plant was not in compliance with a substantial number of standards and requirements, prompting the agency to then shut the doors until it could come into compliance. This does not happen overnight. We are talking about considerable time where self-regulation allowed the plant to get sloppy and, when processors get sloppy, people get sick.

Dr. Richard Arseneault, director of the CFIA meat inspection program, said:

We need to do a better job of managing this data and finding these trends ahead of time...as opposed to having to respond to a crisis like this.

If the agency is already worried, how will it manage under further cuts?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, protecting the health and safety of Canadians continues to be one of the government's top priorities.

I would like to point out that the recent budget did not diminish the role of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency or Canada's investment in food safety.

All food products produced or sold in Canada must meet our high safety standards.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to review the series of events that led to the recall of a number of beef products over the past weeks.

● (1840)

[*English*]

On September 4, 2012, the CFIA first detected *E. coli* in products produced in an Alberta facility supplied by XL Foods. At the time, the CFIA determined that a recall was not necessary as none of the inspected product was in the marketplace. The CFIA immediately initiated an investigation to determine the source of the contamination. The agency then intensified its efforts when follow-up tests came back positive. As a result, evidence of a health risk was found and XL Foods voluntarily recalled affected products. As the CFIA continued investigating, more products were identified, recalled by the company and consumers were notified.

The CFIA immediately began tracing new products to identify where they had been distributed. This extensive process is ongoing and may result in more product recalls. The CFIA will continue to alert consumers immediately when it determines there are affected products in the marketplace.

During the investigation, the CFIA identified deficiencies in the plant's *E. coli* risk management measures. On September 26, 2012, the CFIA temporarily suspended the plant's licence as the deficiencies had not been corrected.

The CFIA acted immediately and continues to investigate and respond accordingly.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Speaker, talking points are cold comfort to a 4-year-old in Alberta who has kidney failure. Going through the chronology of what happened does not explain all the mistakes that were made.

Since the member opposite is clearly unwilling to consider the safety of Canadians, I will try another tactic, the economy. The government is currently attempting to negotiate away the very program that caught the meat contaminated with *E. coli* at the border. Ranchers and cattle farmers are concerned that we will ship tainted meat across the border through no fault of their own and those open doors will slam shut again, just like after BSE. Farmers have every right to be concerned and we owe it to them to protect their livelihoods.

No one wants to see another Walkerton. We know that regulation and budget cuts lead to people getting sick. Will the government support us and all Canadians by reversing cuts to food inspection that are allowing incidents like what happened last month at XL Foods?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, it is very important to put the facts on the table and, unfortunately, much of what the member has just said is inaccurate.

In the last four federal budgets, the government has invested significantly in our food safety system. In budget 2011, we committed \$100 million over five years to build science capacity and implement inspection modernization, including enhanced training, as well as inspection tools for inspectors. In budget 2012, we provided \$51 million over two years to the CFIA, the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada for continuing key food safety activities. The recent budget is strengthening, not weakening, the government's commitment to the health and safety of Canadians.

Like all federal departments and agencies, the CFIA is contributing to the government's deficit reduction action plan. By 2014-15, the CFIA will contribute \$56 million. However, the most important thing is that over the past two budgets spending for the CFIA and for food safety has gone up by approximately \$150 million. Since 2006, the government has hired more than 700 net new inspectors to help the CFIA do its job. Unfortunately, the member and the parties in the opposition have voted against these positive initiatives.

Adjournment Proceedings

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. The House

stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:43 p.m.)

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