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Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, February 11, 2013

The House met at 11 a.m.

become functionally extinct by 2017. That is only four years from now.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1105)

[*English*]

BAN ON SHARK FIN IMPORTATION ACT

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP) moved that Bill C-380, an act to amend the Fish Inspection Act and the Fisheries Act (importation of shark fins), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to begin debate on second reading of Bill C-380, which would amend the Fish Inspection Act by legally banning the importation of shark fins, not attached to the rest of the shark, to Canada. It would also amend the Fisheries Act by enshrining in legislation Canada's current prohibition on shark finning.

My bill seeks to address a conservation crisis that is happening in oceans around the world. Right now, we are witnessing the rapid decline of sharks due to the demand for their fins. Up to 73 million sharks are being killed each year, primarily for their fins. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, over one-third of all shark species are currently threatened with extinction.

Sharks are being finned. The practice of finning is brutal. If I could show an image of a shark getting its fins cut off before being dumped back into the ocean, people would be horrified. Let me describe how sharks are caught and killed. Long lines, often 85 kilometres or so long, are placed in the ocean. These lines have multiple hooks, which indiscriminately catch sea creatures such as sharks, turtles, swordfish, tuna and other big fish. Sharks are hauled into the fishing vessel. Some are dead, but many are still alive. Once they are in the boat, the fins are cut off the shark and its body is dumped back into the ocean. It is left to die a slow and painful death as it sinks helplessly to the bottom of the ocean.

This is not only unethical, but it is a terribly wasteful practice. Scientists estimate that in just a few short decades some regional shark populations will have declined by over 95%. Experts also predict that if current trends continue, up to 20 shark species could

Sharks have long life cycles and are slow to reproduce. They predate dinosaurs. They are apex predators and play a critical role in maintaining the health and balance of our ocean ecosystems. For these reasons, sharks cannot sustain the intense fishing practices they are under. Humans are causing irrevocable harm to our marine ecosystems by continuing to fish sharks into extinction. The consequences of not addressing this problem will significantly and permanently harm the health of our oceans. As parliamentarians, we must consider how Canada can play a positive role in this global conservation crisis.

I propose that Canada adopt an importation ban on shark fins, as it is a practical and effective way for Canada to help curtail the illegal global shark fin trade. The primary reason for the rapid decline of sharks in our oceans is the demand for their fins. Unfortunately, shark finning has become a prevalent practice in various parts of the world. While some countries have banned shark finning, global demand for shark fin continues to drive illegal, unreported and unregulated shark fisheries. On average, shark fins sell for \$400 per kilogram, while shark meat is worth about 50¢ a kilogram. Consequently, a highly profitable, underground shark fin market has emerged, which exploits threatened and endangered shark species to maximize profits. Organized crime is very much involved with the sale of shark fin around the world.

Canada imports, on average, just over 100 tonnes of shark fin a year. Some consumers of shark fin soup falsely believe only shark fins from properly regulated and well-managed fisheries are allowed into the country. This is simply not the case. The fact is that there is no quick and easy way to verify whether imported shark fins came from a sustainable or humane shark fishery. In fact, most do not. It has been proven that fins of threatened and endangered sharks are being sold in Canada today.

Private Members' Business

Last year, CTV News and the Vancouver Animal Defense League purchased dried shark fins from various shops in the Lower Mainland and had the DNA tested by a lab at the University of Guelph. Of the 59 samples tested, it was determined that 76% of those fins came from sharks listed as threatened or endangered by the IUCN. In fact, 10% of the samples came from scalloped hammerhead sharks, which the IUCN lists as endangered. These hammerheads are also listed under appendix 3 of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. This is the international treaty intended to protect species from overexploitation.

As a member of CITES, Canada is asked to assist in controlling the trade of these sharks, but it is clear that we are not living up to our commitment. Despite being a signatory to CITES, Canada is contributing to the global trade of illegal shark fins by continuing to import fins indiscriminately. This is a black eye on our reputation as a world leader in ocean conservation and stewardship.

It is also important to note that existing international regulations and protocols have not demonstrated that they can swiftly respond to the urgent threats facing overexploited shark populations. Proposals to strengthen finning bans and to add more shark species to endangered species lists are failing to gain consensus due to member countries' competing self-interests. Even Canada has been criticized for being the only country to oppose listing porbeagle sharks as endangered at the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.

It is clear that current regulations are not enough to protect sharks from being fished to extinction for their fins. The best way to put an end to this horrific practice is to legislate a ban on the importation of shark fins to Canada. By adopting an import ban, Canada would be joining a worldwide conservation movement to protect sharks. Other countries with shark fin bans include the Bahamas, Chile, Ecuador, Fiji and Guam, as well as the U.S. states of California, Hawaii, Illinois, Oregon and Washington.

Across Asia, there are numerous examples of the growing movement to protect sharks. The Chinese government recently announced it would stop serving shark fin soup at official banquets. Prestigious restaurants and hotels across Asia have removed shark fin soup from their menus, including major high-end hotel chains such as Peninsula, Shangri-La, the Marriott and the Sheraton. Cathay Pacific Airways halted its role in the shark fin trade when it decided to stop transporting shipments of shark fin and other shark products.

In Canada, efforts to protect sharks have gained significant momentum over the past few years. Growing numbers of Chinese restaurants have taken shark fin soup off their menus, including Floata Seafood Restaurant in Vancouver, one of the largest Chinese restaurants in the country. However, some restaurant owners, while recognizing the harmful impact of shark fin soup, feel that if they take it off their menus their customers will take their business elsewhere. This is the case for Veronica Kwan, owner of Kam Fung Chinese Restaurant in Brossard, Quebec. She wrote to members of Parliament urging them to support Bill C-380. She writes:

A ban on the import of shark fins to Canada would level the playing field for business owners such as myself who want to do what it is ethically and ecologically responsible while still remaining commercially competitive.

Increased awareness and action to protect sharks is due in part to grassroots organizations such as Shark Truth, which is fostering change through positive campaigns such as its Happy Hearts Love Sharks wedding contest, which encourages couples to go fin free at wedding banquets. Organizations such as the Humane Society International-Canada, WildAid Canada and United Conservationists have also raised national awareness of the urgent need to protect sharks.

● (1110)

I must also highlight the work of Canadian filmmaker Rob Stewart, whose 2007 film, *Sharkwater*, opened the eyes of millions of people to the exploitation of sharks through finning and the rampant corruption present in the shark fin trade. Through stunning original footage, Stewart documents how even sharks in marine reserves are targeted by poachers. His film has reached large audiences in Canada and around the world and is in part responsible for increased awareness of the realities of shark finning.

Numerous municipalities in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia have responded to the growing public awareness of threats to sharks by adopting bans on shark fin, and many more cities across the country are considering similar bans. Last year the Union of British Columbia Municipalities passed a near unanimous resolution calling on the federal government to ban the import of shark fins to Canada. Cities across Canada are taking action to protect sharks and they are calling on the federal government to do the same.

Before drafting my bill, I consulted with Chinese Canadian business associations, restaurant owners and individuals, as well as academics, elected representatives from all levels of government, environmental organizations and the wider public. I had polling done in English, Chinese, Cantonese and Mandarin in British Columbia, which found that 76% of Chinese-speaking respondents and over 83% of English-speaking respondents support a federal import ban on shark fins.

It is clear that there is widespread support for the federal government to ban the importation of shark fins to Canada. Tens of thousands of Canadians have signed petitions and written to their members of Parliament urging them to support Bill C-380. I have heard from many members that they have received calls and emails, especially in the last few weeks. I want to thank Canadians for writing and contacting their members to let them know how important this issue is.

Private Members' Business

I have introduced many of these petitions in the House of Commons and I can tell my colleagues that they come from all corners of this country. Children are particularly passionate about shark conservation and I have been amazed by their enthusiasm to create change. In my riding, a class of grade one students and their teacher from Moody Elementary made a great presentation to Port Moody city council in support of a municipal ban on shark fin. They researched the environmental impact of shark finning and were excited to share their learning with the council and the public.

I must say it was quite moving when these young people came into council chambers with their very organized messages and signs. They gave a very compelling presentation and I have never seen members of a council react so quickly. They wanted to pass a ban that night. It took a while in Port Moody, but it became the first municipality in British Columbia to pass a ban on shark fin. That caused a chain reaction with the other municipalities in British Columbia, which is now the province that has the most municipal bans in Canada.

The facts before us today make the case that Canada must take immediate action to address the crisis of rapidly declining shark populations. We are facing the likely extinction of shark species around the globe, largely due to the demand for their highly valued fins. Canada must stop indiscriminately importing fins from endangered and threatened sharks. We must put an end to our role in the illegal global shark fin trade.

I ask all members to support Bill C-380 at second reading so it can be studied further at committee.

• (1115)

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask my colleague a bit more about the principle behind his bill. He talked about a conservation crisis and used words such as “rapidly declining shark populations”, “pending extinction”, and so on, though there are many shark populations that are quite healthy. If this is the motivation behind the bill, is he suggesting that for other species that might be facing a conservation crisis, let us say tuna, the same approach should be taken and that Canada should ban the importation of tuna?

Would he then suggest that every other country should follow Canada's example and not allow the importation of tuna, which could negatively affect both our own tuna fishers as well as those who fish for shark within Canadian waters? I wonder if he has thought that through.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the parliamentary secretary raising the issue of tuna. The protection and conservation of tuna is critically important, and I hope that Canada will take action.

My bill is focused specifically on shark conservation. Sharks are being targeted for their fins, not their meat. The meat is, as I mentioned in my speech, about 50 cents a pound. The fins, on the other hand, are valued at up to \$400 a pound or a kilogram. The shark fin is what is being targeted here.

As some scientists have predicted, we could lose some species as early as 2017—in other words, in this decade—if we do not take

dramatic action. Canada can become a global leader by becoming the first country to ban the importation of sharks and really focusing on the shark fin as the source of the issue, which will help conserve our shark populations.

• (1120)

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a number of my constituents are Chinese Canadians, and they have approached me with concerns about this bill.

Like the hon. member, they are dead opposed to finning, and they are totally opposed to the importation of sharks that are an endangered species. They accept both principles. At the same time, they view an outright ban on shark fin soup as an attack on the Chinese culture. I think there is a way around this.

My question for the hon. member is whether he would entertain amendments to his bill that would allow the use of shark fin soup in Canada, but only on the condition that it is not made with sharks that have been finned or sharks that are endangered and that the importation would be limited to countries that obey international law in these matters.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Mr. Speaker, the member raised three issues I could respond to.

In terms of consultation, I consulted with a wide variety of stakeholders, including Chinese business associations. Their concern is that they want a level playing field. They want to see an importation ban. They feel that it is the fair way to go.

I want to clarify that this bill does not impact what is sold in the country. This bill focuses on what is coming into the country. It actually does not address the issue the hon. member was talking about in terms of a ban on shark fin soup. That is more a provincial jurisdiction in terms of sales and trade.

The importation of shark fins, which is really getting at the illegal finning trade, is what this bill focuses on. It will curtail that important demand that exists in the world right now, in which Canada plays a part.

In terms of addressing issues at committee stage and entertaining amendments, I think that is what committee is for. There will be a healthy discussion and debate. I hope all hon. members will consider supporting this bill at second reading so that we can get this bill forwarded to committee for further discussion. Perhaps there are amendments that might need to be made. That discussion will be at committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be speaking in response to Bill C-380. It goes without saying that this is a difficult issue.

[*English*]

Our Conservative government is committed to addressing the serious problem of shark finning. We are taking action on a number of fronts to end this deplorable activity. It is very important to note that shark finning has been banned in Canada since the mid-1990s.

Private Members' Business

[Translation]

The ban applies to Canadian waters and Canadian licensed vessels fishing outside our territorial waters. Canada is one of the first countries to implement a national plan of action for the conservation and management of sharks.

[English]

Our government believes that working through regional fisheries management organizations, such as the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization, to ensure strong management and enforcement practices globally, is the most effective way to prevent unsustainable practices such as finning.

We take seriously our legal obligation to prevent the import of products from shark species that are currently listed as endangered and are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

[Translation]

These species are the great white shark, the whale shark and the basking shark.

I will speak specifically about the proposals in the bill that pertain to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's food safety obligations and the proposed changes to the Fish Inspection Act.

• (1125)

[English]

Let me begin by reiterating our government's unwavering commitment to food safety and the role of the CFIA. The CFIA is already exploring what can be done on the importation of shark fins. Shark products for human consumption fall under regulations that address the importation of fish and seafood products. These regulations set standards for quality, safety and identification and are enforced by the CFIA.

[Translation]

The CFIA focuses solely on food safety and quality as well as consumer protection. All licence holders for Canadian shark fisheries and for fisheries where sharks are landed as bycatch are subject to licence conditions that prohibit them from engaging in shark finning. All licensed shark fishing vessels in Canada are subject to 100% monitoring. Non-compliance with a licence condition constitutes an offence under the Fisheries Act, as enforced by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

[English]

As my hon. colleagues are aware, Bill C-380 proposes to prohibit the importation of shark fins unless authorized by a permit issued by the hon. Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. The expertise and jurisdiction to make these determinations lie with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which therefore renders the licensing scheme in the bill through the Fish Inspection Act completely unfeasible.

[Translation]

I would first like to analyze this proposal in relation to Canada's existing Fish Inspection Act and then in relation to the new Safe Food for Canadians Act.

The Fish Inspection Act regulates issues related to the quality and safety of fish and seafood intended for human consumption. The importation ban set out in the Fish Inspection Regulations applies only to fish products that pose a risk of harm to human health.

However, there is no evidence that shark fins pose a risk to human health.

[English]

If CFIA were to restrict the importation of shark fins for any reason other than food safety, it would leave Canada vulnerable to a trade challenge at the WTO. The proposed ban on shark fin imports does not prohibit the legal production and sale of domestic shark fins in Canada; it prohibits imports of shark fins that were legally produced in other countries. It is a protectionist policy, one that is not good for trade. This could pave the way for other countries to impose protectionist policies on Canadian imports with little to no basis. In fact, Canada is currently challenging the EU at the WTO on a similar type of ban on Canadian seal products.

[Translation]

Bill C-380's recommendations go beyond the framework of the existing regulations and the new, forthcoming regulations on food safety.

[English]

The bill also comes at a time when Canada's Fish Inspection Act will be repealed as our government's Safe Food for Canadians Act comes into force. The Safe Food for Canadians Act, which received royal assent this past fall, strengthens and modernizes our food safety system to make sure that it continues to provide for safe food for Canadians.

[Translation]

This legislation will provide appropriate measures to ensure that Canadians can continue to have faith in the effective protection provided by the CFIA. The main objective of the new legislative measures on food safety is to strengthen our ability to protect Canada's food supply and the health of Canadians.

The Safe Food for Canadians Act will allow us to achieve that by incorporating the provisions of various acts and regulations, including the Fish Inspection Act, in order to ensure more uniform treatment of food products.

[English]

Our government is unable to support the bill. However, it will continue to support responsible, legal shark harvesters and will crack down on those who break the rules.

I appreciate my hon. colleagues' full attention on this matter.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to Bill C-380, an act to amend the fish inspection act and the fisheries act (importation of shark fins) sponsored by my hon. colleague, the member for New Westminster—Coquitlam.

Private Members' Business

Bill C-380 is an important bill with very important implications. It would enshrine in legislation Canada's ban against shark finning. Shark finning is a cruel and inhumane practice that I believe the Government of Canada should be doing whatever it can to end on a global basis. Besides cruelty, shark finning is an awful practice for a number of reasons.

Shark fin fisheries are associated with excessive mortality, as the fishing effort is not limited by hold space. Shark finning threatens the sustainability of fisheries. Finning hinders the collection of the catch data needed to monitor population trends and set sustainable catch levels. Overfishing, which may be driven by finning, is widely recognized as the greatest cause of extinction risk to sharks.

The removal of large numbers of top predators may destabilize marine ecosystems.

It was a Liberal government that banned shark finning in Canada back in 1994. It has been enacted through fisheries regulations and management plans since then. Bill C-380 would place it directly under the Fisheries Act. This would be a good step to take and would send a clear and renewed message that Canada would never accept this practice in any shape or form. It would be a strong symbolic gesture of Canada's stance on the issue.

The stocks of some shark species are in bad shape, and some of the problem can be traced to the practice of shark finning by those countries that allow it. Canada should be doing its part to take a strong stand and take effective action against others who participate in this awful practice.

It is the other part of the bill, which I partially support, that gives me some hesitation. This part of the bill would add to the Fish Inspection Act a prohibition against importing shark fins that are not attached to the rest of the shark carcass. It would also allow the minister to import fins used for scientific research related to the survival of shark species.

In 2011, Canada imported over 100 tonnes of shark fin, which were worth \$6.3 million. None of these fins were attached to the rest of the carcass at the time of import. Therefore, this bill would essentially ban all shark fin imports to Canadian soil without making a difference as to whether they were obtained through shark finning or through sustainable and proper fishing methods.

About half of the 2011 shark fin imports came from other countries that already ban the practice of shark finning. I wonder what message it sends if we completely ban the import of shark fins and do not note the difference between the countries that ban the practice of shark finning and those that still allow it to take place. I believe that we must make a distinction and send a clear message to those countries that still allow the practice to take place in their shark fisheries.

If we do not make a distinction between which species the fins come from, I would also wonder whether they were from endangered species or from those with stocks that are in good shape. These are important points to make.

As it is currently written, the bill would place a federal ban on imports of a food that is still seen as very valuable and very important by many in the Chinese Canadian community. I do not

believe that a complete federal ban on all shark fin imports to this country, whether they were obtained through shark finning or through proper sustainable fishing methods, would send a very good message to those countries.

I believe that we should have the right to choose to eat a culturally important food as long as it is obtained properly from species that are not threatened and that the shark fishing did not involve cruelty.

• (1130)

It is dependent upon us as federal legislators to be very sensitive to the cultural and identity concerns of Canada's many different communities, while still taking a strong stance against the very cruel and inhumane practice of shark finning, which is still practised in countries around the world. Not all shark fisheries involve species that are threatened, and not all shark fishers participate in the cruel practice of shark finning.

This is also an important point to make. We must not put countries that do a good job of regulating their shark fisheries to prevent overfishing and cruelty in the same boat as countries that permit overfishing and shark finning. If we punish only those countries that allow these practices by banning imports from them we would send them a very clear message that this is unacceptable. Perhaps this would be an incentive for those countries to change the way they handle their shark fisheries and perhaps other countries would follow suit.

However, if we also punish those countries that are doing a good job regulating their shark fisheries and preventing cruelty, what message are we sending to them? We would be sending the message that it makes no difference whether they regulate their fisheries and prevent cruelty; that we will treat them the same as countries with unregulated fisheries that allow overfishing to destroy shark stocks and that allow the cruel practice of shark finning. I certainly do not feel that this would be a prudent thing to do.

I would like to explore the bill further in committee and see whether we can make a distinction between where the shark fin comes from and what species it comes from. Some shark fins may very well come from countries that ban shark finning already. The shark may be of a species that is fished sustainably and in an appropriate manner by countries that ban shark finning. The fin may also be separated from the carcass properly once the shark has been landed and brought to the shore of that country. Other shark fins may come from countries that allow shark finning, or from threatened species of shark. These fins are the fins we should focus on banning from importation to Canada.

If Bill C-380 passes as it is currently written, it would make Canada the first country in the world to ban shark fin imports. It is a very important bill and we must look at it closely. I agree completely that shark finning is an awful practice and we need to do more to pressure those countries that engage in this practice to stop it from happening. We must do what we can to make sure shark fins coming into Canada are legally harvested.

Private Members' Business

I come from an area of the country where fisheries are very important. Having sustainable fisheries is something that is truly important to me and to the many people involved in the fisheries in my riding of Cardigan and in the province of Prince Edward Island. We all agree that a sustainable fishery is something we must have. However, the people involved in the fishery must be able to make a living if they are fishing the proper species of shark and if they are using the proper methods.

We should not punish those people involved in sustainable shark fisheries. We cannot lump them in together with people who fish critically endangered species and those who practise shark finning. I believe if we look at the bill more closely at committee and are able to make some amendments, it would serve this purpose.

• (1135)

[Translation]

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start my speech in this new year of the snake by wishing you and all my colleagues a happy year of the snake.

Chuc mung nam moi. Xin nian kuai le kung hei fat choi.

I would like to thank my colleague from New Westminster—Coquitlam, who introduced this bill. I would also like to thank him for all the groundwork he has done to convince many people of the merit of this bill, which is important to me. I believe we should all support it.

I would like to explain why I am giving my full support to this bill and why it is so important to me. I am a certified scuba diving supervisor and instructor. Unfortunately, since being elected I no longer have the time for it. When I taught the “open water” level to beginners, I talked about the importance of preserving our environment, especially the marine flora.

I also showed them the documentary *Sharkwater*, which was filmed by a Canadian and, I believe, won 31 international prizes. It is a beautiful film that provides a simple explanation of the problem of shark finning. It also provides insight into the impact of the phenomenon on the shark population and the reason for this fishing practice.

I cannot help but talk about my Asian heritage. I grew up eating shark fin soup. However, things are changing. The new generation supports this bill, and I will talk about this a little later. Things are changing and I believe it is important for parliamentarians to make that change happen.

• (1140)

[English]

After going on a dive and returning to the boat, having had the chance to see a real live shark, which is truly a pleasure, everyone on the boat will have a smile. They will talk about how amazing the creature is, how important it is, and how privileged we are to be able to swim with it. A lot of people have seen *Jaws*, but that is Hollywood. In real life it is a beautiful creature and an important creature because it keeps our ecosystem in equilibrium.

One thing that is really important to point out is that a tremendous number of sharks are being killed just for their fins; I repeat, just for their fins. The people are not eating shark steak. My colleague

mentioned the price of fins versus the price of meat. The reason we do not eat shark meat is that a shark is the apex predator and it contains a lot of mercury. I do not hear about a lot of people eating shark steak.

The real problem is that sharks are often finned alive. Why are we doing this, just taking their fins? In my community, in the Chinese and Vietnamese community, it is important to treat guests well. At a wedding, for instance, guests are brought shark fin soup. The soup might taste really good, but it is not because of the shark fins but because of the pork broth or chicken broth, which gives it taste. Shark fin has no taste. It is a cartilage and it has no nutritional value. It is basically just a question of prestige.

My colleague from New Westminster—Coquitlam mentioned that he has approached a lot of kids and people in different communities. It is really important for them because there is a difference between the value and the fact that they want the banquet to look good for others. It is not necessary to do that. Even the Chinese government has realized that. A lot of hotel chains have started banning shark fin soup.

[Translation]

If we think about it, it is not really a matter of culture.

I heard government members say that we were targeting Chinese and Asian cultures. That is not true. Cultures and traditions evolve. I am part of a new generation. I have spoken to many people. We believe that we must maintain our roots and evolve at the same time.

I therefore urge my colleagues to support this bill, which is very important for future generations.

An often-used example is ivory from endangered species. Ivory was harvested, just as shark fins are now.

I heard my colleagues say that we should focus on certain fins. A 2012 CTV report revealed that, out of 59 shark fins from which DNA samples were taken, 76% were from endangered species. So even though cutting shark fins is not allowed at the moment, the reality is that, in practice, it would be nearly impossible for inspectors to conduct DNA tests to figure out where every fin is coming from.

If my colleague had watched the film *Sharkwater*, he would also know that there is a massive black market. It is completely illegal. How do we implement the checks? Where do the fins come from? Do they come from a country that does not ban this type of shark-fin cutting, which is often done while the shark is alive? How can we truly know that the fins are not from the black market? That is the problem and that is what the bill is trying to address.

My Liberal colleague has said that he wants the bill to go to committee so that it can be studied and amendments can be made. We completely agree. Unlike another party, we are open to amendments and discussion. The goal is to fix a problem, namely shark finning. It creates an imbalance in nature and marine life. What is more, it is unnecessary.

Private Members' Business

My colleague mentioned tuna. If we apply this principle to shark fins, should we apply it to tuna as well? They are completely different situations. We are talking about the practice of killing a shark to take its fin and use it in a traditional dish. Unfortunately, this does little other than add to the cost. We have already seen what will happen if this practice continues. There is already an imbalance in nature, in the protection of marine life.

If my colleague wanted to protect fish, he would know that taking sharks out of the system creates an underwater imbalance. We are talking about protection and, as a scuba diver, it affects me greatly. Future generations need to be able to see sharks. In 2009, the International Union for Conservation of Nature stated that one-third of shark species were endangered because of this trade.

This is a real problem. Every year, 73 million sharks are killed. That is a stupefying number. If we do nothing, future generations will pay the price, and I am not talking only about the students who are already in school. There is a great public outcry. I am sure that my colleagues have received emails about this issue, and maybe even some tweets.

• (1145)

[English]

I think we have to listen to what the next generation is saying. They are saying, "Protect the sharks; keep them for the next generations". If we are not doing anything now and we know the reason for bringing in shark fins is simply a question of prestige, at one point we have to react.

We know that the regulations in place are not doing the job right now. This is why we have to move forward.

There is a tremendous amount of support from the communities, from scuba divers and even from the Chinese community.

[Translation]

I would like to thank Veronica Kwan from La Maison Kam Fung in Brossard, in my riding, who is aware of the issue and supports the bill. I would also like to thank Canada's branch of Humane Society International, which has done a lot of work on this issue.

[English]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, I want to thank the hon. member for New Westminster—Coquitlam for bringing this important issue to the attention of this House.

I think I can safely say that every member of this House, as do I, thinks the practice of shark finning is an awful thing. It involves the removal of the shark's fin while it is still alive and discarding the rest of the animal into the sea to die of suffocation or predation. We all agree that this is deplorable. Where we might disagree is on how to deal with the issue of shark finning, and I am not yet convinced that Bill C-380 is the way.

To remind hon. members, the bill proposes to amend two federal acts: the Fish Inspection Act, to prohibit the importation of shark fins; and the Fisheries Act, to prohibit the practice of shark finning in Canada. As my colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the

Minister of Agriculture, has spoken on the Fish Inspection Act, I will focus primarily on the changes proposed to the Fisheries Act.

Bill C-380 calls for amendments to the Fisheries Act to ban the practice of shark finning. However, the bill attempts to fix something that is not broken. Shark finning is banned in Canada and has been for almost two decades. In fact, the practice of finning has been banned in Canada since 1994, through licensing conditions under the fishery general regulations. That ban applies to Canadian fishery waters as well as licensed Canadian vessels fishing outside of our territorial waters.

Shark fishing in Canada is governed by sustainable management plans that include strong enforcement regimes to ensure that finning does not occur in Canadian fisheries, and these apply to all shark fisheries in Canadian waters. Indeed, only a few shark species are harvested in Canada, including spiny dogfish, porbeagle shark, shortfin mako shark and blue shark. These harvests are carefully managed based on the best scientific advice, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada is allowed to monitor shark populations in order to ensure their conservation. The shark fishery in Canada is highly regulated, with rigorous dockside monitoring. In fact, Canada maintains the first and only shark fishery in the world to be certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council.

As mentioned, in 1994, due to rising concerns over the practice, the Canadian government prohibited shark finning. The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans was given the ability to do this under section 7 of the Fisheries Act, which sets out the minister's authority to issue leases and licences for fisheries or fishing. Section 22 of the regulations provides the minister with specific authority to set out targeted licence conditions for the proper management and control of fisheries and the conservation and protection of fish. These provisions provide the minister with the authority to impose measures to eliminate shark finning as a licence condition.

Therefore, the regulations already allow the minister to impose, as a licence condition, measures to eliminate shark finning, which has been done. Today, all licence holders for Canadian shark fisheries and for fisheries where sharks are landed as bycatch are subject to licence conditions that prohibit them from engaging in shark finning. Why try to reinvent the wheel with Bill C-380?

The ban is enforced through a number of different internationally accepted methods across Canada. One approach requires that the number of fins correspond with the number of shark carcasses landed by shark fishing vessels. Under a second and more common approach, the number of fins on shark fishing vessels cannot exceed 5% of the overall weight of carcasses onboard when it lands. Both methods are intended to ensure that sharks are not being caught solely for their fins.

Private Members' Business

All licensed shark fishing vessels in Canada are subject to 100% monitoring to ensure this ratio is respected. Any violation of a licence condition is an offence under the Fisheries Act. Penalties for those found to be in contravention of their conditions of licence range from warnings, to prosecution, to requests for a court-imposed licence suspension and quota penalties, to loss of the privilege to renew the licence.

These measures were put in place to ensure Canada's shark fishery conforms to sustainable harvesting practices. It is a very practical approach and it has worked well. There has been only one minor breach in recent years; otherwise shark finning has not been an issue in Canadian fisheries. I would also add that Canada's approach is an internally accepted standard within regional fisheries management organizations.

• (1150)

While the bill is flawed, there are other ways to address the issue. For example, the proposed amendments to the Coastal Fisheries Protection Act would provide new tools for Canadian officials to seize shipments of fish products that have been caught illegally, such as shark fins. The proposed revisions to the Coastal Fisheries Protection Act currently being reviewed by the Senate, as Bill S-13, would provide the legislative authority for Canada to prevent the import of fish products from illegal sources. Additionally, Canada has worked with other countries to put an end to this practice. The Government of Canada will continue to work with our international partners to ensure sustainable management of sharks, including the prohibition of the practice of finning.

Globally, Canada promotes the sustainable management and conservation of sharks through international organizations, including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and regional fisheries management bodies, such as the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. There are also a number of international agreements, to which Canada is a party, which govern the conservation management and trade of certain at-risk shark species. For instance, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, usually called CITES, protects the great white shark, and basking and whale sharks. Imports of any of these shark species, or any of their parts, into Canada is only permissible if accompanied by an export permit from the country of origin that certifies the imported shark, or products derived from it, was caught in a scientifically proven sustainable fishery.

Furthermore, proposals have been submitted to have three more added, at the sixteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties convention to be held in March.

To summarize, Canada has taken action against the deplorable practice of illegal shark finning. This practice has been banned in Canada since 1994. Canada believes that working through regional fisheries management organizations to ensure strong management and enforcement practices globally is the most effective way to prevent unsustainable shark fishing practices, such as finning. A complete trade ban would penalize responsible legitimate fishing practices without addressing overfishing practices or improving global fisheries management. We will continue to support respon-

sible, legal shark harvesters and crack down on those who break the rules.

Given the above, the government cannot support the private member's bill, Bill C-380.

• (1155)

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to participate, for a short period of time, in this important debate.

Let me first add my words of congratulations to the member for New Westminster—Coquitlam for bringing in Bill C-380. The member has recognized there is a problem that exists in this country, and that in fact there is a problem that exists globally, with respect to this issue of the illegal trade in shark fins. He has said he is going to do something about it.

The member has been talking to Canadians, municipalities, members of this House and school children, and people support what he is talking about. We have heard members on all sides in this House say that they too agree the international trade in shark fins is deplorable. The practice of shark finning is deplorable. We have heard everyone agree with that.

However, the only one who has come forward with a plan to stop the problem is the member for New Westminster—Coquitlam. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans had all kinds of excuses as to why the Conservatives are not going to support our attempt to ban the illegal trade in shark fins.

Let me highlight one point that the parliamentary secretary made, and that is the work the government is doing in international co-operation with other groups and organizations, be they regional or otherwise. One example is ICCAT, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, which has held meetings recently to deal with issues of tuna conservation but also the subsequent impact of that fishery on the porbeagle shark.

In 2008, a joint ICCAT-ICES assessment for the northeast Atlantic population of porbeagle gave the following advice:

Given the state of the stock, no targeted fishing for porbeagle should be permitted and by-catch should be limited and landings of porbeagle should not be allowed.

The EU and that committee then went on to set limits on the total allowable catches. In 2012, at ICCAT meetings in Morocco, the only country that objected to a ban on the fishing of the porbeagle shark, which is facing extinction, was Canada. This is one shark that is not included on the list right now because of the work that Canada has been doing. To suggest we can solve the illegal trade in shark fins across the world and deal with the impact of conservation on sharks and the devastation on the marine ecosystem through existing agreements and existing relationships is simply fanciful.

Government Orders

My colleague has said, with the support of his colleagues in his caucus, and I believe I heard some support from the Liberal caucus, that we should bring this bill forward, pass it at second reading, move it to committee and have a good discussion. If we agree, and we have heard everyone say they do, and Canadians by the thousands are reporting that they want this practice stopped, then let us move this bill, which is the first attempt in this Parliament to begin to deal with the problem, into committee. Let us deal with it once and for all.

• (1200)

Let us make a commitment on behalf of Canadians and on behalf of our marine ecosystem, on behalf of those who recognize the fact that we need to step up and stop the illegal trade in shark fins. We need to stop this practice, so let us actually do something about it.

I understand that my time has come to a close. I want to urge all members of the House to vote in support of Bill C-380 and to do something about this deplorable practice of shark finning.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

The hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour will have four minutes remaining when this matter returns before the House.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

ENHANCING ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Bill C-42. Third reading

Hon. Rob Nicholson (for the Minister of Public Safety) moved that Bill C-42, An Act to amend the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts, be read the third time and passed.

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pride that I rise today to speak in favour of Bill C-42, the enhancing RCMP accountability act.

With a history extending back to the very formation of our country, few national institutions are more symbolic of Canada than the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. For many Canadians and people in other countries, the Mounties have come to represent certain values associated with Canada, the values of integrity, honesty, courage and determination. When those values are questioned or tarnished, it not only undermines the functioning of the RCMP but also affects the very heart of how others see us and how we see ourselves.

For that reason, the government has taken a key interest in modernizing the RCMP to meet the challenges of the 21st century. I remind everyone that the RCMP Act was last substantially amended in 1988, some 25 years ago. The world has changed very much in the last 25 years. Canadians are rightly demanding greater accountability from the RCMP, alongside heightened transparency.

The cumbersome RCMP human resources management framework, which is so heavily reliant on paperwork, only makes the situation worse, and the well-publicized charges of sexual harassment are further evidence that far-reaching changes are required within the RCMP. Yes, the institution has made valiant efforts to correct its problems through its transformation agenda, but these internal changes can only go so far. What is needed now is an overhaul of the legislation affecting the RCMP's oversight and operations.

The RCMP and Canadians understand the need for legislative changes. It is very unfortunate that the NDP cannot understand this and, sadly, will not be supporting this important bill. It was made clear throughout the committee hearings that there are structural deficiencies that must be fixed within the RCMP. There are management challenges that must be faced. There are issues of trust and confidence that must be resolved. The government is determined to deal with these questions head on.

As members will recall, the government came to office on a platform of clear priorities. These included enhancing public safety and security and strengthening accountability and transparency. Bill C-42 contains many of the provisions included in legislation introduced in the last Parliament to address accountability issues within the RCMP.

I would now like to review the key components of the bill along with amendments that were introduced at the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security.

Canadians recognize the limitations of the current system of RCMP oversight. They want to know that public complaints against RCMP officers are handled expeditiously with thoroughness and impartiality. They want greater transparency so that justice is not only done but also seen to be done. The government has listened carefully and recognized the need to strengthen external oversight of the RCMP.

I do not want to suggest for one moment that this move denigrates the valuable work that has been accomplished by the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP, the CPC, since its inception in 1988. It has done excellent work. Yet we must also acknowledge the concerns raised in many quarters that the current legislation hampers the CPC from doing its job thoroughly. For that reason, Bill C-42 proposes replacing the CPC with an arm's-length body to be known as the civilian review and complaints commission for the RCMP.

Government Orders

Bill C-42 enhances the powers of the CPC. For example, the new entity would continue to focus on reviewing public complaints through enhanced access to information. It could also summon witnesses to testify at a hearing. In addition, the new body would be able to more broadly review RCMP activities in a particular area of interest and report on its findings. What is more, the new commission would also be empowered to share information or conduct joint complaints investigations with counterparts in other jurisdictions, and it would produce customized reports on public complaints for each jurisdiction holding contracts with the RCMP. These reports would analyze the number and nature of complaints in a given period. They would also identify any trends within the complaints. In this way, the new commission would deliver a tailor-made report that would meet the needs and expectations of contract jurisdictions. These new measures have become the standard tools for modern review bodies.

• (1205)

One of the most sensitive areas of RCMP conduct involves what is known as “serious incidents”. These are cases where RCMP contact with the Canadian public results in serious injury or death. In these high-profile events, it is vital that investigations of these cases is carried out independently, transparently and impartially. As I indicated earlier, it is important to the integrity of these investigations and the reputation of the RCMP that this impartiality be apparent from the very start of the investigation of these serious incidents. That is why the proposed bill would require the RCMP to refer all cases of serious incidents to a civilian investigative body within the relevant province. This body would ensure that the investigation is conducted in an impartial, transparent manner.

Of course, not every province has a civilian investigative body that can handle cases of this nature. If a provincial civilian agency does not exist, the case would then be referred to another police force. However, there are situations where there is no civilian body or other police agency available to conduct the investigation. For instance, at some remote RCMP locations the legislation would provide for this third possibility. In the absence of an external body, the RCMP would investigate the incident itself. Since this would justifiably raise all of the old concerns about independence, transparency and conflict of interest, the proposed legislation would go even further. If the RCMP or another police force were in charge of investigating these serious incidents, the jurisdiction in question or the new commission could appoint an independent observer to assess the impartiality of these investigations.

The government has worked hard to promote the accountability and transparency demanded by serious incidents. I know we have succeeded with the provisions that are outlined in Bill C-42.

Until now, I have concentrated my remarks on how the bill would enhance the accountability of the RCMP to all Canadians. However, accountability is also a concern within the RCMP itself. Over the past year, incidents related to alleged misconduct and sexual harassment in the RCMP have been well documented by the media. The current human resources management framework clearly does not allow for the commissioner to deal with these internal issues expeditiously. That is why a large portion of Bill C-42 is devoted to revamping and modernizing the RCMP discipline, grievance and human resources management practice. The chief concern with

disciplinary action is the requirement to turn over serious cases to an adjudication board. The current policy embedded in existing legislation accomplishes and, in some cases, results in two things. First, it sets in motion a bureaucratic nightmare, a process full of delays that can stretch on for years and can create animosities that poison workplaces. Second, by taking away power from front-line managers, the latter lose the ability to correct behaviours and return the members to work quickly and put the incident behind them, or to demonstrate to others in the workplace that inappropriate behaviour is not acceptable. Currently, front-line managers do not have the ability to do this within the RCMP. It is time they have the ability to manage the people they work with in a modern, efficient way.

Bill C-42 would modify this process substantially. Most significantly, it would empower front-line managers within the RCMP. Under the bill's provisions, these managers could impose consequences or measures for most contraventions of the code of conduct. For example, managers could impose remedial training or corrective action or, in some cases, dock the officer's pay. Managers would only hand over the case to a conduct board if the review could lead to the firing of an officer.

The grievance process is just as troubling as the process for discipline, perhaps even more so, if that is possible. There seem to be as many processes as there are issues. A member who has a problem with his or her terms and conditions of employment goes one route. A member appealing a discharge goes yet another. Another member appealing a disciplinary sanction takes yet a third route. There are so many different administrators and processes for each one of these incidents that through it all, front-line managers are kept in the dark many times. It is time to shine the light of accountability on it and to find solutions.

• (1210)

Under Bill C-42, a single process would be instated for both grievances and appeals by members. The same set of administrators would deal with them. The same decision-makers would review the results. In this way the system would be much simpler, more consistent and operate with greater efficiency. Complementing this formal approach, front-line managers would be encouraged to deal with minor problems informally and at the first occurrence, as human resource managers across the country in other police forces are able to do before these occurrences become official grievances and before they undermine a positive workplace culture.

Our improvements to RCMP management would not be complete without also considering the important role of the commissioner. In short, the commissioner currently lacks authority for decisions that would be part of any senior manager's tool kit, including those provided to other police chiefs. To rectify these shortcomings the proposed legislation would give the commissioner new authorities. These include, for example, the power to demote and discharge members, to appoint commissioned officers and to investigate disputes involving workplace harassment.

Government Orders

I have highlighted the major provisions of Bill C-42 for consideration by the House. I would now like to take note and explain the changes that were adopted by the House of Commons at report stage. The committee accepted three substantive amendments. These were issues that were raised by witnesses throughout the hearings. We were pleased to further strengthen the legislation by these amendments.

As amended, the bill now supports the establishment of a strengthened reserve program, relying heavily on retired RCMP and other police officers. Currently, reservists are limited to how long they can serve consecutively. This change is important for a number of reasons, one being that it gives managers much needed staffing flexibility and helps ensure a healthy and strong workplace by reducing the amount of overtime worked by regular members. I am pleased that the committee agreed to enhance the RCMP's ability to benefit from the reserve program without interruptions in service time.

The second amendment provides clarity for the chairperson regarding immunity. The original provision provided immunity to every member, officer or employee performing the duties, powers and functions of the new commission. This was always intended to include the chairperson. As such, the committee saw fit to formally spell out in the legislation that the chairperson also has immunity. The final amendment clarifies that the RCMP commissioner cannot refuse to investigate a complaint initiated by the chairperson.

The proposed legislation, together with the three substantive amendments, would bring the laws governing the RCMP into the 21st century. It is puzzling that the NDP would work with us at committee to further strengthen the legislation and then sadly play these games at report stage and now not support this important piece of legislation. I sincerely call on the NDP to support the legislation and to work with our government to help stop harassment within the RCMP.

We heard repeatedly at committee stage that the proposed legislation would give the RCMP the flexibility it needs. At the same time, by addressing structural problems it would enhance accountability and transparency. In doing so it will bolster trust and confidence in the RCMP by both Canadians and Mounties.

While sadly it seems that the NDP will not put aside its ideological opposition to our common sense reforms, I can assure Canadians that our Conservative government will be supporting the bill at third reading.

•(1215)

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would use the word “astonished”. The member knows we worked quite closely together on the bill. We took it quite seriously in committee but the government rejected each and every one of the amendments that we proposed to the bill. It is surprising to me how the member could be surprised at this point that we are not supporting the bill. Obviously both sides of the House accept the seriousness of the issues we are dealing with, but we were disappointed that the government rejected all the amendments that we proposed at committee.

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, I would challenge my hon. colleague that his amendments were not productive amendments, although we appreciated them being brought forward.

However, right now we all agree on the bill before us. It is a good bill. It seems to me as if the NDP is throwing the baby out with the bath water. Those members did not get exactly what they wanted. They have a bill before them that we and witnesses at committee see as a good bill, which will address many of the issues within the RCMP. Instead of NDP members taking a principled stand and doing the right thing for the RCMP and the people of Canada, they are saying no. Because they did not get the amendments they wanted they will not support the bill. I call on the NDP to put aside what I would call a selfish outlook and be leaders, represent their constituencies, stand up for the RCMP, do the right thing and support this important piece of legislation.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we will be supporting the bill, but I do have a very serious question for the parliamentary secretary.

I have been solicitor general and really understand the reasoning behind giving the commissioner more power to demote individuals and discharge members in certain instances. However, one of the huge problems in the RCMP relates to the person who may become commissioner and whether he or she uses that power in the way in which it was intended. Power can be a good thing or a bad thing when in the wrong hands.

Therefore, are there safeguards within the legislation to protect the rank and file from a commissioner who may have a vendetta against a certain member or any other reason?

That balance is extremely important. I wonder if the parliamentary secretary could give us some advice on that.

•(1220)

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, certainly my hon. colleague does raise an important issue. There are measures currently in place whereby the commissioner is held accountable. However, in specific cases where RCMP members are concerned, there is still a very thorough complaints process whereby RCMP members can go to the board, bring their complaints forward and have them ruled on.

Therefore, as is the case with other police forces, there are ways that members can disagree with their police chiefs or come forward and lodge complaints, because there is a very practical human resources process in place, especially under this new enhanced and modernized RCMP accountability act. There are ways for RCMP members to do that. We have a great commissioner and are so happy with the work that he has done, but certainly every leader and every commissioner needs ways to be held accountable.

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am quite pleased that my colleague spoke to the bill today because it is very important. I am very proud of the work that she has done on this file and in moving the bill forward.

Government Orders

In preparation for the debate today I was looking at some of the feedback that we have had from stakeholders across the country on the bill who would see a direct impact because of its proposed passage. For example, Catherine Ebbs, the chair of the Canadian Mounted Police External Review Committee stated:

Bill C-42 creates the opportunity for the force to renew and modernize their internal processes, and one focus in that development will be streamlining processes.

I think that's a very worthwhile exercise.

There are all sorts of people who would see a direct influence or impact with respect to the bill who have supported it because it is necessary. I was hoping my colleague could speak to some of the feedback that she has heard across the country on this important piece of legislation.

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, we certainly have had a lot of positive feedback. This has been requested for so long by not only the RCMP but also the Canadian public. Therefore, the feedback has been tremendous.

My colleague from the opposition, the critic for public safety, was upset that some of their amendments were not adopted. One of the measures they wanted to introduce was yet another big bureaucratic investigative body in place of what we already have, regionally and within jurisdictions.

Mr. Tom Stamatakis, the chair of the Canadian Police Association, commented on that just recently. He said that it would add layers of infrastructure and duplication of offices and that police were capable of investigating these serious incidents. "You need to have the right kind of independent oversight of it so you can ensure that the investigation is conducted...but I think there are models that are more efficient than just adding more and more layers of bureaucracy to these kinds of incidents." That was his response to a question that I posed to him about one of the NDP-proposed changes to the bill.

The police do not want more bureaucracy or to add costs. This is a good bill that will have a very good three-pronged process for investigating serious incidents. The support is there. We support it. It is great to hear that the Liberals will support it. Will the NDP do the right thing and vote in support of the bill to end harassment within the RCMP?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when 200 women decide to take action and file a class action lawsuit, I think that speaks volumes about the problem of sexual harassment in the RCMP.

The term "sexual harassment" does not even appear in Bill C-42, and the Conservatives rejected an amendment as simple as providing all RCMP members with training in that regard.

Can someone explain this for me?

[*English*]

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, with respect to my hon. colleague, we give the tools to an organization such as the RCMP to put processes in place to stop not only sexual harassment but harassment, bullying and any kind of negative, wrong behaviour to any one of its members. To put that kind of terminology in legislation actually limits the legislation and limits what the RCMP

are able to do under practical, best practices within human resources management.

I would ask the NDP to do a little research, to look at other companies and organizations, private or public, and how they address forms of harassment. They have good policies and processes in place. The bill gives the RCMP the ability to do that. When we start embedding very specific terminology in the legislation, it can limit it. We want to give the RCMP the ability to address every form of harassment, and that is what the legislation would do.

• (1225)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, could the hon. member tell us which independent witnesses, in other words those who were not government officials, RCMP officials or otherwise holding public office, appeared at committee in support of the government's bill? My recollection is that absolutely no independent witnesses supported the government's position at committee.

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, as I already mentioned, Tom Stamatakis, the head of the Canadian Police Association, whom I would suggest my hon. colleague would not want to discredit, supports the legislation. There were a number of them.

The opposition members somehow suggest that the bill has not been asked for by the RCMP and that it is not supported. It might not be exactly the way the NDP wanted it worded, maybe they did not get their amendments passed, but they supported these changes. They need to do the right thing. Maybe they did not win everything they wanted, but it is not about the NDP. It is about the RCMP. It is about doing the right thing for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It is not about NDP members being able to say they scored a political point. They should stand up, do the right thing and support the bill.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to speak to Bill C-42 at third reading today.

First, I want to begin by paying tribute to the women and men of the RCMP who work every day to help keep our communities safe. Often we talk about the wondrous blessings of this very large and diverse country, but I would also add that sometimes it can be a large and cold country, which can be a curse as well as a blessing. With the conditions we faced in most of the country over the last week, I think we need to remember that the emergency services people, the RCMP and all those other front-line people, are still out there working in the cold, keeping us safe despite the harsh weather conditions that keep many of the rest of us at home.

I think that the opening of the third reading debate is a good time to remember why the bill is before the House. The government likes to emphasize the word "modernization" and say that it is time to review the act, that this is the first major revision over 25 years and, therefore, that we can bring things up to date since we last debated this in the House in 1988.

I would like to argue that it is before the House not just because time has elapsed and it is time to look at it again; it is before the House because we have very serious concerns to address regarding the RCMP.

Government Orders

I do take exception to the position that has been stated this morning, that somehow the NDP has an interest in this. What we are talking about is what we heard from witnesses and from stakeholders about some things that needed to be in this bill and were not there. We did propose amendments at the committee stage, and again at report stage, to address the serious concerns. I want to just remind the House what those are.

First, there is a declining confidence in the RCMP, despite the fine work done by women and men on the front lines every day. Overall, we have seen the public losing some of the confidence it has had over the years, which confidence has made the RCMP a national symbol in many ways.

Yes, the public still has confidence in the RCMP, but that decline in confidence, no matter how small, has to be a concern for members in this House.

Second, we have a clear problem with sexual harassment within the RCMP. We also heard in committee that we have problems with other kinds of harassment. Therefore we have to address that problem directly. It is not just updating the bill; it is dealing with something that has happened inside the RCMP over time that has led to 200 women bringing a lawsuit against the RCMP for the damage to their careers that happened as a result of sexual harassment in the RCMP.

Third—which the government focuses on almost exclusively, and I would agree—there is a need to deal with serious concerns about management of human resources and labour relations inside the RCMP.

Let me talk about each of those in a bit more detail and start with the declining confidence.

Obviously, we have had a number of unfortunate high-profile incidents over the last few years involving the RCMP, which resulted in deaths and serious injuries to the public. Some of this loss of confidence is to be expected whenever there are serious incidents of this kind.

However, in large part, I think the loss of confidence is attributable to the police investigating themselves. In these cases that involve, as I said, serious bodily harm and/or death, the public worries that somehow when police investigate police there will be a tendency to take care of one's own and to perhaps not pursue the investigation to its full length.

I believe that the police, generally, do a good job investigating themselves. However, if the public does not have confidence in that investigation, then we need to proceed in a different way.

Some of that loss of confidence is a direct result of public concern about the structures we use to hold the RCMP accountable.

Yes, the hon. member who is the parliamentary secretary talks about a very confusing set of overlapping jurisdictions, and we would agree with her. That is why we proposed, in committee, that there be one clear independent body that is able to investigate in these kinds of incidents; not adding that as another layer on top of existing bodies, but having one national civilian investigative agency in which both the public and the police could have confidence in the investigations that take place in these very serious cases.

Second, I talked about the problem we obviously have with sexual harassment within the RCMP. We cannot just brush this aside, saying the RCMP will deal with it, because obviously it has failed to do so. Anytime, as I mentioned, 200 members of the RCMP, for any reason, go outside the normal RCMP processes and ask the courts to intervene because of what they see as very damaging policies and practices within the RCMP, then we have a serious problem—and it is not a problem of just a few bad apples, but it is a systemic problem within the RCMP.

● (1230)

We on this side have a serious concern that there is a flaw in the culture of the RCMP, which is now deeply ingrained. It is a culture that all too often tolerates harassment in the workplace, specifically sexual harassment. Therefore, we put forward an amendment to the section that lists the responsibilities of the commissioner of the RCMP. This section outlines certain things that the RCMP commissioner must do, but does not list everything the commissioner does, as the hon. member on the other side implied. It establishes some clear responsibilities.

In committee, we heard from representatives of women who are bringing forward law suits. We also heard from experts on sexual harassment that, instead of trying to deal with the problem at the back end using discipline, there is a necessity to change the culture of the RCMP through training at the front end and make people aware of what they sometimes do not even perceive as harassment.

I know this from serving on a municipal police board. Some 10 years ago, we required all employees on the police board to go through harassment training. At the end of that training, some officers whom I respected said they had done some things over time that they had not realized had an impact on others within the police force.

That is the importance of stressing that putting harassment training into the responsibilities of the commissioner would help change the culture that results in the limitation of careers of women within the RCMP. We spend a lot of money training these officers, they gain a lot of experience, and they find their careers blocked or frustrated by a practice that is unacceptable, which is sexual harassment.

As I have said, when we have so many instances come forward, we have a systemic problem. This not an NDP proposal that would benefit the NDP, but most organizations have dealt with sexual harassment at the front end through training. Therefore, it is beyond me why the Conservatives fail to accept at least this one amendment, which is a very simple amendment, to add harassment training to the specific responsibilities of the commissioner.

Also, adding this specific responsibility for training would create accountability. When the commissioner comes before the House at the public safety committee, if there is a specific responsibility listed in the act, then it makes it possible for members of Parliament to ask questions on how that responsibility is being carried out, what the commissioner has done in this area, and how he or she has met the statutory responsibilities, instead of leaving the act silent on the question of sexual harassment.

Government Orders

As my hon. colleague said in his question, the words “sexual harassment” do not even appear in the bill that is put forward as a solution to the problem of sexual harassment. I will accept the parliamentary secretary’s argument that harassment is not just sexual in nature and that there is a larger problem in the culture of the RCMP. However, that is why we put forward the amendment, which was rejected by the Conservatives, to make the bill something that would be part of the up-front efforts to change the culture of the RCMP. I believe this is a measure that would go a long way, along with independent oversight, to help restore confidence in the RCMP.

Our third concern, the management of labour resources, I think really comes down to what the parliamentary secretary raised. It is a discipline process that seems convoluted, sometimes arbitrary and often ineffective. We have had some egregious examples, especially in dealing with discipline regarding sexual harassment.

For example, a senior officer in one of the provinces was found guilty through the internal process of numerous incidents of sexual harassment of his female colleagues. The punishment that came out of this disciplinary process was to transfer him, near the end of his career, from a posting in a very cold part of the country to a posting in what I, of course, regard as one of the best parts of the country when it comes to climate. It did not seem like much punishment. It did not seem like very effective punishment to simply transfer the person, with no training required, and without any remedial work being done with the person. It was to simply transfer the person to another jurisdiction, and those problems may in fact have been transferred with the individual.

Therefore, we agree that the discipline process is sometimes convoluted, slow, arbitrary and ineffective. Of course, if the discipline process is not effective, it does make it difficult to deal effectively with all of those other challenges the RCMP faces.

• (1235)

Bill C-42 is before the House this session, and we on this side supported it at second reading because we acknowledge the seriousness of these challenges currently facing the RCMP, and we hoped to have a dialogue at committee that would result in a stronger bill. We heard from many witnesses and, as I said in my question to the parliamentary secretary, we heard from no one who was an independent witness, who was not an official of the RCMP, that he or she actually supported this bill.

I have talked at great length with the president of the Canadian Police Association, and he does have reservations about this bill despite the comments of the parliamentary secretary.

The Conservatives presented this bill to the House last summer, just before the break, and on this side we responded with the serious set of hearings of witnesses in the fall. I would argue we had a good set of hearings. We dealt with the issues substantively.

However, what it demonstrated was there was lots of room for improvement in this bill. Again, we put forward a package of amendments that we believed would serve to strengthen the bill and address those serious problems. All of those amendments were rejected. We also put forward amendments at report stage, and once again they were rejected.

It should come as no surprise to the government that on this side of the House we have found that we cannot support the bill at third reading. It leaves those major issues unaddressed.

It really exacerbates the problems that result from the paramilitary model that the RCMP initially adopted. When the RCMP was set up, the Government of Canada looked to the Royal Irish Constabulary, which had been established in Ireland in 1822. This was a paramilitary model that was designed to help police an Irish population that was hostile to what it saw as the British occupation.

There is another model from Britain, a model that I believe would better serve the Canadian context. That model is nearly as old. It was set up in 1829 for the Metropolitan Police of London based at Scotland Yard. Instead of being a paramilitary organization, the Metropolitan Police was set up on a community policing model and a model of shared governance, where there was more consultation with the cop on the beat about how to do policing and less of a top-down structure.

The solution in terms of administration and labour relations that the government has adopted here is to give the commissioner more power. To me, a lot of the problems we are facing result from that concentration of power in the hands of one person. What we suggested were some amendments that would help spread out that power, increase the authority of the external review committee, increase the confidence that rank and file members would have in the internal discipline process in the RCMP and, therefore, also increase public confidence in the RCMP.

We are opposing this bill because we believe that in the House of Commons we have a duty to do the best we can in terms of reforming an act, especially when these kinds of issues only come before the House once every 25 years.

To repeat, sexual harassment is still not in the bill. Our solution to tackle sexual harassment at the front end through training and a change in the culture rather than simply the disciplinary end was rejected by the Conservatives.

In terms of oversight, what we suggested in our amendments was a fully independent complaints commission reporting to the House of Commons. What do we have in the bill? We have a complaints commission that continues to report to the minister, and a commission that cannot make binding recommendations; it only can make non-binding recommendations to the minister and the commissioner.

To have a more fully independent commission, we thought some changes were needed: to report to the House of Commons, to allow binding recommendations. Those suggestions were rejected by the Conservatives.

Even the parliamentary secretary mentioned that there are four provinces, and of course the three territories, where there is no provision for independent investigation of the police. In those serious incidents involving serious bodily harm or involving death, in four provinces, even after this bill passes, we will still have police investigating police. This remains a serious confidence problem for the public.

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The minister and the parliamentary secretary have both mischaracterized our proposal as one of adding to bureaucracy. Instead, what we were suggesting is an independent, civilian, national investigation organization that could replace some of those other organizations, replace some of the duplication, but most importantly would establish public confidence that when there are unfortunate incidents, they have been thoroughly investigated and will result in an outcome that has the appropriate consequences.

● (1240)

I want to take a couple of minutes to talk about two statements made by witnesses at the public safety committee. They both spoke about the solution of giving additional powers to the commissioner. One of those was Mr. Tom Stamatakis, president of the Canadian Police Association. In committee, on October 29, this is what he said:

Bill C-42 provides the commissioner with extraordinary powers in this regard, powers that go beyond what one might find in other police services across Canada. For example, in Ontario, a police officer who is subject to a disciplinary process retains the right to appeal the decision to the independent Ontario Civilian Police Commission, a quasi-judicial body that provides an impartial review of the process and ultimately a decision. Without any additional, and most importantly, independent avenue for appeal, I would suggest there is a possibility that RCMP members could lose faith in the impartiality of a process against them, particularly in situations in which the commissioner has delegated his authority for discipline.

In short, what Mr. Stamatakis was saying was in line with the amendment we proposed. We have an external review committee that looks at disciplinary decisions within the RCMP, but it only makes recommendations to the commissioner. If a rank and file member appeals his or her discipline, it goes to the independent external review committee, but the commissioner does not have to pay any attention to its decisions. Our amendment suggested that we could have greater independence for the external review committee, and that was supported by the Canadian Police Association.

Other witnesses at the public safety committee also spoke out against the power imbalance, in terms of labour relations, within Bill C-42. Most recently, we heard from Rob Creasser, media liaison in British Columbia for the Mounted Police Professional Association. It is sometimes called the non-union union, since the RCMP is prevented from unionization. What he said in committee was:

One major problem that exists in the RCMP is the tremendous power imbalances within the organization. Bill C-42, rather than mitigating these issues, will only make them exponentially worse.

If Bill C-42 is passed in its current form with the charter violations and avenues for continued abuse of power by managers, rather than correcting the issues that have plagued the RCMP, our Parliament would be promoting the bad behaviour and cronyism by legitimizing this type of behaviour.

That is a somewhat stronger statement than I might make on this issue, but it points to the direction of our amendment, which is that we need a more collaborative management structure, not a strengthening of the powers of one person and not a concentration of those powers in the hands of the commissioner alone.

It became apparent to us, after hearing witnesses and experts at committee, that the bill has deep flaws that will not fix the concerns the public and the rank and file members of the RCMP have.

Since Bill C-42 was passed in committee, 2,000 members of the RCMP have signed a petition stating that they were not properly consulted on the changes in the bill and that they do not believe the

government is representing their best interests in this bill. Two thousand serving RCMP members signed the petition opposing this bill.

Bill C-42 still allows, in four provinces, for police to investigate police. Really, the solution adopted by the Conservatives is to dump responsibilities onto provincial investigating agencies rather than to guarantee that there is one high-quality civilian agency at the national level.

The NDP has put forward its package of amendments reflecting what independent witnesses said in the committee and reflecting the things we believe are necessary to address the three main concerns I talked about earlier in my speech.

Measures to address harassment training at the front end are critical to changing the culture in the RCMP. Measures to strengthen the independence of review bodies are critical to restoring public confidence in the RCMP.

The Conservatives are standing by their argument that putting more power in the hands of the commissioner to fire individual officers will curb all the ongoing issues in the RCMP. Giving the commissioner this concentration of power, we believe, would contribute to ongoing problems and not solutions.

● (1245)

I would conclude by saying that the NDP wish we could have supported the bill at third reading, but the government was not able to see its way clear to accepting any of the amendments that would have addressed these serious concerns.

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for and appreciate my hon. colleague's comments, although we are agreeing to disagree, which is too bad on such an important issue that needs to be moved forward.

We talked about people who are supporting the bill who are independent of, as the member said, the government and the RCMP themselves.

David Eby, former executive director of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association, said:

They're changes that are long overdue. Certainly we have shared the frustration of senior management within the RCMP that they have not been able to remove problem officers in the way that we would expect...so it's good to see these changes coming.

Shirley Bond, B.C. Minister of Justice, said that she was very pleased to see a response and that the Minister of Public Safety had assured her that this was the kind of step needed to give the Deputy Commissioner and the Commissioner of the RCMP the tools they need. She said that it was a positive first step.

There are a number of others, including Ian McPhail, who I do not think my hon. colleague would say is not impartial. He is completely impartial, as Catherine Ebbs, one of my former colleagues, talked about.

My colleague said he wishes that the NDP could support it. Do not just wish for it; actually do it.

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Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, I do not think we should engage, on either side, in partial quotations from various people to try to win our argument. We should go back to the general argument we have advanced, which is that we believe there are some serious deficiencies related to three main concerns we see with the RCMP.

I would like to say that at committee, the government allowed us to call witnesses who presented opposing points of view. There has been a lot of debate in the public about the relevance of Parliament. Anyone who looks at the debate we had on this bill will conclude that we addressed real issues. We had people before the committee who were experts we could listen to.

As the parliamentary secretary says, at this point, the government and the NDP will have to agree to disagree on the bill.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question relates to the point the member made on the imbalance of power. I raised that question with the parliamentary secretary earlier. I am very concerned about that, although we take a different approach and we will support the bill.

Maybe the member can answer this, because all of us do not have the opportunity to attend committee. I am puzzled. If the member had an amendment at committee to try to balance the balance of power, what was the reasoning for it not being accepted? One of the concerns we have with the government is that if an amendment does not come from the government, the Conservatives reject it out of hand. Dealing with this serious issue of the balance of power, with a commissioner with all the power in the world, could be a problem down the road.

I wonder if the member could explain to the House the reasoning behind the loss of that amendment. It sounds, from what I have heard here, as if it was a good one.

• (1250)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, my confusion is about how the Liberal Party has decided to support this legislation, despite its professed concern about the lack of a balance of power. We put forward an amendment such that the recommendations of the external review committee, when it reviews decisions on the dismissal of members, would be binding on the Commissioner of the RCMP.

The government gave us no clear reason for rejecting that other than to say that it felt that the solution was to give complete power to the commissioner to allow him or her to move expeditiously. Yes, perhaps in a few cases, we know that the commissioner was not able to remove people quickly enough, but it ignores the other side of that question. What about all those other members who are worried about their careers and may have been accused of something falsely? They have to be able to accept that it would not just be the commissioner's view but would be the evidence that would support discipline against them. That is what making the independent recommendations of the external review committee binding would do for the whole RCMP. It would give confidence that decisions are based on evidence, not on just, perhaps, the commissioner's opinion.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety spoke about the New Democrats wanting their way. If it is not their way, they vote against it.

Is it the first time the members have heard from the government, in a democratic institution like this one, where we are here to debate and study a bill and have amendments, that it seems unable to accept any amendments coming from the NDP? They seem to have formed a government that wants it their way or the highway. If it is not their way, and we are not on their side, it is as if we are not on the side of the right thing. Is a bill not there to be studied and to receive amendments to make a better bill? Is that not what this building, this Parliament, is all about? I would like to hear the member on this.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Acadie—Bathurst for his question, because it goes to the heart of what we sometimes see as the problem in this House under a Conservative majority government. It is that the Conservatives call on us to work co-operatively with them, and when we try to do that and bring forward genuine improvements to bills, we find that there is very little possibility that those ideas will be accepted.

I point to one amusing example in public safety. On a different bill, we had an idea for an amendment. Lo and behold, later it came back as a government amendment. The very fact that we had proposed the amendment made it unacceptable. However, when a virtually identically worded amendment came forward from the government, we were happy to support it.

Mr. Brent Rathgeber (Edmonton—St. Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, listening to the hon. member's speech, I was perplexed by his suggestion that the solution to the problems at the RCMP could be solved with front-end training. I do not mean to diminish the value of front-end training or harassment training, but I am concerned that the effects of that would takes years, if not decades, to have any palpable effect, as new recruits were trained and ultimately found their way into management positions.

Does the member not agree with the commissioner, who believes that this bill would help build a culture of management that is effective at the RCMP and that would be a more effective and certainly a more expeditious solution to some of the problems at the RCMP?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, the member raises a good point. However, to me, the point about training is that obviously, it is not just rank and file RCMP members who would be trained on the issue of harassment. It would obviously be management within the RCMP who have failed to deal effectively over the years with sexual harassment within the force, which has led to this deep-rooted problem in the culture of the RCMP now. Yes, it will take a while.

We do not believe that harassment training is the silver bullet that will immediately make this better. However, over time, it will change the culture of the RCMP and will provide a workplace where women can serve in full equality with men and not worry about having limitations placed on their careers because of unacceptable behaviour by their colleagues.

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• (1255)

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, one of the comments I keep hearing from the Conservatives in many of these discussions is that the New Democrats do not propose any amendments they can accept. I do not know how many bills have come through here since we started this session. It is probably about 50. We have proposed amendments every chance we have had, and I do not think very many have been accepted.

What troubles me is that the thrust of this bill, and one of the complaints we have about a lot of bills, is to have immense power left in the hands of an individual. That has happened in the immigration file. It has happened in the public safety file, and it is happening again. Immense power would be left in the hands of a single individual. That appears to be a theme from across the aisle. The Conservatives believe that the person at the time should be empowered to make all these decisions. We fear those kinds of powers. Would the member comment further on that?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, it reflects something we see all too often on the other side of the House. The other day, in question period, we saw the Prime Minister answer almost all of the questions. It is a model of one person taking the leadership role and making himself accountable without sharing the responsibility and drawing on the expertise of others within the organization. I agree with the member that it is an unfortunate tendency we see, starting right at the top, on the other side, with the Prime Minister.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak on Bill C-42, An Act to amend the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts.

I want to state for the record what the summary of the two key points indicates this is all about. The summary of the bill states:

This enactment enhances the accountability of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police by reforming the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act in two vital areas. First, it strengthens the Royal Canadian Mounted Police review and complaints body and implements a framework to handle investigations of serious incidents involving members. Second, it modernizes discipline, grievance and human resource management processes for members, with a view to preventing, addressing and correcting performance and conduct issues in a timely and fair manner.

That sounds great in theory, but I have to remark that wonderful ideas do not always work in theory. I recall the government bringing in the Federal Accountability Act. This is much along the same lines. Indeed, I heard the parliamentary secretary talk about accountability and transparency. I remember the Federal Accountability Act well and the government talking about transparency and accountability. Anything we have seen from the current government is the absolute direct opposite: We are seeing the least transparency we have ever seen of any government in Canadian history. Access to information requests are taking longer and longer. We cannot get answers from the government. Committees are shoved in camera on simple motions that should be debated in public but are taking place in secret.

I wanted to outline that at the beginning because when the government talks about accountability and transparency in its own business, we have seen anything but that. I hope that with the changes to the RCMP we will see some transparency and accountability. However, the record of the government is the direct opposite.

Although we are debating the RCMP Act, I am concerned about this place because we are not seeing things happening at committee in the open and transparent way that we should. The way the government is operating is a blight on the Parliament of Canada. As a former solicitor general, I do not want to see that same blight apply to the RCMP, because it is our national police force and a recognized icon around the world. I want to see it improved. The best intentions laid out in this bill may sound great, but they need to come to fruition in the way they were intended to.

The Liberal critic agrees with the central premise of the bill, that the commissioner's capacity to deal with disciplinary issues should be strengthened and the process for dealing with them streamlined. In my earlier questioning, I outlined some of my concerns in that regard and I will get to those in a moment. That said, the bill certainly is a step forward. As with all legislation, it may need to be improved as we go down the road a piece.

The critic for the Liberal Party also says that some minor improvements could be brought to the powers and scope of the new civilian complaints body and notes that this body has been strengthened in keeping with previous Liberal positions. From the perspective of my party, we Liberals welcome the new legislation and the attempts by the government to address the current challenges facing the RCMP.

• (1300)

As has been expressed in this debate and will be in future debates in the House, there is no doubt that the RCMP is facing many challenges. We see the issue of sexual harassment in the press all too often. As I said a moment ago, the RCMP is a symbol of Canada around the world, something we are proud of, and we do not want to see this image tarnished due to the odd individual in the force who tarnishes not only the image of the RCMP but also the image of Canada. The corrective measures have to be put in place to allow the national police force to deal with these problems in an effective manner.

Bill C-42 aims to tackle these harassment and discipline issues by reworking the force's bureaucratic grievance system and by giving increased powers to the commissioner. The bill would also give senior managers a wider range of options to sanction members immediately, such as by suspending pay.

I raised some concerns about this point earlier, not so much with the additional authority of the senior managers as a management team, but the power of the commissioner and the power surrounding him. As one member I talked to this morning said, it gives the commissioner the power to "hire, fire or boot and all the rest". That is a pretty substantive statement, and there is no question that on disciplinary issues, the commissioner does need the power. However, having been there as a solicitor general, I think there is a dilemma.

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The commissioner is in charge of all things RCMP. The Minister of Public Safety is responsible for the RCMP and for policy. It is so different from many of the other ministries. If another ministry has a staffing problem, the minister can step in. That cannot be done with the RCMP because there is a space there that the minister cannot influence. Therefore, the rank and file of the RCMP do not really have the ability to go to the government or the minister if they are having problems with the commissioner. Much in the RCMP therefore depends on the individual, the man or woman who may be the commissioner of the RCMP, and how much power he or she has and how they use that power. They can use it to either good or bad advantage.

Whether we like it or not, there is politics in all organizations, including the RCMP. It is a command system where people eventually move to the top and are appointed by the Minister of Public Safety and/or the Prime Minister to the position of commissioner. There is always that internal political dilemma. My colleague from the NDP spoke to this earlier, noting the legitimate concerns there.

●(1305)

In fairness to the government and to my own party, I believe we need to move ahead. I wish the government had accepted the reasoned amendments by opposition parties, although it tends not to do so, because these could have been made it a better bill. That is why I brought up accountability and transparency earlier in the context of the accountability act. This place is not working because the government just does not accept amendments from others, no matter how well reasoned they are. That could be a problem in this case.

We have to move forward with the bill, but it could have been improved. I admit that openly. Part of the reason for this legislation not moving forward is that this place and its committees are not working as they ought to work any more, because it is the government's way or no way. It is that simple, and that is a sad commentary on how our Parliament is working.

With respect to the power of the commissioner, yes there needs to be power to discipline. Having a rank and file member just go to the other review agency to protect himself or herself may or may not work, in my view. The RCMP is a command structure. Intimidation from the leader can be a strong and powerful thing. What tends to happen is that people who disagree may just step aside and go into another occupation, such as security, a local police force, or whatever. I am being quite open here. There is some reason for concern. It is too bad that aspect could not have been improved.

Given the incidents that have happened in the RCMP and the force's image and uniqueness in this country, we have to move ahead with Bill C-42, but we have to be wary of the problems that could appear. The minister, the government, and all of us as parliamentarians need to be watchful of that and not be afraid of bringing in corrective measures in the future if it seems necessary to do so. I would suggest that the government be wary of that point and be watchful.

It is true that we need to find ways to exercise discipline and to deal with some of the unique internal problems within the RCMP. We need to deal with those problems. We need to be absolutely

confident that if we create some other problems along the way for the rank and file in terms of their interests and their maybe even challenging a commissioner for legitimate reasons, that their ability to do so would not be undermined by the additional power to be given to the commissioner in this legislation. I would therefore suggest that we all be watchful of that fact. If it becomes a problem at some future point, we should be willing to act quickly to address it.

Bill C-42 would replace the existing watchdog agency, the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP, with the new civilian review and complaints commission.

●(1310)

Paul Kennedy was a witness before the committee. He was chair of the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP. He did a very remarkable job. He was not afraid to challenge the RCMP, or indeed the government. He is one of the ones who lost his job, as did Adrian Measner and others over the last six years, for being brutally honest and challenging the Government of Canada. That should not have happened.

It is one of the reasons that the new body has been brought into place. We need these independent officers. He was not as independent as he had hoped. He was not reappointed, and the reason he was not reappointed was because he had done his job and challenged the system.

In terms of what is now going to be called the civilian review and complaints commission, I will only say, will it be independent enough? Will it have the authority? Will it have the backbone to challenge the system, as Paul Kennedy did when he was chair?

There are a lot of complaints. We do not hear many of them. However, I expect members on the committee have, though I am not a member of the committee. There are all kinds of complaints that come in against the RCMP, for many reasons. There are the complaints in the rank and file, sexual harassment and other things. There are complaints from the public in terms of how their particular case was handled, whether it was fast enough or they were elbowed during an arrest, or whatever it may be. The Arar issue went to the commission for public complaints at one point. There is a range that is all over the map.

In my view, that review body has to have the ability to deal effectively with those complaints, to be willing to listen, to receive complaints from the rank and file. I believe that is under this new proposal as well. They have to have the ability to challenge the system and to work in the interest of the public in terms of their answers to these complaints. It is a very important body. It needs to be there. We absolutely need a way for the public to be heard on issues, whether it is a small or big complaint, and to challenge the RCMP on how an issue was handled.

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My key point is that given the experience with the government and its removal or not making an appointment—we are going to see the same thing with the Parliamentary Budget Officer, no doubt—an individual and a body who have the backbone to challenge the government are critical. They absolutely must have that independence and they must be made of the character to challenge them.

I have raised some issues. There is no question that we are going to support this bill moving forward because I believe decisions have to be made. I believe the bill could have been improved. It was not because the government does not allow anybody else's thoughts to enter its jurisdictions. Unless it is its own, it thinks it has no merit.

Let me close by saying there does need to be some changes within the RCMP. It is our national police force. It is unique around the world. People look to it as a symbol of Canada. This bill is a step forward in terms of regaining that reputation.

• (1315)

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, being a retired member of the RCMP, I am very proud to wear the red serge whenever I can.

I have watched with interest as Bill C-42 has moved forward. This bill needs to get passed. For well over 100 years, the RCMP has been handcuffed by the fact that it has been unable to remove members from the RCMP when it was needed. Again, as the hon. member across the way said, it is not all the members; it is a select few. However, those select few tarnish the RCMP.

Does the member opposite believe the bill has gone far enough for his party to move it forward and, if so, is he confident that in committee there would be opportunities to discuss the opportunities that they see as being fit?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, as I said, we have recognized that improvements are needed. I agree with the member's remarks. He has been in the RCMP.

As Commissioner Paulson said, he needs the authority to get rid of some bad apples. That is true. It only takes one person to create a terrible image of the whole organization. The bill would give that authority.

In my remarks, I also weighed in on some concerns. We have to recognize that power can be taken too far, from the commissioner to the rank and file, in terms of somebody who has perhaps not been a bad apple. We have to recognize that as well.

I believe, and our party believes, it is a step forward. It is a move in the right direction. However, we have to be vigilant in terms of the implementation of the bill and how this bill would work with respect to the RCMP.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am perplexed about the support for the bill by the Liberal Party. In committee, the Liberal Party proposed no amendments. It did not even support all of our amendments. If the Liberal Party had these concerns, its members did not act upon them at the committee level.

I have total respect for the member as a former solicitor general, and I do not doubt the sincerity of his remarks. However, it seems peculiar that now the Liberal Party is prepared to support a bill that

would not create a fully independent complaints commission, would not address the issue of sexual harassment, and would further concentrate power in the hands of the commissioner.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I think I made it very clear. That is what this place is all about. It is a place of debate. It is a place of different positions. It is a place to make decisions. When we go back to the remarks that were made at previous times in this House, the Liberal Party has made it very clear where we stand. We see the bill as an improvement upon the current situation. However, we recognize the bill could always be improved.

As the member would be aware, we did support some amendments that the official opposition made. We did not support all of them because in our view not all of its amendments were good ones. That is our opinion, and that differs from the member who just spoke.

However, on balance, we looked at this and asked whether it would move us a step forward, and we, as a party, believe it would.

• (1320)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, perhaps we could pick up on the point to which my colleague just made reference, which is that it is very rare to see legislation of this nature going forward. There is absolutely no doubt that there could be amendments to the legislation that would further enhance it and make it a better quality legislation. Unfortunately, as my colleague has illustrated, the government has not seen fit to accept, in any real or tangible fashion, the amendments coming from opposition parties.

At the end of the day, I would ask the member to reaffirm that even though the Liberal Party is supporting the legislation going forward, it does not mean we believe there is no need for improvements. We anticipate there will be a need to make more changes in the legislation. The government was negligent in not respecting the committee process in allowing some of the amendments the New Democrats might have passed, or even the dialogue that was taking place in the committee.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Winnipeg is speaking to a broader issuer than this piece of legislation, Bill C-42. I mentioned that in my remarks. Increasingly I am concerned with how committees function, or rather how they are not allowed to function, in that amendments are hardly ever carried, even though they make a lot of sense.

At one point in time the Senate would take issues seriously. It would fix mistakes that we might have overlooked in this place. In my view, that is not happening now. The big whip comes down and we get it through. If this kind of process continues, such as passing legislation that is not the best it can be, the courts will start to rule on some of the flaws we have made. Therefore, I think my colleague is speaking to the broader issue of how this place works, which I have laid out in my remarks.

I am very concerned. I believe that Bill C-42 is an example. Some amendments had been proposed and not accepted because of where they came from, not because of what they contain. That is a concern that Canadians should increasingly be worried about.

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[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his presentation.

At least two or three times during his presentation, I was left with the impression that he considers this bill a step forward. Even if someone repeats two or three times that we are taking a step forward, that does not mean that we are taking three steps forward; we are still taking only one. But more than one step is needed to move forward. What we are really dealing with is a bill that, while not exactly a step backwards, is more like running in place, which is a far cry from the ideal.

How many times did I also hear that this bill needs improvements—without, however, any indication of what exactly those improvements would be? It also appears that no amendments were made in committee in that regard.

Could the member give us a specific example of how the Liberal Party would like to move forward, an example of something that would really work this time?

• (1325)

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, as I said in my opening remarks, the bill does give the commissioner the ability to deal with disciplinary issues. That is a big issue facing the force at the moment, especially as it relates to some of the incidents of individual rank and file members who are impacting the image of the force and how we think the RCMP should effectively operate. Therefore, the fact that the ability is there is a step in the right direction.

I did state in my remarks that we have to be watchful of that and ensure the new powers given to the Commissioner of the RCMP are used in the way they are intended. It is our job to do that.

[Translation]

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by informing you that I will be sharing my time with the member for Trois-Rivières.

I read Bill C-42, An Act to amend the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts, when it was introduced in the House before the summer break.

I was really disappointed when I read the bill, which is yet another example of the Conservatives' lack of judgment and inaction on matters that concern the equality of women.

The government seems to think that this bill is the answer to the problem of harassment within the RCMP. Unfortunately, that is not the case. This bill is a far cry from a comprehensive solution.

In a serious situation such as this, we really have to get to the root of the problem. A bill that is so vague and weak will do nothing to change the work atmosphere and occupational culture.

Even in unionized work places, which the RCMP is not, and with good policies against harassment, which the RCMP does not have, harassment persists.

You have to delve very deeply to change the culture of our workplaces and to eradicate that type of behaviour.

Giving the RCMP commissioner the power to directly fire officers will not solve the problems with the RCMP culture. An arbitrary power, especially when we are talking about the Conservative model, does not solve the problem.

What we need is awareness, monitoring and concerted action to change behaviours. But this bill has none of that.

The Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security examined the bill. One after another, the witnesses pointed out that the bill could not fix the situation on its own, and that arbitrary powers unfortunately lead only to more abuse. The problem is complex and systematic.

The RCMP commissioner, Bob Paulson, confirmed this himself when he appeared before the Standing Committee on the Status of Women in the spring. He said:

...I think what's happened is that the RCMP hasn't kept pace with society in general and how society has moved to provide systems and processes that insist upon equality...It's the culture of the organization that has not kept pace...We haven't been able to change our practices and our policies, or provide systems that would permit women to thrive in the organization and contribute to policing, which they must do.

For the RCMP to be a successful policing organization, we must have women contributing in a significant way. I think how the organization manages authority and power... I've said it publicly, and I'll say it again. I think the problem is bigger than simply the sexual harassment. It is the idea of harassment. The idea that we have a hierarchical organization overseeing men and women who have extraordinary powers in relation to their fellow citizens, which requires a fair degree of discipline.

In committee, I specifically asked the commissioner about the culture of the organization. His answer enlightened us on the fundamental issue that will not be fixed by a bill:

...when we change the RCMP culture so that people, no matter what their rank, are making principle-based decisions on the merits of the situation and not defending their pips and crowns and their rank by demonstrating to others that they are more powerful or more influential, then we will have changed the culture.

I want to point out that in response to the highly publicized incidents reported last year by some very brave women in the RCMP, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women decided to examine the issue of harassment in public service workplaces.

• (1330)

On December 6, 2012, Vicky Smallman, from the Canadian Labour Congress, appeared before the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. I will quote what she had to say about workplaces and culture.

[English]

One of the best tools for preventing harassment of any kind is a healthy, inclusive workplace with a commitment to gender equality. Job security, reasonable workloads, and good labour relations all offer a sense of stability and comfort in the workplace. But while it does not completely prevent individuals from harassing others, it might create a climate that allows women to feel safe about coming forward with a complaint.

Workplace culture is important. As you conduct this study, I hope you will consider looking at the culture of federal workplaces and any factors that may create an environment conducive to harassment or that may impede its prevention—that is, that may encourage women to keep silent.

Unfortunately, a large number of women in the RCMP kept silent for many years, and in a lot of workplaces that is the case.

Government Orders

The bill was introduced without the benefit of the findings of the internal gender audit of the RCMP, ordered by the commissioner, that is currently under way and not yet completed. The Conservatives' approach does not seem to make women in the RCMP a priority as it ignores any kind of gender-based internal audit or findings. That is very unfortunate. It is also unfortunate that other studies being done that are looking at the issue of sexual harassment and other gender-based discrimination in the RCMP as well as other federally regulated workplaces, such as the one being done at the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, are not being considered.

The NDP thinks we can go further on these issues as there needs to be a clear anti-harassment policy in the RCMP, one which contains specific standards for behaviour and specific criteria for evaluating the performance of all employees. Such a policy is needed to serve as a basis for a fair, disciplined process. This is absolutely necessary to have a better environment in the workplace for the RCMP, as well as other workplaces that have a culture of dominance, for instance, brought from the fact that there is a culture of authority, which is obviously necessary in something like the RCMP. However, that does not necessarily mean there needs to be harassment and we need to be dealing with that more concretely.

[*Translation*]

Unfortunately, this bill fails because it continues to allow the RCMP to investigate itself in certain situations, it creates a piecemeal system that puts the burden of monitoring on the provinces, it creates a complaints commission that is not fully independent and that reports to the minister with non-binding recommendations, and it limits access to sensitive information to the commission.

In order to fix the shortcomings in this bill, in order to truly attack the problem, the NDP voted at second reading to send Bill C-42 to committee. There, we proposed a number of amendments that required mandatory harassment training. That is something that would absolutely be necessary in all jobs if we truly want to consider men and women to be equal. Our amendments called for a more independent civilian organization to be responsible for complaints against the RCMP. They also called for the creation of human resources policies that were more harmonious, by withdrawing the draconian powers proposed for the commissioner.

The Conservatives rejected all amendments to this bill, as has been pointed out today in this House. We are used to this kind of thing, but that does not mean we must stop fighting for what we think is right. These amendments would have improved the bill, and they were developed based on recommendations made by witnesses in committee.

In closing, it is obvious that we cannot support this bill. It really does not go far enough. I do not believe that we should tell Canadian women that it is all right to take half measures to solve a problem. We have to get to the root of the problem and stand up for equality in this country.

It is unfortunate because this bill addresses an urgent matter. Women, the RCMP and Canadians want effective action from their government, rather than bills doomed to failure right from the outset.

• (1335)

[*English*]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is talk about having anti-harassment guidelines in this law, which are not there. Would the member agree that there needs to be something that goes a step further?

In any change in an institution, the integration of the armed forces in the U.S., for example, in 1942, or women entering the armed forces or policing throughout the years, there is resistance. Not only does there need to be anti-harassment, but there also needs to be an understanding of the contribution that women can make and why harassment is not acceptable. There needs to be a sensitization of the change in those institutional organizations.

I wonder if my colleague would like to comment on that.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Mr. Speaker, I want to say right off the bat that the bill does not even include the word "harassment", so that is a number one big disappointment. It is cowardly of the government to not address the issues we are trying to address. It is a question of equality for women in all workplaces. We should be protected. We should have mechanisms to prevent these kinds of situations where we are demeaned and treated as inferior and less important, and therefore, not as able to contribute.

There are many strong women who can speak out about these kinds of things and who managed to make their way up the ranks anyway. However, it is not equality if we are living in a society when in places such as the RCMP and other federally regulated workplaces, where we could actually be making a difference, we are looking at bills that do not include the word "harassment".

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech. Women's issues are really important to her, and she does an outstanding job in committee.

I would like to go back to the quote about how the problem is not harassment, but the idea of harassment. In committee, we proposed mandatory anti-harassment training for RCMP employees, for example.

I would like my colleague to comment a little more on that. How could including anti-harassment training in this bill have made a difference at the RCMP?

• (1340)

[*English*]

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Mr. Speaker, I am no longer on the Status of Women committee, although I did enjoy my year there. One thing that we heard over and over again is that there is a lack of resources for preventing sexual harassment in many workplaces and a lack of resources when it comes to essentially promoting gender equity across this country.

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Training that will help prevent harassment and provide information about how to manage such situations when they arise is absolutely necessary if we are to make progress in this area. Unfortunately, the bill is really disappointing because it does not go in that direction at all. It does not try to establish how to prevent these kinds of situations for Canadian women.

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-42 deals with a very important subject. First of all, I must admit that my participation in today's debate is not without some bitterness and disappointment. I really feel as though this legislation represents yet another missed opportunity. We have become accustomed to this government's half-measures, hollow phrases, empty shells and smoke and mirrors that all add up to nothing more than grandstanding.

When it comes to an issue as important as the one addressed in Bill C-42, it seems to me that a step in the right direction is not nearly enough. For a team of parliamentarians, regardless of our party affiliation, taking a step in the right direction is not enough. We need to solve problems as they arise, which Bill C-42 definitely does not do.

My speech could have included many lines of attack and many subjects, but I will try to focus on two things: I will first address the issue of the discrepancy between substance and form, followed by issues related specifically to sexual harassment.

On the question of form, more and more people I have spoken with—in my riding and across Quebec—have a huge problem with what they describe as democracy denied. I have to admit that, despite the work we do here in the House and in committee, I agree with those people, and to be frank, the whole process surrounding Bill C-42 illustrates this very clearly.

I would like to share a few thoughts with the House. Of course, everything was done according to the rules, but that is not enough. For instance, one might wonder whether Bill C-42 was the subject of any time allocation motions or other such procedures aimed at reducing the amount of time parliamentarians would have to debate the issue and further explore their proposals regarding this bill. The answer is yes. Speaking of time allocation motions, this government has moved nearly 30 of them since it won a majority about two years ago.

After I was elected, I remember that when I came to the Hill, during my training, I was told that the work in the House was quite partisan, but that work in committee was less so. Bills moved forward and were improved, which gave meaning to the work we do here to represent our constituents. However, of the 18 amendments that the NDP proposed to Bill C-42, guess how many were approved? None. It has almost become tradition. If it does not come from the governing party, it is no good. We are light years away from the adage that enlightenment comes when ideas collide. Now, if we come up with an idea that is like a Conservative one, it must be a good idea; otherwise, we can keep it to ourselves.

And, yes, amendments were approved in committee, but they came from government members. For the most part, the amendments had to do with grammatical errors in the French. Far be it from me to

say that those amendments are not important; I have too much respect for my language to overlook those errors, but really, we could have done better.

One could also question the independence of the witnesses who came to testify and to provide expertise that would allow the committee to go further in its proposals. It seems that the majority of the witnesses called by the government were from either the government or the RCMP, which means that they were completely impartial, of course. From what I gather—because I did not sit on this committee—the witnesses called by the official opposition were treated with somewhat questionable fairness. They were called at the very last minute and their testimony was crammed into the last day. There are many questions—concerning the format alone—that merit better responses than the ones we received.

● (1345)

Let us talk about the substance of the bill. Earlier I said that, today, I would speak out against how sexual harassment issues are dealt with, because the topics addressed in this bill are very important.

When it comes to an issue as important as gender equality, taking a step in the right direction is not enough. We had the opportunity to solve the problem. However, once again, the government has proposed a way to sidestep the issue, while giving the impression that it has dealt with it.

I would like to quote Yvonne Séguin, the executive director of Groupe d'aide et d'information sur le harcèlement sexuel au travail de la province de Québec:

With the 32 years of experience we have, we have found out that when companies do have a clear policy, when employees do know what is acceptable and not acceptable, it makes it much easier for management to deal with the problems.

Bill C-42 therefore needs to have clear tools that would help both managers and employees to know what is going on.

Bill C-42 is the government's response to the longstanding complaints of sexual harassment within the RCMP and to a series of recent events related to this issue.

As hard as it may be to believe, the term harassment is not used anywhere at all in this bill.

In a bill that is supposed to address the issue of harassment, no one even has the courage to say the word. That is a problem.

When children ask questions, we are supposed to give straightforward answers and use the correct terminology. In this case, a first step should have been taken at the very least.

The NDP has been applying pressure from the beginning, from the very day that Bill C-42 was assigned a different number in another legislature. The NDP wants the minister to make the fight against harassment a priority and to provide a solution to the problem. All employees in all workplaces, not just those who work for the RCMP, have the right to an open and safe workplace, but obviously, that is not quite the case.

Government Orders

We are not claiming that a unionized organization provides the best protection of workers' rights. However, it is revealing that the RCMP is the only police service in Canada without a collective agreement. Staff relations representatives who are elected to manage employment issues use a process that is more like consultation than collective bargaining.

Nevertheless, the NDP proposed amendments that were completely straightforward, because we strongly believe in gender equality and fairness and respect between men and women.

All of our amendments were rejected. However, for those who follow our debates, I think that it is important to talk about the three or four amendments proposed by the NDP, so that people can judge the common sense and relevance of our amendments for themselves.

Although this was not the first amendment proposed, the first amendment I would like to mention recommended that all RCMP members receive mandatory training on sexual harassment.

Education and information have always formed the very foundation of any regulations and of any progress. However, even just talking about the issue was already too much for this government.

The second amendment had to do with creating a completely independent civilian body to examine complaints against the RCMP so that the police would not be investigating the police. A broad consensus is developing in civil society regarding this recommendation.

Lastly, how could the Conservatives refuse to create a police force that is better equipped in terms of human resources by taking powers away from the RCMP commissioner and strengthening those of the external review committee? Bill C-42 goes completely in the opposite direction. Once again, the Conservatives are giving the commissioner even more power, just as they gave certain ministers more power to control information in several other bills.

•(1350)

In closing, I wish to reaffirm the NDP's position. Our party will continue to work with women to ensure that gender equality becomes an undeniable reality once and for all. We will do a lot more than just one step forward.

[*English*]

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I took note of the member's comments when he said we should increase the powers of the commissioner and decrease the powers of the civilian authority.

Could the member answer this simple question: By giving the civilian authority more power, how does he think the commissioner would be able to act from within?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, "Working together", a simple phrase from 2011, has become the NDP's mantra. It corresponds perfectly with our way of thinking, and we are not willing to let it go.

[*English*]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, some of the member's comments are worth consideration, but clearly Bill C-42 is going forward.

We are supporting it because it is a small step forward. If we had to wait for three or four years to get something much more comprehensive in detail, which would deal with some of the issues we all care about when it comes to the sexual harassment issue in the RCMP, I think that would take a long time.

Bill C-42 very much responds to what the commissioner said was his own frustration with his inability to take swift action. Does the hon. member think Bill C-42, if adopted, would give Commissioner Paulson the tools he needs to deal with these issues swiftly?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for her comments.

I would also like to thank her for her vision of the future, because she acknowledged that we will fix the problem just two years from now, when we replace this tired government that focuses on half measures.

I think our biggest disagreement has to do with whether or not a step in the right direction is enough. It is high time that we in Canada made it clear that half measures are no longer good enough. Canadians deserve better than proposals that simply help us catch up but do not help us advance. We do not want that. We want to solve the problem.

[*English*]

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if my colleague would like to reflect a bit more. The Liberals seem to suggest that requiring harassment training would take years for us to agree upon. I find that a strange comment, since many large organizations have already introduced harassment training.

I wonder if the member sees any obstacles to the RCMP doing that, and I wonder why we could not just simply put that in the legislation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for the relevant question.

I believe that this is a clear illustration of the corporate culture at the RCMP. The fact that they did not instantly agree on the benefits of sexual harassment training clearly shows that their corporate culture is still hierarchical and quasi-militaristic.

It is 2013, and we need to get on with it.

•(1355)

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member talked about the fact that the Conservatives have refused all of our amendments. Is this an unusual step for the Conservatives to refuse amendments, or is this the way they do business generally?

*Statements by Members**[Translation]*

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Trois-Rivières has time for a brief response.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that it is the norm now.

[English]

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish my constituents of Vietnamese origin a happy Vietnamese New Year.

[Member spoke in Vietnamese]

On Bill C-42, I would like to add my comments to this lively debate and explain, in part, why the NDP is forced to object to it and will be voting against the bill.

We proposed reasoned, positive, progressive amendments to the bill, but they have all been rejected. They included adding mandatory harassment training for RCMP members specifically within the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act, ensuring a fully independent civilian review body to investigate complaints against the RCMP, adding a provision to create a national civilian investigative body that would avoid police investigating police, and creating a more balanced human resources policy by removing some of the more draconian powers of the RCMP commissioner and by strengthening the external review committee in cases involving possible dismissal from the force.

One of the reasons the bill is here is that the RCMP itself has been subject to a lot of criticism, which has generally been levelled at the top echelons of the RCMP. More recently, the criticism has come from the realization that there is a huge and potentially much bigger than reported problem with systemic sexual harassment in the RCMP. None of us on this side of the House have any intention of allowing this to continue. One of the proposals we made was to ensure that the culture of the RCMP would in fact change.

Change does not happen through legislation. It does not happen by someone telling the boss to fix it. Change happens from the ground. Change happens from the individual RCMP members being taught and given anti-harassment training in the workplace and being made to understand that it is no longer culturally acceptable. It is no longer acceptable in this country that women should feel threatened when they are members of the RCMP or that they should feel they cannot complain about the practices they feel harassed by. That is a key element of the NDP's position on the bill. The sexual harassment that has come to the fore in the last few months must be rooted out quickly. However, that is not going to happen with the bill that is before us.

While we recognize that some improvements are being made by giving a little more power to the commissioner and by the other tinkering the bill undertakes, it goes nowhere near far enough. The bill does not deal with the systemic problems in the RCMP that have caused a litany of complaints about the RCMP to be made public over the past 15 years or so. In one case, the allegations of sexual harassment appear to go back 23 years. That is a long time and a lot of culture that needs to be corrected. It is not going to be corrected overnight and it is not going to be corrected without direct action on

the part of the Conservative government to introduce and force mandatory anti-harassment training on the RCMP.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time for government orders has expired. The hon. member for York South—Weston will have 16 minutes remaining the next time this matter returns before the House.

Statements by members, the hon. member for Guelph.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

● (1400)

*[English]***RESIGNATION OF POPE**

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it was with sadness that Roman Catholics across Canada and the world learned that Pope Benedict XVI will step down as Bishop of Rome and head of the Roman Catholic Church at the end of February.

During his papacy, Canada saw the elevation of the Archbishop of Toronto to Cardinal, as well as the canonization of Brother André and Saint Kateri Tekakwitha.

I can recall with emotion while in Rome last spring to witness the elevation of His Eminence, Thomas Collins, a Guelph native, to cardinal, seeing a moment during communion when a mother approached the Holy Father with her child. I was moved as time seemed to stop when he paused and blessed her child before continuing with his duties.

Always mindful of his role as servant of the servants of God, Benedict approached his vocation with great devotion, and it is with deep humility that he acknowledged today that he had reached his physical limit for such an important responsibility.

I join members across the House and Catholics across Canada and the world who thank him and pray for his health and well-being in the coming years.

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QUEEN'S DIAMOND JUBILEE MEDAL

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the diamond jubilee medal honours Her Majesty's 60 years as Queen of Canada while allowing Canadians to recognize those who serve society.

Over the weekend, I was pleased to host a ceremony recognizing 30 outstanding individuals from my riding of Palliser who have served their communities and country without expecting recognition. From military service to community service, from mentoring youth to helping seniors, from attending to those in crisis to helping children at home or abroad, these 30 individuals are deserving of this medal.

I would like to thank our emcee, Candis Kirpatrick; our guest speaker, Senator Pamela Wallin; and the nominators who brought these individuals to our attention. Lending a hand is a valuable service, and I am honoured to help recognize these deserving individuals.

GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my youngest son Joe is another year older today. His aspirations are much like the aspirations of many Canadians, like those who attended my town hall meeting last month on the budget priorities for the federal government.

He, like many residents in my riding, thinks that we should invest in more training and skills development for young people like him and older workers, so that he and others like him will be able to meet the skills shortage facing Canada and have better job prospects.

Like my son Joe, many residents in York South—Weston agree that we should have universal public child care so that parents can afford to keep working to support their families. They believe that we need to do more to improve the lives of aboriginal Canadians, including giving them the same access to quality education that all Canadians receive. They believe that we need to strengthen environmental protection laws, not diminish them. Our children will inherit this country some day and do not want to be saddled with our environmental mistakes.

These were all things I heard loud and clear in my budget town hall. My son gets it. The question is why the government does not get it.

* * *

IMJIN RIVER CUP

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, members of Parliament sometimes get the opportunity to honour history.

Such was the case yesterday when 10 Conservative MPs faced off against members of our military to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Imjin River games held in Korea.

We need to take our minds back to a place decades ago and thousands of miles from home, where Canadians again answered the call. Our soldiers were sent to repel a Communist invasion of South Korea. It was a bloody war; all wars are. In the end, Canada lost 516 of its best with thousands more wounded. To keep morale high, they played hockey on the frozen Imjin River.

Yesterday we recognized that history, playing on the frozen Rideau Canal. I was honoured to be part of the celebration, and yesterday we played to an 11-11 draw. It was not exactly a defensive gem, but the tie was the most appropriate ending. We honoured our military by playing Canada's game, just like they did in Korea so long ago.

Thanks to Senator Yonah Martin for organizing this special day. It was a thrill to hold the Imjin River Cup, knowing that participants from both teams will have their names engraved on it. Thanks again to our military for making us proud.

* * *

SYRIA

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I just met with Syrian Canadians who put a human face on the unspeakable horrors and atrocities in Syria, where some 70,000 have died, thousands more been detained and disappeared, 2.5 million internally displaced and suffering, and more than 700,000 refugees,

Statements by Members

with the international community as a bystander to this horrific tragedy.

Canada has an important role in helping to alleviate the human suffering. We must immediately expedite family reunification and sponsorship for Syrian Canadians; enhance our humanitarian aid and ensure that it reaches those who desperately need it; and join the international effort to bring Assad before the International Criminal Court.

Most importantly, Canada must reaffirm the doctrine of the responsibility to protect. In a word, everything that we were told would happen if we intervened—more killing, sectarian strife, jihadist involvement—has happened, not because we intervened but because we did not intervene.

While the world dithers and delays, Syrians continue to die. The time for action is now, and Canada must take the lead.

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●(1405)

RICHARD PIERPOINT

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 1760 a 16-year old boy who would become a Canadian hero was captured in Senegal and sold as a slave to a British officer in New England.

When Americans rose against the Crown in 1775, Richard Pierpoint joined the Loyalists, serving in the Butler's Rangers Regiment in Fort Niagara, where hundreds of black volunteers fought for Canada in decisive battles like the battle for Queenston Heights.

During the War of 1812, Major-General Sir Isaac Brock approved Richard's request to form an all black army. More than 30 of the 100 free black men in Upper Canada joined the Colour Corps to protect Canada. With courage and under danger they built Fort Mississauga.

For his war contribution Richard was given 100 acres in Wellington County, next to my hometown of Fergus, where he lived until his death in 1837.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we all salute black heroes like Richard Pierpoint, who so long ago made great contributions to Canada to make us the nation we are today.

* * *

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, grassroots are at the heart of democracy. I have travelled across my riding since the beginning of the year, and many of my constituents have told me they are frustrated with the Conservatives.

Statements by Members

I met with a number of seniors who no longer receive paper copies of their tax forms. If they do not have the Internet, too bad for them. The Conservatives are once again punishing our seniors. Shame on them.

I also met with a teacher who spoke about her desperation with regard to the EI reform. A number of these professionals work on call and, during the summer and fall, EI is often their only source of income. To maintain a knowledge-based society like ours, Canadians must be able to work in careers at which they excel, and not in jobs that do not correspond to their abilities.

This week, we are celebrating Hooked on School Days, and I want to pay tribute to the wonderful work our partners—in particular our teachers—do in our communities. They deserve to be able to educate the next generation of talented Canadians without worrying about losing their income when they are unemployed.

* * *

[English]

AIRLINE SERVICE IN B.C.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today with good news for northeastern British Columbians.

This afternoon WestJet's new regional air carrier, WestJet Encore, announced the first cities in Canada chosen for scheduled service this June, and British Columbia is the major beneficiary. Beginning in June, Fort St. John will benefit from service to and from Calgary and Vancouver.

Competitive air service is essential to keeping our economy moving and linking our communities and businesses to each other. That is why we worked so hard as a community to bring WestJet Encore to our city.

I have more good news. Passengers will be flying in brand new Bombardier Q400 planes manufactured right here in Canada.

I congratulate WestJet and the people of Fort St. John, as we worked so hard to bring this new service to our area. On behalf of all British Columbia MPs, I thank WestJet Encore and welcome it to beautiful British Columbia.

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WIND POWER

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the proposed wind farm in North Gower, Ontario would place industrial turbines within 800 metres of some family dwellings. With increasing reports of health problems and the need for properly designed clinical research, it only makes sense to put the project on hold until Health Canada completes its study.

That is why I have been working with Ms. Jane Wilson and other concerned citizens to urge a moratorium.

Yesterday I was pleased to hear the Minister of Health for the federal government announce the revised research design for the study. Initially, the revised study will target 2,000 homes near wind turbine projects located across Canada.

We must make our decisions based on science and research, not blind ideology. To that end, I join with the residents of North Gower in asking the province to impose a moratorium on this project until Health Canada can finish its important work.

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● (1410)

EMPLOYMENT IN WINDSOR

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a recent report indicates that my community of Windsor lost over 20,000 jobs between 2006 and 2010.

Despite the Conservatives' claims to create jobs, they have again decided to slash more services and jobs. In fact, their action plan is failing Canadian families.

They moved our CBSA headquarters from the busiest border in Canada, laying off dozens, and slashed 40-plus Service Canada positions. Sixteen more jobs disappeared at the Canadian consulate in Detroit, and now they have even decided to close our Veterans Affairs office, reaching a new low.

Sadly, these actions take place with little to no consultation. Now Canada Post has announced the sacking of 80 positions in its decision to close the Walker sorting plant and historic Olde Sandwich Towne post office. Ironically, we just celebrated the War of 1812 and this post office is ground zero to some of the greatest moments in Canadian history.

All of these cuts without community consultation create even more job losses as individuals and businesses lose valuable and efficient services.

The next time the Conservatives want to spend millions on advertising their failures, why not can the commercials and keep services Canadian families want?

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ETHICS

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Mr. Speaker, members of Parliament have the extraordinary privilege of unfettered free speech in this chamber. However, they also have the important obligation to speak responsibly when they leave the House of Commons.

The hon. member for Winnipeg Centre is well aware of this responsibility, which is why it is troubling that the member created a legal defence fund to solicit donations to help offset the costs of a defamation lawsuit brought against him for his comments outside of the House. The media has reported that the member received a \$10,000 donation to the fund from a union, and the website soliciting donations bears all the hallmarks of a political fundraising website.

Canadians need to know that donations from corporations and unions, which are precluded by the Canada Elections Act, cannot be funnelled into a fund used to defray the costs of a legal matter involving a politician. Canadians also deserve to know the source or amounts of these donations.

Accordingly, I have asked the Ethics Commissioner to examine this practice and the methods employed by the member for Winnipeg Centre.

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[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Claude Patry (Jonquière—Alma, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the people of Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean were already having a lot of problems with the employment insurance program even before the reforms were implemented.

Instead of addressing the program's irritants, the current government is making an already very difficult situation even worse.

I would like to take the opportunity today to thank Sylvain Bergeron, of ASTUCE, and France Simard, of Mouvement action chômage, two regional organizations that have been standing up for the rights of the unemployed for years.

The services they provide to our communities, our workers, our families and the most vulnerable are vitally important, and their efforts are very much appreciated.

I would also like to encourage people to participate in the activities being organized to condemn the changes to employment insurance that hurt Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean. There will also be days of action, with activities taking place in front of the Service Canada offices at Racine Street tomorrow, February 12, and in downtown Kénogami on Saturday morning, February 16.

Mobilize against employment insurance.

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LEBANON

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, some prominent Bloc Québécois members, particularly the hon. member for Ahuntsic, held a press conference in Montreal this morning calling on the federal government to allow a direct air link between Montreal and Beirut, Lebanon.

I rise here today to convey our government's position, which is crystal clear: we have no plans for this kind of direct link anytime soon.

In fact, we still have some serious concerns about cargo and passenger security at the airport in Beirut, especially in light of the media reports indicating that dangerous organizations are at work at that airport. The activities of these organizations fly in the face of Canada's interests and values.

As MPs, the safety of all Canadians should remain our top priority. It is unfortunate that the Bloc Québécois decided to disregard security concerns in a malicious attempt to score political points.

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GÉRARD ASSELIN

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, last Saturday our former colleague, Gérard

Statements by Members

Asselin, passed away. He died of complications from surgery he had in December to control the insidious cancer he was battling.

A passionate man, he was truly committed to his region, which he represented from 1993 to 2011. After working for more than 30 years for the well-being of his city and his region, he wanted to enjoy life. He wanted to travel and spend time with his family.

We will remember him for his hard work and his ability to get things done. And we will never forget his fiery character, his colourful expressions and his unceasing defence of Quebec's interests.

Today, we share his family's pain and we offer them our sincere condolences on behalf of the Bloc Québécois.

Good-bye Gérard. Quebec is forever in your debt.

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●(1415)

[English]

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it has been months and the NDP has yet to explain the \$21 billion carbon tax found on page 4 of its platform. This tax would raise the price on everything that Canadian families in Mississauga—Streetsville pay for, including gas, groceries and electricity.

Our government has a low tax plan for jobs and growth across the country, a plan Canadians support. In fact, thanks to our government's efforts a Canadian family of four now keeps over \$3,000 more of its money in its own pockets.

Why do the NDP leader and his party want Canadians to pay billions for his risky economic policies?

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THE SENATE

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister once promised, "I will not name appointed people to the Senate". The Prime Minister has now broken that promise 58 times, and the Conservatives defend their negligence of their duties with make-believe ads on the NDP. As a new member, I find this all very sad.

Conservatives have had 789 sitting days in government, and they have called their Senate bills for debate only 18 times over seven years. Canadians know that maintaining the status quo in the Senate is in the vested interests of two parties, parties that use taxpayer-subsidized senators to do partisan work for them. However, thankfully Canadians have the NDP, the only party that opposes the entitlements of Conservative and Liberal senators, the only party that stands firm against patronage and the only party that stands shoulder to shoulder with Canadians on accountability.

*Oral Questions***NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA**

Mr. Greg Rickford (Kenora, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the Liberal Party asked Canadians for a mandate to implement a job-killing carbon tax, they flatly rejected it. No matter to the NDP leader; he is ignoring Canadians' position and is peddling a similar, more expensive carbon tax. In fact, if he gets his way, the NDP leader would impose a new \$20 billion job-killing carbon tax. This new tax would kill Canadian jobs and hurt Canadian families by making everything cost more, from gas to groceries to electricity.

Did he check with his northern Ontario caucus on this tax? The fact is that Canadians do not want the NDP's \$20 billion carbon tax, and our government will continue to stand up against this NDP policy that would kill jobs and stall economic growth. As long as the NDP continues to push its \$20 billion job-killing carbon tax, the leader will continue to be as unpopular as the Liberal Party, if he is not there already, especially in northern Ontario.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has now appointed more Conservative cronies to the Senate than even Brian Mulroney. Bagmen, defeated candidates and party hacks are doing political work on the taxpayers' dime.

Senator Mike Duffy has been caught claiming a generous P.E.I. housing allowance while holding an Ontario health card. That is to say nothing of Mr. Patrick Brazeau.

How many more disgraceful incidents like these will it take before the Prime Minister admits that this pork barrel patronage project, otherwise known as the Senate, should be abolished?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know that the Senate board of internal economy, which of course is mirrored with a parallel institution here in the House of Commons, is looking at the whole issue of residences right now. As a matter of fact, I think the NDP, both on Thursday and Friday, applauded the government's decision to move in that direction and also to bring in an internal auditor to look at this question.

However, the leader of the NDP, of course, conveniently forgets the fact that every time the Canadian people have elected a senator, their elected prime minister, our Prime Minister, has appointed that person to the Senate. The evidence is in Senator Unger, Senator Brown and of course, Senator Black, who are all members of the Senate, elected by the Canadian people. That is the direction our government is going in, and we will continue to do so.

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[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us talk about thieves. Together, the Liberals and

Conservatives pillaged \$57 billion from the employment insurance fund to give handouts to the richest companies. The government used that \$57 billion as though the money belonged to it, not to workers and employers.

How do the Conservatives justify the fact that they are cutting access to EI, when workers and employers contributed more to this fund than they ever received in benefits?

• (1420)

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me say that I agree with half of what the Leader of the Opposition said about how the Liberals stole \$50 billion from taxpayers when they were in power.

It is also true that our government increased access to employment insurance for Canadians who need it. That is what we promised during the 2006, 2008 and 2011 election campaigns, and that is a promise this government has kept.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Human Resources said that the employment insurance program is too lucrative. That comes from the same minister who said that EI is an incentive to remain unemployed.

It is therefore not surprising that the Minister of Human Resources has implemented an inhumane reform that attacks unemployed and seasonal workers without consulting the provinces and the economic sectors affected.

Pressure from the people is intensifying, and the federal minister is meeting with her Quebec counterpart today. Will the Conservatives listen to the political and economic stakeholders and abandon this botched reform?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP has levelled these accusations in the past, and Canadians have quite simply rejected them during elections. When we look at the reforms that our government has brought forward and implemented, we see that the objective was to give Canadians access to employment insurance when they need it, no matter where they live. That is what our reforms are doing. The economic and regional results indicate that the current reforms make sense for every region of Canada.

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PARLIAMENTARY BUDGET OFFICER

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the President of the Treasury Board recently stated that there was no legal way to renew Kevin Page's term. That is completely false. The Federal Accountability Act is clear. It refers to the PBO's renewable term.

Last April, the Prime Minister said "I expect ministers to always tell the truth".

So why is the President of the Treasury Board not telling the truth?

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have already stated clearly in the House that we want a Parliamentary Budget Officer who is impartial and who can give credible opinions on budgetary matters.

The Parliamentary Librarian has hired a headhunting firm. We have no intention of removing the PBO's office from the purview of the Library of Parliament.

[English]

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the President of the Treasury Board can make things up, but we have read the Federal Accountability Act and the law contradicts him. It says, “renewable term”. Conservatives are no longer satisfied just attacking Kevin Page personally, starving him of funds and denying him information. Now they make up facts about the law.

The budget is fast approaching and extending Kevin Page's term is the sensible thing to do, so why are Conservatives attacking the PBO and undermining fiscal accountability?

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have said in this place that there are numerous methods of accountability that we take seriously in the chamber, be it the estimates, the public accounts or the budget process. However, we also want a parliamentary budget officer who is non-partisan and a credible source of opinion on fiscal matters. I understand that the Library of Parliament, an institution of 100-plus years in this place, has retained a search firm. We welcome its deliberations, but we will not see any changes further from that.

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THE ECONOMY

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, buried in all of last week's rubble about Duffy and Brazeau, robocalls and push polls, there was some hard reality about the struggling Canadian economy. Consumer debt got worse, 22,000 jobs were lost, trade was down again and housing starts dropped by 19%; all signs of a weakening economy. This is no time for complacency.

To counteract Canada's economic deterioration, will the government present a new budget before the end of February?

• (1425)

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am genuinely pleased that the Liberals are so excited for a budget they want Christmas to come early. They can rest assured our budget will be tabled along the regular timelines.

However, while I have a moment, I am pleased to certainly let the member for Wascana and the House know some of the things that have been said very recently about the Canadian economy. Tom Donohue, who is the president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said, “The great Canadian miracle is something we should follow [in the United States]”.

Indeed, the Canadian economy has created over 900,000 net new jobs since the worst part of the recession. We have lowered taxes over 140 times for Canadians and our budget will reflect this growing success in the Canadian economy.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, government boasting is meaningless to those who have lost their jobs or cannot afford a mortgage or a pension or cannot get their kids into higher education. Saying we are not as bad as some others is settling for mediocrity.

Oral Questions

Will there be a budget in February? Will it freeze job-killing Conservative EI payroll taxes? Will it make family tax credits available to all Canadians not just the more wealthy? Will it tear down barriers to skills and learning? Will it invest in infrastructure and housing?

Will the budget do these sensible things?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I did not say we are better than the others. We are, in fact, the best in the world when it comes to job numbers. The World Economic Forum and the OECD confirm that Canada's job numbers are the best in all the G7. It does not mean, of course, that we can be complacent.

We have put in place our economic action plan. We will be bringing forward responsible measures in budget 2013 and we will keep doing what we promised Canadians we would do should we be entrusted with a majority government, which is to take care of the Canadian economy so that Canadian families can take care of their responsibilities.

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[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the economy is in enough trouble without the government adding to the problem by pushing ahead with its ill-advised EI reforms, which have been criticized by Quebec's seasonal employers, including Charles-Henri de Coussergues, the president of the Association des vignerons du Québec. Workers are troubled by the reforms and, in his own words, “they are discouraged and I am losing this workforce”.

Claudine Pedneault, the owner of Les voitures d'eau hotel in Isle-aux-Coudres, had this to say: “We are angry.... Some of my employees have been with me for 20 years. I am afraid of losing them....”

Will the government listen to these people and put an end to EI reforms that kill jobs?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the changes that have been introduced clarify the responsibilities of EI recipients. The aim of the EI program is to provide support to people while they are looking for another job. We are helping them to find a new job by expanding the job alert and job bank systems. We want to help workers find jobs.

Oral Questions

[English]

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of International Cooperation's office is a renowned black hole for funding proposals. In fact, very few see the light of day and those that are funded are increasingly out of step with Canadians. How did Crossroads, an anti-gay organization, get sign-off from the minister to operate in a country that Canada has strongly criticized for its persecution of its gay citizens?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we fund results-based projects, not organizations, and projects are delivered without religious content, including this particular project.

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, speaking of results-based projects, the Conservative government has taken a dislike to organizations like KAIROS and Development and Peace that work for the welfare of people around the world and that have achieved tangible results in the field.

Meanwhile, religious groups that promote their own ideology have made inroads with these same Conservatives.

Has the time not come to stop making a mess of things at CIDA and issue clear, objective criteria for partnerships—

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. Minister of International Cooperation.

• (1430)

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that premise is absolutely bogus. As I said earlier, we fund results-based projects, not organizations, and religion has nothing to do with any of that.

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[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a procurement contract for Cyclone helicopters was signed nine years ago, but the goods have yet to be delivered.

The Minister of National Defence has called this contract “the worst procurement in the history of Canada”. Okay. But then the minister granted an additional \$117 million in funding to Sikorsky.

Although the Conservatives like to suggest that they could support the NDP's proposal to create a defence procurement agency, we still have no helicopters.

When will they finally deliver the goods?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member said, it was under the previous Liberal government that this issue was neglected for years. Our government expects Sikorsky's obligations under this contract to be met. To date, they have not been met. In fact, it has missed every deadline and

every timeline. To that end, we have already applied millions of dollars in liquidated damages and we are going to be applying significant additional charges that will begin to accrue against this company for failure to deliver. We will continue to aggressively insist that Sikorsky meet its obligations.

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister shares the unfortunate reflex of the Minister of National Defence, always pointing the finger of blame at others. However, those ministers have been in the front bench for a long time and that means that they are responsible—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. Order, please. The hon. member for Beaches—East York has the floor.

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, I am pointing at the minister who is responsible for the problems, responsible for fixing the problems and responsible for getting the job done. Our aircrews are still waiting for a replacement for the 50-year-old Sea Kings.

Why the kid gloves with Sikorsky and when will our aircrews get the equipment they need?

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member can see, I share his frustration. It was under the previous Liberal government that this contract was signed and this issue was neglected for many years. We do expect Sikorsky to meet its obligations. Under this contract to date, it has not met them. In fact, it has missed every deadline and every timeline. To that end, we have already applied millions of dollars in liquidated damages against this company and we will continue to significantly apply more damages to this contract. We are doing what we can to aggressively insist that Sikorsky meets its obligations.

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[Translation]

ETHICS

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Speaker, since Mike Duffy was appointed to the Senate, he has criss-crossed the country peddling Conservative policies and even fundraising for his party.

Thousands of dollars are going up in smoke, like the signals from a papal conclave. And Conservative senators are taking those thousands of dollars straight out of the pockets of Canadian taxpayers. That is what the Senate has become.

How can the government justify this abuse of taxpayers' money for partisan purposes by people who are not even qualified to be senators?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think that question tarred an awful lot of great Canadians with a rather wide brush, and I am a little bit saddened to see that coming from a party that purports to be treating people with respect. In fact, there are many very respected Canadians doing hard work for Canada in this one parliamentary institution.

In terms of some issues and some questions that have been raised, the Senate Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration is examining those questions, and in three individual cases, has referred those to an outside auditor to ensure they are dealt with appropriately so that taxpayers are protected.

[Translation]

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it seems that Senator Duffy is not the only one embroiled in the Senate spending scandal. He is now part of an elite and growing group of overpaid people who supposedly own a residence in the province they are meant to represent.

The Prime Minister will surely keep appointing lifelong winners to this Conservative lottery. However, before he does, can the Prime Minister tell us if there are any other senators who are not living in the riding they represent?

[English]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we have addressed on a number of occasions, the Senate Committee of Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration has been reviewing both their policies, under which we all know that all parliamentarians are expected to maintain a residence both in their home region that they represent as well as here in Ottawa, and ensuring those policies are correct and that they are being applied appropriately. The committee has been going through that diligent process and we expect it will continue to do so to protect the interests of taxpayers.

• (1435)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, former Conservative Senate leader, Lowell Murray said that either Mike Duffy can produce evidence that he lives in P.E.I. or he is “a goner”.

Surely the PMO must have vetted Duffy just like it vetted Patrick Brazeau, and after being reassured about Patrick Brazeau it declared that anyone who had any questions about Brazeau was an ankle-biter. It has been bit, but clearly someplace else.

Will the PMO produce evidence that reassures that Mr. Duffy is actually eligible to sit in the Senate, and are there any other senators who have been breaking the rules and ripping off the taxpayers? Who are they? It must know.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I indicated several times, the Committee of Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration in the Senate has been looking into this matter.

It is reviewing these policies, something we have encouraged as a government, and I expect that it will complete that process in a thorough and diligent fashion.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives got caught and now they are suddenly trying to show us that they actually cared about the rules. They broke the rules all along.

Speaking of which, we have Matt Meier, who processed illegal voter suppression calls in the 41st general election based on lists that were handed to him by the Conservative Party. Matt Meier was then recently hired by the top Conservative operative, Jenni Byrne, in these illicit phone calls in Saskatchewan. First the Conservatives denied it, then they got caught. It is the robo-script all over again.

Why is the government not putting a stop to the illegal tactics that were used to defraud people in the 41st general election?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is the NDP civility project at work, that member right over there. I find it interesting that he lobs false allegations when he knows that the Conservative Party is working proactively with Elections Canada to ascertain what happened in Guelph.

As for the member's trash-talking, he should leave that for his rap career. Vanilla Ice should look out, because “Vanilla Not So Nice” is in the House.

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ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week the—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Toronto—Danforth has the floor.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, last week the Prime Minister defended a dishonourable scheme to put pressure on the non-partisan boundary commission in Saskatchewan, and he defended it with an enthusiasm that should cause all Canadians deep concern. The House leader then claimed the government's support for these tactics is equivalent to two Newfoundland MPs legitimately appearing before a House committee to request a boundary adjustment.

Does the government stand by the House leader's effort to change the channel with such manifestly incorrect and false comparisons?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, electoral boundary processes encourage input from parliamentarians, public and political parties.

It is well known that our party agrees with the 75% of people in Saskatchewan who support the riding boundaries as they are. StatsCan's latest report shows that Saskatoon and Regina are the fastest growing, youngest demographic cities in Canada. I do not understand why the opposition wants to limit the representation from those two great cities.

*Oral Questions***HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
CANADA**

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the saga of the lost student-loans data gets worse every day. This weekend, the government admitted the hard drive went missing in August, not November, as previously claimed. Nearly 600,000 Canadians were exposed to identity theft for over six months, not three months, as we were led to believe by the government.

This only gets worse. The minister refuses to explain herself for these outrageous privacy breaches. Changing stories and blaming staff will not work any longer.

My question is simple. Why is the minister refusing to appear before the committee, and how is she going to be accountable to Canadians?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the loss of this data was totally unacceptable, especially as it was unavoidable.

That said, I have instructed the department to change the way it handles Canadians' data. It is changing its systems. It is changing the processes. It is providing training, mandatory training, to all staff who deal with personal data so that this sort of situation can never happen again.

My officials would be pleased to appear before committee very soon.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what is totally unacceptable is the minister's lack of accountability. For example, she says the data was lost in November. We know that is not true. She says that she provided those people with the best protection possible. That certainly is not true.

Now we have students like Natasha, from Kemptville, who has received notice that she was affected. The problem is, though, she did not apply for her student loan until 2007. The minister said that was not possible.

Would the minister state, unequivocally, that only students between 2000 and 2006 were impacted?

• (1440)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the department has made every effort to contact those for whom information is available, who were involved in this, to make sure that they are, number one, aware of the situation and also that the Government of Canada will be providing credit protection for them for a period of six years.

The department is also changing the way information is stored, the way it is processed and the way it is shared so that this sort of thing cannot happen again.

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EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is simple, and it is directed toward the Prime Minister.

Why is the Conservative government essentially stealing early Canada pension plan payments from seasonal workers who are on employment insurance? Not only are the crippling changes made to

employment insurance affecting those who are fortunate to gain a day's work, with a clawback of 50¢ on the dollar; EI changes also claw back early pensions, pensions that seasonal workers paid for.

Will the Prime Minister fix the problem so seasonal workers' pensions are protected from this legal theft?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the changes are there to make sure that we take away things that discourage workers from working. There were parts of the employment insurance—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. Minister of Human Resources has the floor.

Hon. Diane Finley: Mr. Speaker, as the employment insurance system was administered previously, people were discouraged from working. When they had the opportunity to work part time, the EI system discouraged them from doing it.

With so many employers looking for workers full time and part time, we needed to make sure that they had access to the people for the right reasons. We needed to make sure that we were supporting families when they wanted to work and make them and their families better off.

[Translation]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in the wake of a number of questions from the NDP, Quebec's employment and social security minister is calling for the immediate withdrawal of the Conservatives' EI reform. The Conservative government in New Brunswick is also demanding an urgent meeting.

Every day, my office receives hundreds of phone calls and emails from discouraged workers who are wondering why the Conservatives are targeting them.

When will the Conservatives understand that gutting the EI program is simply unacceptable and is hurting our economy?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have to wonder why the NDP continues to spread fear among the unemployed. That is unacceptable. It wants to ignore the facts: we have removed the obstacles that discouraged the unemployed from working, whether it be full time or part time. The NDP does not want us to help the unemployed find work that would help them, their families and their communities. We want to help the unemployed find work.

[English]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Quebec's labour minister is in Ottawa to talk about why Conservative cuts to EI will hurt provincial labour markets. Provincial governments, seasonal workers, municipal groups and local businesses are all united against the Conservative's short-sighted cuts to EI.

Consulting stakeholders is a basic principle of competent public administration, something this minister just does not get. Now that she is finally talking to the provinces, will the minister actually listen to these concerns and rescind her reckless cuts to EI?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member talks about cuts. In fact, it is just the opposite. What we are doing is enhancing the assistance that is provided to people who are unemployed, maybe helping them find another job. We have expanded the job bank considerably so that it shows a lot more jobs that are available. We are also making sure that people are aware of those jobs. If they do not have access, we are sending them notifications so that they are aware of the opportunities for which they are qualified in their areas. I think that is a big improvement in helping connect Canadians with the jobs available.

•(1445)

[Translation]

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Mr. Speaker, workers have had more than enough of the minister's evasive answers. They know that they are being unfairly punished by the employment insurance reforms, no matter what the Conservative Party says.

There are many workers and employers in Quebec and eastern Canada who depend on seasonal jobs, and now they are considered to be bad guys. The Conservatives are tearing apart the social safety net and passing the bill on to the provinces, which must now pick up the tab for social assistance.

Will the minister finally admit that she has made a mistake and immediately announce that she is suspending these unwarranted reforms?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is wrong.

We are helping people find work, which is better for them, their families and their communities. If more people work, fewer people will be applying for social assistance from the Government of Quebec. That makes sense. We are making these changes to help people find positions in their area for which they are qualified and to help them get these jobs.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister says there have been no cuts. This would mean that the five-week pilot project has been restored. I wish to thank the minister for that.

The EI reform is causing chaos in my region and across eastern Canada. Workers blocked downtown Tracadie-Sheila this morning. It was the third protest in five days. The New Brunswick Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, who is a Conservative, is asking for an emergency meeting because he realizes that the reform is unfair and simply will not fly.

Does the minister realize that we are in this situation because she did not want to consult with workers or the provinces? She can toss her reform in the garbage.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, members are obliged to tell the truth in this House.

Oral Questions

The truth is that seasonal workers have always had the responsibility of looking for work during their off-season. If there is no work available in their area of expertise in their region, employment insurance will be there, as it always has been.

The NDP should stop fearmongering. Instead it should encourage people to accept the work that is available to them.

* * *

[English]

JUSTICE

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, since first elected in 2006, our party has been steadfast in our commitment to put the rights of victims ahead of the rights of offenders. We have enacted over 30 measures aimed at keeping our streets and communities safe. However, there is still much work to be done when it comes to further strengthening Canada's justice system.

Canadians have expressed concerns with the number of high-risk accused persons found not criminally responsible. Can the Minister of Justice please provide the House with details on his latest justice bill, the not criminally responsible reform act?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is correct. Canadians, particularly victims, are increasingly concerned about the potential for high-risk individuals being released into the community. It is not surprising, given that, according to the Department of Justice, between 1994 and 2004, there was a 50% increase in the number of review board admissions for those found not criminally responsible and unfit to stand trial. This is one of the reasons we have introduced Bill C-54, the not criminally responsible reform act. We are acting to ensure that public safety is given paramount consideration while giving a greater voice to victims. These are common sense reforms. I hope they have the support of all members of the House.

* * *

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it was not enough that the Conservatives shut down the Experimental Lakes Area, the ozone network, the PEARL research centre and the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. They then stopped Environment Canada scientists from talking to the media.

Now they are telling Fisheries and Oceans scientists that every publication they work on will have to have DFO approval before they can say anything. This is muzzling, plain and simple. What are the Conservatives afraid of, and why did the minister approve this policy?

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, there has been no change in DFO policy with regard to scientists.

We are very proud of the work our scientists do and encourage them to participate in conferences and networks throughout the world.

Oral Questions

• (1450)

[Translation]

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the new guidelines being forced on Fisheries and Oceans Canada are quite troubling.

We knew the Conservatives were control freaks, but now they want to have even more control over scientific research.

The Conservatives are now in a position to prevent independent scientific research from being published if it does not suit their ideology. This policy is paranoid and dangerous for science.

Why does the Conservative government want to control independent scientific research?

[English]

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only paranoia is on the other side of the House. There has been no change in the way DFO and DFO scientists deal with their science work. We encourage them and we will continue to encourage them.

* * *

[Translation]

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT CANADA

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I received a letter from Human Resources and Skills Development to inform me that I was one of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians whose personal information went missing on the Conservative government's watch.

The victims, who, like me, are vulnerable to identity theft, expected this matter to be dealt with quickly, but it took three class action suits for the Conservatives to do anything about it.

Why are the Conservatives providing less credit monitoring protection than was originally recommended?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have signed a contract with Equifax to protect the credit of those affected by the loss of information.

This contract was signed to help people and it is far more than the opposition is suggesting.

Fortunately, so far there is no evidence that there has been any fraudulent use of this data.

[English]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it took several class action lawsuits for the Conservatives to act at all. Now they are offering less than what HRSDC originally recommended. That is a fact.

I know the minister likes to ignore real victims and act like we are just statistics, but I am here standing in front of her. Therefore, can she tell me, along with the half a million other Canadians, who for the rest of our lives are now more vulnerable to identity theft, when she will take the issue of privacy seriously, instead of re-victimizing Canadians?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we take the privacy of Canadians very seriously. That is why the Privacy Commissioner was contacted immediately. That is also why the RCMP has been brought in to investigate the situation, because we want to make sure that we get the facts.

Meanwhile, the department has signed a six-year contract with Equifax to protect the credit of those people affected, such as the hon. member, to make sure that their credit is secure and that their identity is not stolen.

Fortunately, so far, there is no evidence that there has been any fraudulent use of this data.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, after the coup in Mali, this government cut direct aid to the Malian government, which was the right thing to do. But since then, the government has taken two positions that are difficult to reconcile.

First, the government will reinstate aid to Mali once a government is democratically elected. Second, the government will reinstate aid to Mali once a road map for elections and restoring democracy has been created, which will allow the government to help restore democracy.

Which of these positions does the government support?

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada has a long history of supporting the people of Mali. In fact, the ambassador of Mali noted that Canada's assistance has been long standing and exemplary.

While government-to-government assistance remains suspended, we continue our development and humanitarian assistance with our partners, and we wish to see a democratically elected government in place and stability restored as soon as possible.

* * *

PARKS CANADA

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada's national parks and tourism are the latest victims of the Conservatives' disastrous handling of the economy.

First, they slashed \$29 million from Parks Canada, which has forced cutbacks to hours, shortened seasons and a serious downgrade of services. Now they are hoping to make up for these shortfalls with larger user fee increases.

National parks contribute millions to our local economies. When will the Conservatives stop this government killing tourism tax?

*Oral Questions***THE BUDGET**

• (1455)

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague knows that parks fees have been frozen for years and in fact represent only a very small percentage of the actual cost of operating our parks.

We have been working with our respective communities with regard to the different parks in different situations across the country. We have developed a new fee regime that will address visitor experiences at the times of the greatest visitor numbers.

* * *

[Translation]

HEALTH

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if the Conservative government continues to drag its heels, Alzheimer's will become a major public health problem in the not too distant future.

According to a recent U.S. study, the number of people suffering from Alzheimer's will triple by the year 2050, which means that approximately three million Canadians will be suffering from dementia. Treating dementia is no easy feat. A pan-Canadian strategy needs to be put in place to battle dementia.

Will this government work with the NDP to devise such a strategy?

[English]

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is making investments with the provinces and territories by increasing health care transfers to \$40 billion at the end of the decade.

We are also making significant investments in health research. At the moment, we are funding about 10,000 research projects across the country, and we have increased research in Canada to \$1 billion per year.

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, too many Canadian families will have to deal with Alzheimer's. I know it only too well. My mother suffered from it before she died.

We are ill-prepared to deal with this debilitating diseases that puts pressure on caregivers and our health care system. There will be 1.5 million affected within a generation.

Dementia costs over \$33 billion a year. These costs could escalate to \$293 billion a year.

Will the Conservatives agree with the NDP and act now?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, our government is making significant investments in health transfers to the provinces and territories. At the end of the decade, it will reach \$40 billion. That party has voted against those transfers.

At the same time, we have increased health research to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in this area. Again, that party voted against it.

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as part of our government's continued focus on jobs, growth and long-term prosperity, today the Minister of State for Finance will host an innovative cost-effective round table to consult directly with Canadians on the economy.

This groundbreaking telepresence pre-budget consultation will use new video-conferencing technology to allow our government to gather important feedback from community and local business leaders from coast to coast to coast, all the while saving taxpayers' dollars on travel spending.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance please update this House on how technology like telepresence is helping more Canadians be part of the budget process?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, innovative cost-effective consultations like telepresence and online submissions are allowing our government to exchange ideas with more and more Canadians in a very cost-effective way. As we prepare for economic action plan 2013, I would like to encourage all Canadians to take the time to share their views on how to position Canada to prosper over the long term, by visiting www.fin.gc.ca.

One thing I do not think we will be hearing about is Canadians begging for the NDP to impose a \$20 billion carbon tax.

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Charlottetown had two big snow jobs this weekend, one from mother nature and the other from the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Backpedalling from closing nine district offices, the minister hatched a plan. He came to P.E.I. under the cover of night. His mere presence, unannounced, amounted to a grim reaper moment, unnerving employees wondering what further misery he was bringing.

True to form, as the minister of symbolism, he announced that he would open a wicket line for vets, calling it an "access office". Would the minister tell the House if his new wicket will include case managers to help veterans?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was really glad to meet with Mayor Clifford Lee from Charlottetown, Liberal minister Roach from the Ghiz cabinet, as well as many veterans at the Royal Canadian Legion. I also had good fish and chips in a local brewery.

Oral Questions

It is more than obvious. We have more than 1,000 great employees on the island, in Charlottetown, working for veterans. Is it not obvious that our veterans should have access to them?

* * *

• (1500)

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on Friday, the Prime Minister claimed that the decision to close the Kits Coast Guard station was made in the interest of public safety. However, the people responsible for public safety on the coast contradict the Prime Minister's claim. Police, fire chiefs and coast guard officials have all agreed that closing the station will put mariners lives at risk.

Why will the government not listen to public safety experts and British Columbians and reverse this reckless decision?

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have listened to search and rescue experts, the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Coast Guard. This question has been addressed thoroughly.

Vancouver will continue to have an abundance of federally funded search and rescue assets available to protect and save lives. British Columbia is served by 13 search and rescue life boats, 2 hovercraft and 2 helicopters.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs appeared before the Senate committee on aboriginal peoples on Bill C-27. During the meeting, Liberal Senator Nicholas acknowledged the difficulty in getting information out of her own first nations leadership and Liberal Senator Sibbeston said that he supported the bill. Yet, near the end of the meeting these same Liberal senators walked out of the meeting denouncing the bill.

Could the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs please remind the House of the importance of this particular bill?

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first nation members have asked for greater accountability and transparency for public funds. Our government has responded to these calls with the first nations financial transparency act. It would provide community members with the tools they need to hold their band governments accountable.

We are disappointed that the Liberals are opposed to transparency and accountability for band governments for the tax dollars they receive.

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after promising Colonel Neil Russell, a 33-year veteran with the air force, a long-term care bed in Parkwood Hospital, Veterans

Affairs is now backtracking. Colonel Russell will have to pay the province for the bed.

This is a betrayal of the men and the women who have served our country. Veterans are not a provincial responsibility. When will Veterans Affairs Canada stop this demeaning and adversarial process and take care of all of our veterans?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to confirm to the hon. member that we take care of all veterans, and especially those who have an injury that requires long-term care. That is why we are providing them with our community beds throughout the country, where they want and as they want it.

I invite the NDP member to support our initiative. We are seeking their support. We are investing as much as we can for veterans. We would like to have their support once in a while.

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in less than an hour, Quebec's employment minister will be meeting with the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development to discuss EI reforms.

Like unemployed workers and business people, Minister Maltais is concerned about the dramatic impact the new measures will have on critical sectors of the regional economy, since Quebec is home to 40% of the seasonal jobs affected by the reforms.

That is why the Quebec minister is once again asking Ottawa to provide her with all of the studies on the impact that the reforms will have on Quebec.

Will the minister finally acknowledge the harmful impact that the reforms will have on Quebec and pull the plug on measures that discriminate against the regions?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there are seasonal workers in all regions of Canada.

The changes to the system will help seasonal workers find jobs during the off-season. They will be better off than if they were not working. The reforms are good for them and for their families.

* * *

[English]

PRESENCE IN THE GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of a delegation from the Yukon, led by the Hon. Darrell Pasloski, Premier, and the following ministers: Brad Cathers, Scott Kent and Mike Nixon.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1505)

[English]

RESPONSE TO THE SUPREME COURT OF CANADA DECISION IN R. V. TSE ACT

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-55, An Act to amend the Criminal Code.

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

* * *

[Translation]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

FINANCE

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fifteenth report of the Standing Committee on Finance pertaining to its study of tax incentives for charitable giving.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this report.

I would like to thank all members of the committee for their work on this report, as well as the analysts, clerks and all other committee staff who made the report possible.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present in both official languages the 11th report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts in relation to its study of Chapter 4—Regulating Pharmaceutical Drugs—Health Canada of the fall 2011 report of the Auditor General of Canada.

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this report.

* * *

CANADIAN FORCES MEMBERS AND VETERANS RE-ESTABLISHMENT AND COMPENSATION ACT

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-472, An Act to amend the Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act (death benefit for parents).

He said: Mr. Speaker, the reason for the introduction of this bill is that, if we take Afghanistan as an example, 158 individuals passed away, giving their lives to the service of Canada. The immediate spouses of those who were married were entitled to the supplementary death benefit of, I believe, more than \$270,000. However, for those individuals who were not married, the estate received nothing.

Routine Proceedings

It is time that on the battlefield we recognize that, whether a soldier is married or not married, it should not matter to the estate where the supplementary death benefit goes. This legislation would change that. It would basically make all of our men and women in the services who die in the line of duty for their country equal under the compensation benefit to ensure that their estate would receive the supplementary death benefit.

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

* * *

PETITIONS

WIND TURBINES

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to rise today to present this petition from constituents mostly in the community of North Gower, who ask that there be a moratorium on the Marlborough wind farm project, which will add as many as 10 industrial wind turbines, some as close as 800 metres to dwellings in the North Gower area.

Understandably, along with reports of health problems related to those turbines, this has led residents to call for this moratorium, and I present the House with this petition in order to encourage that outcome.

WINDSOR-DETROIT CROSSING

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have three petitions.

The first petition calls for the new border crossing in the Windsor-Detroit corridor to have a bike lane. Hundreds of people are signing petitions and are supported by the cyclists in Michigan as well and by Michigan elected officials at all levels.

• (1510)

PENSIONS

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a second petition signed by thousands of people with regard to the age of eligibility for the OAS being changed from 65 to 67. The petitioners are objecting to this practice and want the government to rescind this as an issue.

POVERTY

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the last petition is with regard to the elimination of poverty in Canada. The petitioners are identifying that Canadian seniors and children are in too much poverty, and they would like to see the elimination of poverty as a goal for this country.

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present three petitions regarding CCSVI. Canadians living with multiple sclerosis are waiting to hear when patient recruitment will start for the promised CCSVI trial, which was to begin November 1 and which the CIHR website states began on that date, but which the Minister of Health's office wrote started in January 2013.

Government Orders

Canadians with MS wonder why they have to wait until February 20 for simple answers to simple questions. How many trial centres have passed ethical and hospital reviews? How many patients have been recruited, and when did patient recruitment begin?

The petitioners call upon the Minister of Health to undertake phase III clinical trials on an urgent basis at multiple centres across Canada and to require follow-up care.

[Translation]

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour and pleasure to present a petition signed by over 125 residents of Sherbrooke who are opposed to the cuts that are being made to the funding awarded to Development and Peace.

This petition was presented to me a few weeks ago in Sherbrooke by the organization itself and by the Archbishop of Sherbrooke, Msg. Luc Cyr.

The 125 signatories to the petition are calling on the minister to provide this organization with the funding it needs to continue to do the work that has earned it much praise for many years now.

I hope that the government will listen to reason and support Development and Peace.

[English]

HEALTH

Hon. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise to present a petition signed by numerous constituents from my riding of Kelowna—Lake Country, as well as other constituents from across Canada, who are concerned with regard to tanning beds and the cause of cancer. They support Bill C-386, which was tabled by my hon. colleague from Selkirk—Interlake. They are calling on Parliament to enhance consumer protection in the tanning industry by strengthening labels on tanning beds and prohibiting youth from access.

PENSIONS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I present a petition signed by residents of Winnipeg North asking me to send a direct message to the Prime Minister that they believe people should continue to have the option to retire at the age of 65 and that the government should in no way diminish the importance and value of Canada's three major seniors programs: OAS, GIS and CPP.

* * *

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 that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

SAFER WITNESSES ACT

Hon. Peter Kent (for the Minister of Public Safety) moved that Bill C-51, An Act to amend the Witness Protection Program Act and to make a consequential amendment to another Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a great privilege for me to rise today to speak in support of Bill C-51, the safer witnesses act.

Our government has been quite clear that one of our top priorities is to help build safer communities for all Canadians. One of the ways we are doing that is by providing law enforcement officials with the tools they need to do their job more efficiently and effectively. We have done a lot since day one. We have enacted legislation to stiffen sentences and increase the accountability of offenders, and we have enhanced the ability of all law enforcement officials to keep Canadians safe. We have taken steps to modernize the RCMP.

The legislation before us today strengthens our track record and will go a long way to enhancing our collective efforts to combat organized crime. Crimes committed by organized crime networks present a serious concern to both police and Canadians. Many organized crime groups are involved with the illicit drug trade, which we all know is growing.

According to Statistics Canada, for example, cocaine trafficking, production and distribution in Canada has grown nearly 30% over the last decade. Today we also know that organized crime is becoming more global, more transnational and more pervasive. We know that organized crime groups are becoming more sophisticated to avoid detection and arrest.

We also know that most serious organized crime groups are very secretive, and they often pose unique challenges for law enforcement officials because they can be very difficult to infiltrate. In some cases, law enforcement officials rely on the co-operation of individuals formerly involved with these organizations in order to combat their activities or successfully prosecute the ringleaders. In other cases, they might rely on the testimony of key eyewitnesses. Those who do come forward or co-operate often fear for their own safety as well as the safety of their family and loved ones.

Public safety is the cornerstone of the witness protection program as it offers protection, including new identities, for certain individuals whose testimony or co-operation can be so vital to the success of law enforcement operations.

Although witness protection was informally available since 1970, Canada's federal witness protection program was officially established in 1996 with the passage of the Witness Protection Program Act.

Today, the federal program, which is administered by the RCMP, can provide emergency protection to witnesses under threat, offering such services as permanent relocation and also secure identity changes.

Government Orders

Since provincial governments are also responsible for the administration of justice, many provinces, including Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, have established their own witness protection programs, which differ from the federal program.

The federal program has a legislated mandate to provide national protection services to all law enforcement agencies in Canada, as well as to international courts and tribunals.

Legislation governing the federal witness protection program, however, has not been substantially changed since it first came into force, despite the constantly changing nature of organized crime and some calls for reform.

The safer witnesses act would help to strengthen the current federal witness protection program, a program that, as I have mentioned, is often vital to effectively combatting crime, particularly organized crime.

As the hon. Shirley Bond, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of British Columbia, noted when commenting on Bill C-51, in the fight against crime, protecting witnesses is essential.

Bill C-51 would enhance the protection offered to key witnesses who wish to co-operate with law enforcement officials in the fight against serious organized crime.

Chief Bill Blair of the Toronto Police Service perhaps said it best when he said:

In Toronto we have seen the fear caused by intimidation and the threat of retaliation in gang investigations. Witnesses with valuable information are deterred from coming forward.

Chief Blair supports this legislation, as it is “a valuable step in protecting public safety”, in his words.

Bill C-51 would also help to protect individuals and front-line officers involved in administering and delivering witness protection.

• (1515)

Tom Stamatakis, president of the Canadian Police Association, recognized the protection put in place through our bill. The Canadian Police Association strongly believes that the legislation will enhance the safety and the security of front-line law enforcement personnel who are engaged in protective duties.

Mr. Stamatakis has stated that the Canadian Police Association appreciates the steps being taken by the Government of Canada to address those concerns. He went so far as to say, “On behalf of the over 50,000 law enforcement personnel that we represent across Canada, we ask that Parliament quickly move to adopt this Bill”. I could not agree more.

The safer witnesses act would also promote greater integration between federal and provincial witness protection programs and will help to ensure that individuals can access federal identity documents more quickly and easily.

Bill C-51 proposes important changes in five main areas, which I will outline. First, the changes will allow provincial and territorial governments to request that their programs be designated under the federal Witness Protection Program Act. This designation will

facilitate their witnesses receiving a secure identity change without needing to be admitted into the federal program, which is the case today.

Should an individual in a provincial program require a secure identity change under the existing rules, he or she must be temporarily transferred into the federal witness protection program so that the RCMP can obtain the appropriate documents. This can obviously cause delays. It can also lessen the security of the program and present witness management issues for the RCMP.

The reforms that our government is proposing would streamline and speed up the issuance of secure identity documents through the RCMP. As long as a provincial witness protection program has been designated, a provincial official responsible for the program would be able to work directly with the RCMP to quickly acquire the necessary documents. Once designated, secure requests for documents would be handled more quickly and easily, since witnesses under a provincial program would no longer need to be admitted into the federal witness protection program.

Under these changes proposed by the legislation before us today, federal organizations would be required to assist the RCMP in obtaining identity changes not only for witnesses in the federal program but also for witnesses in designated provincial programs. Provincial governments have been requesting an expedited process for obtaining federal identity documents, and we are acting on their request. These two changes, which our government has introduced, would help meet these demands from provinces such as Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

In fact, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Saskatchewan Gordon Wyant had this to say about the legislation:

These changes will help strengthen our criminal justice system by providing greater protection for witnesses. We support the proposed improvements to the *Witness Protection Program Act* as yet another step in making our communities safer.

A third area of reform proposed by Bill C-51 concerns the protection and disclosure of information about people within provincial and municipal witness protection programs. Under the existing federal Witness Protection Program Act, the prohibition against disclosure of information is limited to only information about the change of name and location of federal protectees. The bill would broaden the type of information to be protected and include information about the change of identity and location of provincial witnesses in designated programs as well as information about the federal and designated programs, including those who administer both the federal and provincially designated programs, which is so important.

Therefore, we would be providing greater protection to both the protectees as well as the law enforcement officials who are administering these programs. It is hard to believe it has gone this long without changes. It is very important that we all support this and get the bill passed. Again, this is consistent with provincial requests to strengthen disclosure prohibitions so that information about their witnesses is protected throughout Canada.

Government Orders

The fourth set of changes in the safer witnesses act would mean that the federal witness protection program would be able to accept referrals of persons assisting organizations with a mandate related to national security, national defence or public safety rather than only from law enforcement and international courts and tribunals, as is currently the case. Such organizations include the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and National Defence.

• (1520)

Again, these are very important changes. These legislative reforms would respond directly to a recommendation that was made in the final report of the Air India inquiry.

Finally, Bill C-51 would also address a number of operational issues, based on experiences gained in administering the current program over the past 15 years. For example, this would include permitting voluntary termination from the federal program and extending the amount of time emergency protection could be provided to candidates being considered for admission into the federal program. The change would be to extend the current 90-day availability of emergency protection to a maximum of 180 days. These changes have been recognized as important as the program has been used and administered over the last several years.

The changes our government is proposing to the Witness Protection Program Act are the product of extensive consultations with federal partners and provincial and territorial governments, as well as with stakeholders, law enforcement officials and many interested parties.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, our government is committed to providing law enforcement with the tools and resources needed to protect the safety of our families and our communities, including an effective witness protection program. An effective program is extremely valuable in the fight against crime, especially, as we know, organized crime.

Our government is proposing to enhance the effectiveness and security of the federal witness protection program by making it more responsive to law enforcement needs. These changes are needed to better support law enforcement and those whom the program is designated to protect by providing better service to provincial witness protection programs and improving protection for those who provide it; through broadened prohibitions against the disclosure of program information; by improving processes to obtain secure identity changes for witnesses; and through an extension of the amount of time emergency protection may be provided.

The changes that our government is proposing would respond to many of the needs and requests of provincial and territorial governments. They would respond to the needs of law enforcement officials and other stakeholders involved in the criminal justice system. They also would respond to the needs of Canadians from coast to coast who wish to see our government continue to build safer communities for everyone.

I therefore urge the opposition members to consider the bill, to look at the merits of the bill and to support this common-sense proposal that we have put forward. I encourage all members to support the bill and, as police and stakeholders across the country have asked us, let us expedite this, get the bill passed quickly, and

get better and more efficient protection for witnesses who help us combat organized crime in Canada.

• (1525)

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I assure the parliamentary secretary that we will certainly be working with her in committee to get the bill considered as expeditiously as possible. We always have to look for the possible poison needle in the haystack, as is our duty as the opposition. However, we will be trying to ensure this gets through as soon as possible.

My question is about the consultation with stakeholders. I would like to hear more about this, because this is an example of where the government members' listening to stakeholders has actually worked quite well.

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his commitment and his party's commitment to help us get this through committee.

It is correct that there are numerous consultations that go on continuously, obviously with provincial stakeholders and counterparts. The Minister of Public Safety meets with his counterparts regularly. In fact they just met recently before the Christmas break. As well, we consult with front-line officers. We meet regularly with the Canadian Police Association and members of the chiefs of police. Consultation is indeed very important and it is something that our government takes seriously.

Obviously the member opposite has listened as well to stakeholders and provincial counterparts, and he and his party want this to be moved through quickly. We appreciate the support of the member and his party. Hopefully, going forward we can get this accomplished.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do understand that the Liberal Party also wants to see the bill sent to committee. However, I have a question. When we talk about the designation from other jurisdictions that would be taken into consideration if the legislation were to pass, can the member provide a list of which provinces?

I am also interested to know if there are programs at the municipal level. I know the bill makes reference to the municipal level, but are there cities that actually have them, and if so which ones? I am most interested in knowing that.

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, there are several provinces that have witness protection programs in place: Quebec; Alberta; Manitoba; and I believe, British Columbia and Saskatchewan. There are no municipal programs. Obviously the province would operate these.

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What the designation would do is help expedite secure identity documents. Right now there can be quite a delay when provinces try to get secure identity documents for people involved in the witness protection program. Now they could have their program designated under the federal program. Once it is designated, that process would happen a lot faster, which would make it better for law enforcement and it would make those who are witnesses feel a lot more secure and feel they would be protected if they go forward.

Those are the provinces that currently have a provincial program in place.

• (1530)

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-51, the safer witnesses act, is an important bill. The many important provisions in the act help secure identity changes for witnesses and help our law enforcement agents when they do risky undercover work.

Recently there were news articles about an important undercover case that exposed Hell's Angels' activities in British Columbia. It was very daring undercover work. Risky police activities are taken to help bring criminal organizations to the law.

When victims of crime also come forward and testify about nasty, terrible events they have experienced, I wonder if the member would expand on how the provisions of the bill would help someone such as the undercover officer, who put himself at great risk in the recent case in British Columbia, and how victims of crime would benefit from the protections in the bill.

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, putting victims first as well as recognizing the good work that front-line officers do is very important in all of the legislation our government puts forward. There is a couple of ways that the bill and the changes to the witness protection program would help our officers. First, it would create greater prohibitions regarding what kind of information could be disclosed about someone who is within a witness protect program or who has administered it, which is obviously law enforcement and its agencies.

It is pretty unbelievable, but up until now, all that would not be able to be disclosed was the name and location of someone who was in a witness protection program. There are so many more ways to track someone down, so we have expanded that to a much broader, much greater amount of information that would be protected for not only those people who are part of the witness protection program, but also the law enforcement people who help enforce it.

This would help victims. We hope it would also help us prevent and deter crime, find out where those organizations are working and allow law enforcement a greater ability to infiltrate, stop them and keep our communities safer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for her speech and her bill.

My comments pertain primarily to the situation in Quebec. The Conservative government has been in office for nearly seven years now. During that time, there have often been requests from the RCMP and Sûreté du Québec in light of the growing violence in the province as a result of street gangs, organized crime and biker gangs.

The RCMP and Sûreté du Québec regularly ask for more money in order to detect these situations and run a witness protection program that is as effective and, more especially, as transparent as possible.

I would like my colleague to explain to us how this bill will help to achieve that objective.

[*English*]

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, we have been very responsive to the needs of front-line officers, including the RCMP and provincial police throughout this country. In fact, we have 11 police officers who are part of our caucus and who have worked on the front line, so we listen to them and we consult.

We have been providing tools such as these legislative changes. We have provided 30 different pieces of legislation to help crack down on crime, which is what police are asking us to do. We have heard from front-line officers in our study on the economics of policing. They have said it is not more money they need; they want the tools to fight crime. They are looking at ways to be more efficient. We have given them the tools as far as legislation is concerned to crack down on gangs, guns, drugs and organized crime. This is just one of them.

Unfortunately, the opposition members did not support many of the bills we put forward. I do not know if they have any police officers in their caucus. We do have 11 of them and we are listening to our caucus members as well as police from across the country. We will continue to give them the support they need. We would ask the opposition to support our legislation and not to vote against us when they have a chance to support police officers.

• (1535)

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the parliamentary secretary could tell the House what checks and balances will be in place to ensure that the identity of a federal protectee is not exposed.

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, currently there are a number of checks and balances in the program. However, one inefficiency we found was that a very small amount of information about someone involved in the witness protection program is prohibited from being disclosed. As I mentioned earlier, it is only the name and location. Not only as a check and balance but to greater protect witnesses, more information must be protected. The methods of finding people have become much more sophisticated. Therefore, we have to make sure that a greater amount of information regarding where witnesses have been relocated, their change of name, the jobs they are doing and what they did previously is protected. Again, it is not just for witnesses. It is also for members of law enforcement who are part of that process.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, sometimes the protection can be as simple as police protection, but other times it might require a secondary residence at a safe location.

Government Orders

However, there are costs involved. According to the RCMP's website, sometimes the cost of protecting witnesses hinders investigations, especially for small law enforcement agencies that have a tight budget.

Will the government commit to investing more in witness protection in the future?

[English]

Ms. Candice Bergen: Mr. Speaker, the witness protection program is administered by the RCMP, which has a sufficient budget to continue with that program. It is not administered by local police departments, which clearly are under provincial jurisdiction.

We have provided funding. For example, we provided one-time funding of \$400 million for the police officer recruitment fund to help recruit more officers. We are giving police the tools they need.

For the hon. member's clarification, the witness protection program is administered federally by the RCMP, not by local police, under the federal program.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am going to say honestly that I am pleased to rise in the House to speak to Bill C-51 at second reading, not so much personally, as I was already up speaking this morning, to Bill C-42, as was the parliamentary secretary, but because, like many members, we have had challenges even getting to the House today.

As the NDP public safety critic, I have the honour of speaking in the House quite often. Unfortunately, too often, it is on bills motivated by the Conservatives' tough on crime attitude. The parliamentary secretary asked why we do not support all of their bills. I would like to take just a moment to talk about this tough on crime attitude, because this is an attitude that too often results in policies that are ripped from headlines.

At best, it is based on a faulty concept of deterrence and the idea that harsh sentences somehow deter crime. There is actually no imperial evidence to show that. The only way deterrence functions is when the investment is made at the front end of law enforcement. It is the certainty of being caught and the swiftness of prosecution that puts people off committing crimes.

Most criminals do not sit at home thumbing through the Criminal Code to see which offence to commit based on the length of the sentence. Obviously they are motivated by other social, economic and personal factors. If resources are put at the front end, we get better results. That is one reason this legislation looks a lot better to us than most of the bills that come forward from the Conservatives.

At worst, the tough on crime agenda appears to be based on little more than retribution, and retribution is not an effective approach to crime. Although it may make some people feel better for a short period of time, it results in policies that are expensive and that rarely show any positive results. In contrast, we in the NDP believe in evidence-based measures, which will help us build safer communities.

I am honestly pleased to stand in the House today to support Bill C-51 at second reading. We have seen a couple of hopeful signs from the Conservatives with this legislation, and also with Bill C-54, which deals with measures for those not criminally responsible. We

have seen more consultation from the government on these two bills. We have seen more attention to evidence on these two bills than we have seen before. In this case, action is long overdue. We are glad that the government finally listened to stakeholders, as we have been asking it to do this since 2007.

In November 2012, the NDP member for Trinity—Spadina repeated our call for action to expand eligibility for those going into the witness protection program. This is particularly important in the struggle against street gangs. The previous narrow definitions excluded them from the witness protection program. We and government members have heard from many community representatives, and from many law enforcement agencies, that to get co-operation to help break street gangs, inclusion of possible witnesses in this program would be very important.

Since 2007, the NDP has also specifically called for better coordination of federal and provincial programs and better provision of services to those provincial programs, which is another positive measure we see in the bill.

We have always called for better overall funding for the program. I will come back to that question.

While we support what the bill attempts to do, which is improve the witness protection program, we are concerned that the Conservative government will refuse to commit any new funding. In fact, the minister said during the introduction of the bill that this would have to be funded from existing funds.

While there is no legislative flaw we can see at this point in the bill, which ensures that we will support it at second reading, we are concerned, because as I often like to say, the proof is in the funding. If we make these improvements, but law enforcement agencies do not have the funding they need to operate the program, we have not moved very far forward.

Whatever the improvements here, the demand that the RCMP and local police departments work within their existing budgets will likely hinder the implementation of the proposed amendments and the improvements in the bill.

The RCMP's own website states that there are instances when the cost of witness protection may impede investigations, particularly for smaller law enforcement agencies. When municipal departments, which are extensive across this country, try to make use of the program, they must reimburse the RCMP fully for the costs, which can be very high. This is an ongoing cost for them. Most of them have no provision in their budgets for making use of this program. It means, oftentimes, that front-line law enforcement officers have to make difficult choices, because they cannot get those who need protection into the program, because the funding is not available to support those individuals once they are in the program.

Government Orders

● (1540)

Again, the witness protection program is often crucial to getting the co-operation the front-line police need so that they can get convictions that will take key organized crime figures out of the community. If there were adequate funding, the same would be true for getting key witnesses to testify against street gang members to help break up those street gangs.

The federal witness protection program has long been criticized for its narrow eligibility criteria, for its poor coordination with provincial programs, and for the low number of witnesses actually admitted to the program. In 2012, 108 applications were considered for admission to the program, and, largely due to funding constraints, only 30 people were accepted.

What does that mean? It means 78 cases for which we might have been able to get a conviction and might have been able to make progress on organized crime, because that has been the focus of the program to this point. We did not get that because of inadequate resources.

There are some important improvements, as we acknowledge, in the bill. Bill C-51 proposes a better process to support provincial witness protection programs. This would be especially important for expediting getting new identity documents for those in provincial programs. Before, as the parliamentary secretary mentioned, this required transferring them to the federal program and transferring them back, with an enormous amount of bureaucratic time-wasting and cost. We are pleased to see that.

The expanded definition is important. In addition to including witnesses in street gang cases as possible entrants to the program, it would also expand the program to include agencies with national security responsibilities.

It would also extend the period for emergency protection. That is one of the key issues local law enforcement figures have raised. Sometimes people need to go into this program very quickly, and sometimes it takes a while before they can get into a more permanent situation. Extending that emergency protection is important.

Provinces such as Ontario and Alberta have been pushing for a national revamp of this program, including recognition of their existing programs. Again, the designation of programs and recognition of those programs is a positive feature of the bill.

For federal departments and agencies with a mandate related to national security, both those that function under national defence and those that function under public safety would now be able to refer witnesses to the program. I will say in a minute why that has been a gap of very great concern in the past.

Because there is no direct reference to eligibility for the program for witnesses in street gang cases, many stakeholders have been concerned that street gang witnesses may not fit these new criteria. We are assured by the government that they will. We look forward to talking about this question in committee to make sure that this critical area is indeed covered by these changes to the witness protection program.

At committee I will be asking those questions to make sure that the federal government is truly committed to the inclusion of street

gang, youth gang and national security witnesses in this program. This will be an important step toward building safer communities in Canada.

We believe that the bill addresses the key problems. There are still a few things it does not do. Again, we would like to talk about those in committee.

Bill C-51 does not include provisions for an independent agency to operate the program, as was recommended in the Air India inquiry report.

There is kind of a conflict of interest when the RCMP manages the program and also manages the investigations. It is able to use the incentive, I guess one would say, of the witness protection program to get co-operation, and then, later, it makes the decision about who is actually eligible to be in the witness protection program. The Air India inquiry report suggested that there should be an independent agency to make those decisions that involve the RCMP as both the investigating authority and the decision-making authority on who gets protection from the program.

When we look at national security, the inability to protect witnesses was a major obstacle to prosecutions in the Air India bombing case. That is why, in the report, there was a lot of attention given to the witness protection program. One witness, Tara Singh Hayer, publisher of the B.C.-based *Indo-Canadian Times*, was assassinated in 1998. This made the affidavit he had given the RCMP in 1995 inadmissible as evidence in the case.

● (1545)

I would say that Mr. Hayer was not a likely candidate to go into the witness protection program because he was a very brave individual. However, two additional witnesses, seeing what had happened to him and not being eligible to go into the witness protection program, refused to provide evidence to the RCMP or the Air India inquiry because of what they had seen happen to another witness who had provided information, and the fact that he was assassinated.

Justice Major, in his report, acknowledged that he felt unable, because of the restrictions in the witness protection program, to provide the protection that would be necessary for prosecution in the case of Air India.

The RCMP has also called for intensive psychological examination of potential protectees, a national support centre for the program, and has also supported the call for an external advisory board in their case to serve as a watchdog on the decisions being made.

We recognize that these are all potentially outside the scope of this bill, but I still think it is worth having a discussion in committee about some of the other things that the RCMP has said are necessary for the efficient operation of the witness protection program.

New Democrats believe that strengthening the program will improve co-operation with local police and the RCMP in the fight against gang violence, and in doing so will help make our communities safer. It has a proven record of success in the fight against organized crime.

Government Orders

While the Conservatives have been slow to respond to this issue, and we on our part have been calling for these changes since 2007, we are pleased to see that the government has listened to the stakeholders in this case and brought in this new legislation to expand the program.

Bill C-51 does address key legislative concerns with regard to the witness protection program and therefore warrants our support. Despite our ongoing concerns about funding, the NDP recognizes that Bill C-51 still falls short on some key changes to the program, such as having a more transparent and accountable process for admissions into the program. Again, the Conservative government has ignored the important recommendations of the Air India inquiry with regard to this independent review of who is admissible into the program.

We do feel that Bill C-51 provides the basic legislative fix that we need. We will wait to see if the Conservatives are going to provide the resources to make it really count for local communities. As I often say and will say again, the proof is in the funding. Local police wish to make use of this program. They welcome these changes. They are waiting to get to work on some of the street and youth gang problems they have when this tool becomes available to them. However, it will not work if they do not have the funding at the local level.

At the public safety committee, we are doing a large study on the economics of policing. I think it has made all members of Parliament aware of the constant downloading of costs and responsibility onto police forces.

When we asked witnesses at committee what percentage of their calls for service were actually what people regard as crime, they responded that it was around 20%, saying that 80% of the time the police spend working on other issues. What that really means is that they are working on things like mental health, addictions, and all those other social problems of exclusion and marginalization. In our society we have made what I would call an unconscious decision that we will leave all those responsibilities to the police. One good sign of that, which we often see, is the difficulty of finding emergency social services, even in urban areas, after five o'clock. Who will one call after five o'clock when most people have their mental health and addiction crises? Those offices are closed.

The police become the agency called to deal with those problems. This is one of the huge, and probably the most important, cost drivers in policing. I know that the Minister of Public Safety suggested that police salaries were in fact a cost driver and that they took away resources from other things they needed. We on this side believe that the police who serve our communities as highly trained professionals need to be paid a fair, professional wage. We recognize that most of the time wages—and certainly in municipal and provincial departments—have been set through a process of free collective bargaining. Therefore, it not the police salaries that prevent resources being available for things like the witness protection program, but government budgets and all those other demands that we place on the police every day of the week.

• (1550)

As I said at the beginning, we know that the police are out in snowstorms doing all kinds of things that are not strictly fighting

crime but providing emergency assistance to the public. I am looking forward to the work in committee not just on this bill but also on the study on the economics of policing to help find some ways to get the cost of policing under control by getting the focus back on building safer communities.

We in the NDP are committed to this concept. We need measures based on real evidence that will lead us toward solutions that make our communities safer. One way of doing this is through an improved witness protection program that helps keep our streets safe by giving police additional tools to fight street gangs.

The parliamentary secretary talked about an expedited process. I want to again reassure her, as I did in the questions asked at the beginning, that on this side we are committed to getting this bill to committee as soon as we can, and giving it a high priority in committee and bringing in the witnesses we need to talk to as quickly as possible. We will not prolong the process beyond what is needed, because we know that local police forces are in fact waiting for this tool to be made available to them in order to do some very important work in community safety.

At this point, I am happy to conclude my remarks by saying that this is one case where the New Democrats believe that the government has listened to stakeholders and has consulted. It might be a little late, but we are pleased to see that it brought in this legislation, and we will be looking at the next budget to make sure that the resources that police forces need, particularly the RCMP, are there to ensure that this new and improved witness protection program can actually be used by those on the front line.

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to tell my hon. colleague how much I appreciate his remarks, the thoughtfulness that has gone into the New Democrats' approach in looking at this bill and the fact that they are in agreement with us and, more importantly, stakeholders, provincial and territorial leaders and Canadians that the witness protection program needs to be fixed.

I appreciate some of the comments he made regarding the Air India inquiry and having a separate investigative body. I want to let him know that we consulted with provinces on that. They had some concerns and would rather that we deal with them directly.

The area that we agree on, to allow other public safety agencies such as CSIS and the Department of National Defence to refer individuals to the witness protection program, was in direct response to the Air India inquiry and its recommendations. It is clear that the member has had some experience and done some consulting with stakeholders. I wonder if he could talk a bit more about the people he represents, whether this will be looked at favourably and help in our fight not just against organized crime but also against threats that come internationally.

Government Orders

• (1555)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, I know that the parliamentary secretary likes to cite the Conservatives as having 11 former police officers on their side and that I usually respond to that by saying I am former municipal police board member and also did international policing research. Therefore, there is no monopoly on expertise in either caucus.

In my own experience on a municipal police board, the funds were not available and it was very difficult to convince a municipal council to include a line item in the budget for witness protection. It already saw policing costs as high and clearly saw witness protection as a federal responsibility. It was very difficult for municipal police forces to use the tool because they were faced with a big bill for which it was difficult to get budget money. That is why when the budget comes out, New Democrats will be looking very closely at what the government is doing to make sure that the funds are available and that these improvements are actually utilized by front-line police.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member and the parliamentary secretary also referred to organized gangs as a major justification for why we need to expand the witness protection program. Could he provide some background in that regard from the province he represents? What can he tell us about the numbers of gangs, gang activities and increases in membership?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, there are areas around the country that have serious problems with youth gangs and street gangs. They are most notable by their presence in the headlines, including some in downtown Toronto. That is the reason the member for Trinity—Spadina has taken such a high-profile role in trying to keep this issue before the House of Commons and to get these changes made. The activities of street gangs, by nature, often involve youth and people whose judgment is not the best, or they would not be involved in the gang. It ends up with a broader threat to the safety of innocent bystanders as a result of gang activities and conflicts between gangs.

In Montreal, my colleague, the member for Alfred-Pellan, has also done a lot of work in her community on the problems with street gangs there. Then of course in Surrey, British Columbia, where we probably have one of the largest problems with street and drug gangs, both the member for Surrey North and the member for Newton—North Delta have been very strong proponents of using this legislation to, as the police say, “crack” those gangs. They have trouble getting anyone to come forward to give evidence. If they can just get one person, they can probably get a conviction that will seriously disrupt street gang activities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the position described by my party and my colleague with regard to our support at second reading is a clear indication that we approach each bill with a clean slate and hope for the best for our constituents, the people we work for.

I have a quick question. Have we taken this bill as far as we possibly can without adding more money, which, I fear, is the direction the government plans to take?

[*English*]

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Trois-Rivières for his question because that is the key point today. The point of view of our caucus is that we can make these important legislative changes. We can do the right thing here in the House. However, if the police do not have the funding to allow them to use the new tools we give them, then there will be no effect at all. That is why I was reminding the parliamentary secretary that, yes, we will be supporting the bill but we will be watching the federal budget very carefully to ensure that funds are included in the budget for the operation of the new aspects of this program and to ensure that the general cutbacks being applied in public safety do not end up impairing the ability to fight crime at the community level.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague both for his work on committee and his comments today.

On committee, we were talking about the funding available. We have posed this question to people testifying and they have said it is not as much about the funding as it is the model and the structure provided. Can my hon. colleague comment on some of those aspects? We are getting the sense from the other side that if we pour money into it, that will solve the problem, but that is clearly not what we heard on committee. It was not the budget or the money issue; it was how the system was modelled.

On a budgetary note, some of the systems that my hon. colleague was talking about are developed by provincial and territorial governments. Our government has provided to the Yukon, for example, record levels of federal transfer payments. There was \$809 million in last year's budget allocated for the kinds of things to support improved models with community groups and organizations working directly with the police. It is as much a provincial and a federal partnership that is required in policing, particularly when we move to organizations that run municipal and provincial police forces, to come up with a great model of Canadian policing.

Could my hon. colleague comment on some of those things that I know we both heard on committee?

• (1600)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, it is tempting to say to the hon. member for Yukon that the question was asked and answered all at once.

However, what we have heard, particularly at the municipal level, is the perception that witness protection is really part of the justice system and not the policing system. For the cost to be passed back to municipal police forces is a large problem for them and they do not see the logic of that. We are actually protecting the witnesses giving evidence in court, and we are actually protecting the integrity of the justice system by protecting those witnesses. Yes, it is true that we are talking about getting co-operation with the local police forces, but they tend to see that as a federal or provincial responsibility and not a municipal responsibility.

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Thus I am looking forward, along with the member, to trying to find in committee structures that make sure that the money gets to front-line policing. As he has been on committee with me, he knows that I am not a person who calls for a lot of excess spending. I think we have to make sure that we spend in the right areas. That is why I am concerned about asking police to do all kinds of things with highly trained police officers, things that might better be done by someone else in our community with more appropriate skills, and not put all of those burdens onto the police force.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the bill expands significantly the number of different areas of jurisdiction that can have witness protection programs. However, as I understand it, the government has said there will be no expansion of budgets to provide for this. How do we do one without the other?

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Speaker, we are back to the heart of the matter, from my point of view. Last year, as I said, only 30 out of 108 applications were approved for the program. Only 30 people in the country received witness protection. For the government to expand the numbers eligible, obviously those 108 applications are going to expand exponentially. If we cannot offer that protection to people, we will not get the benefit of this bill. We will not get them co-operating with the police on youth gangs or on national security issues. Without the funding in place, this is not going to work.

All members on this side will be looking very carefully at the federal budget to see if the resources are going to be made available to make this very positive law work on the ground.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to approach this from a different perspective.

I have had the opportunity to be the justice critic in the province of Manitoba for many years, and there are a wide variety of issues facing our justice system. To pick up on the point that was raised in terms of the budget responsibility and so forth, at the end of the day, Bill C-51, which is a positive bill that we want to see move forward, would have a fairly significant impact, even if it passes as it is currently being proposed today.

When the member said it is an issue of budget, he is correct. We need to factor in that at any given point we could have somewhere in the neighbourhood of 1,000 people within the program, 70% of whom would be under RCMP jurisdiction. As has already been referenced, the number of applications made last year versus the number that were accepted raises other issues.

However, to look at what we are ultimately wanting to pass, there is no doubt that by expanding the program we would see a higher demand for it. I believe the current budget is around \$9 million to \$10 million. I am not completely sure of those numbers, but it is a significant amount of money, and there would be a need to ensure the program is adequately resourced. When we talk about being adequately resourced, obviously the bill would have more. The last question to my colleague was related to the responsible province or municipality, and he made reference to the police or the department of justice.

In the last little while, I have been circulating a petition within my constituency. I will read the last paragraph of the petition, to which I must say I have had many of my constituents respond very favourably. It reads:

We, the undersigned residents of the Province of Manitoba call upon the House of Commons to provide for and support [effective crime prevention] programs that will prevent crimes from happening like programs that focus on steering young children away from associating with gangs or gang activities.

The petition is calling on the Government of Canada to work with other levels of government to develop effective programs that prevent youth from committing crimes.

When we talk about the financing, administration and so forth, we need to recognize that the different levels of government all have a role to play in this. That is the reason, when the parliamentary secretary introduced the bill, I asked how many other jurisdictions had a program that is currently running. I was pleased to hear some of the numbers that the parliamentary secretary referenced.

At the end of the day, this is a significant issue. I asked whether there was an increase in the number of gangs, as this has been a serious problem in Winnipeg. However, Winnipeg is not alone. There are other jurisdictions, as the member has pointed out, that have issues related to gang activity. Gang activity in the province of Manitoba has skyrocketed over the last 10 years. During the 1990s, gang-related issues were not debated much inside the Manitoba legislature. However, since 2000 or 2001, it has become a very serious issue.

One year we had over 14,000 vehicles stolen. For a province with roughly 550,000 drivers, that is a significant number of vehicles. When we look at the individuals who were stealing them, it was young people. I had acquired through a freedom of information request that it was somewhere in the neighbourhood of 200 youth. I might be off on the number, but they had stolen, on average, 30 vehicles.

● (1605)

Out of that relatively large grouping of youth, if we were to canvass them we would find that a good number were directly involved in gangs. It was part of a gang initiation whereby they had to go out and steal cars. At the end of the day we all pay for that at the different levels, whether it be municipal, provincial or national. We have to take more of a co-operative approach to dealing with crime in our communities.

Also, the federal government needs to play a leading role. It can ensure there are some national standards, from coast to coast to coast, in proactively preventing crimes from taking place. That is what we ultimately want to see happen.

In regard to Bill C-51, the Liberal Party is in favour of this bill and wants to see it go to committee. We do believe it would have a positive impact. It would help in terms of resolving crimes. Ultimately, I do believe if it is administered properly it would prevent some crimes from taking place.

Government Orders

In looking at the bill, it does several things. The parliamentary secretary made reference to how the provinces would be able to designate their own internal programs and get that designation from the federal program without necessarily having to transfer the individual into the program. As she made reference to its merit, I do believe there is great benefit to that, the biggest being time. Time is very important with things of this nature. Processing times, being able to change identity, and so forth are of critical importance. For the most part, I believe the government would receive a very favourable response in regard to those measures in Bill C-51.

We understand it would assist in changing identity, which is something one would think would have a wide diversity of support from the many different stakeholders following the debate on this bill. We appreciate the fact that it does broaden the information that can be protected and also supports people from within the program.

However, if we take a look at the history of the witness protection program, I think most Canadians would be surprised that it does not have a very long history in terms of legislation. Most people would believe there has always been some informal aspects to witness protection, and that was primarily done at the local policing level. We can go back 30 years, 40 years, where police officers, through discretion, were able to provide assurances to witnesses. There would have been all sorts of actions taken to try to provide assurances to witnesses that they would be safe if they were to come forward and state what they had observed or what they were aware of in terms of a criminal activity. We could go back to the eighties where that started to become a little more formalized because of different commissions and reports that were coming out. We started to see internal documents clearly demonstrating the need for a witness protection program.

It was not that long ago when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien introduced the Witness Protection Program Act, the first legislation of its kind brought to the House of Commons. As we continue to move forward, we today have another piece of legislation that has been drafted that would ultimately complement the original legislation. Why? Because in time things change.

● (1610)

There is a need for us to change the legislation and modernize it so that we can meet the needs of today. The power of the Internet, the influence that organized crime has, the potential of terrorism, these are all very real issues today to which legislation has to be able to respond.

The ability of police to protect witnesses is crucial in order to fight crime and acts of terrorism. If we cannot provide those assurances to witnesses, there is a very good chance they would be unable to testify. If they are unable to testify, we would be unable to get the types of convictions that our crowns are looking for across Canada in all provinces and territories. We have to somehow recognize the importance of witnesses and the roles that they play and the risk we take by not enabling those witnesses to feel safe in testifying. If we fail in doing that, then individuals who are committing some pretty terrible crimes are going to get away or be let off with a much lighter sentence than if a witness had been able to testify. It is of critical importance that police see this as a viable tool that would make a difference.

Public trust in the witness protection program is also vital to the success of the program. We can say that we have the program in place and ask Canadians to trust us because it is a great program, but there has to be a certain element of confidence in the program. If a potential witness does not feel the program is going to be strong enough and that their life is going to be threatened by making a disposition, chances are they will walk away from that opportunity. Therefore, building trust is critically important.

We support the ability of the federal departments, agencies, services and the national security, National Defence or Public Safety, mandate to recommend witnesses to the WPP. It seems to be a natural evolution that would be incorporated into the current legislation. It makes sense. That is why we support the government's proposed change.

We look to the government to be sensitive to our concerns, such as why there has not been a separate body created to oversee admissions to the witness protection program and what potential merits there could be if we were able to identify that. How we deal with disputes between protectees and the RCMP is another issue that has been raised and brought to my attention. The government would be best advised, between now and the time in which the bill gets to committee, to give some attention to that. In the hope that Conservatives will approach it with an open mind, I trust that there will be amendments brought forward. Through those amendments, we will ultimately see the legislation take better form and receive much stronger support.

The broadening of information that can be protected is very important. I believe it is a core base that is being suggested and we need to be able to expand that base. We support that aspect of the legislation. We need to recognize, as we look at ways in which we can improve upon the program, that the program may have to be expanded, which is, in part, a resource issue. There needs to be adequate resources to support the program.

● (1615)

I have always appreciated that through our federation, we have different ministerial conferences, justice being no different, and that there is a need for different levels of government, as they come together, to talk about this program and other programs. We should look at ways in which we could do more to prevent crimes from taking place. We do support the bill in principle because it is a good bill. It is a change from the original act of 1996. It makes a lot of sense and therefore we would like to see it sent to committee soon.

On a personal note, it would be wrong of me not to emphasize to the Prime Minister and the government just how important it is to have safe streets in our communities. During my first election to the House in the byelection, I had indicated that crime and safety was a high priority for me and that given the opportunity I would raise these issues in the House. I believe in fairness and in consequences to crimes. I also believe passionately that we need to do more to prevent crimes from taking place.

Government Orders

In debate from both sides of the House we heard members make mention of organized crime, which is a serious issue for many of my constituents. They want the government to take action. Most of my constituents recognize how important it is. I have the opportunity almost on a weekly basis to talk about this type of issue with my constituents. I put a lot of focus on preventing crimes from happening in the first place.

We talk about organized crime and gang activities, but many initiatives could be taken to prevent young people from entering into gangs in the first place. We need to look at our infrastructure, our resources from different levels of government, and have a higher sense of co-operation in terms of finding alternatives that would engage our young people and stop them from getting involved in gang activities. Young people get involved in gang activities for a multitude of different reasons. In the 1990s there were under a thousand young people involved in gang activities and now there are thousands. It is hurting a lot of communities, not only in Winnipeg North but in many communities across this country.

If the legislation ultimately passes, we hope to see a government that is more committed to resolving the gang-related problems that many of our communities are living with today. I have confidence that our police forces across the country would use this tool well and work with our courts and prosecutors. There are many other things we can do to prevent our young people from getting involved in gang activities.

•(1620)

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to hear that the Liberals will be supporting the bill being sent to committee. Hopefully at committee they will continue to work with us to get this passed quickly. It is an important piece of legislation.

My colleague talked a lot about prevention, and I am wondering if he is aware of several initiatives that our government has funded in regard to crime prevention. First, there is the police officer recruitment fund, a one-time injection of funds for provinces to use. It was \$400 million, and they have used it very well. Police departments have added police officers. That is one of the initiatives.

Another one is our national crime prevention strategy, \$40 million. I am not sure if the member is aware of this, but he might want to let his constituents know that we are funding \$7 million annually to go directly to helping stop young people, who are maybe vulnerable, from getting involved in crime and gang activity. This is a specific fund that deals directly with anti-gang strategies for young people.

I am not sure if the member was aware of those initiatives. Also, today the Minister of Public Safety announced another call for applications to our security infrastructure funding, which is helping different organizations. If they are being threatened for a number of reasons, we are helping fund them so that they can be protected.

These initiatives are helping to stop crime, whether it relates to gangs, drugs or guns. Sadly many times the opposition does not support this. I am wondering if the member was not aware of this funding, and why he would not have supported it when we brought it forward? His constituents were actually signing petitions on this issue.

•(1625)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, the member for Portage—Lisgar makes reference to a program that was introduced by the federal government.

I would like to emphasize why I talked a lot about a sense of co-operation and working with other jurisdictions. When the federal government came up with the program to hire more police officers in communities, there was a substantial amount of money put aside to hire more police officers in Winnipeg. I do not know if Manitoba has acted on it since but maybe between the two of us we can find out whether or not they actually did. However, as of a couple of years ago, they had not accessed that money.

One could say that we need to get a better understanding of why that money was not accessed, whether more police were put on foot patrol or whatever it might be. It is interesting to note that at the same time we had community police offices closing in Winnipeg North, on McPhillips Street and on Main Street. Those are things that have happened in the last few years.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I share the sentiment that there is a lot more we can do to prevent crime.

My question for the member is not a personal question of where he was but where his party was. When the legislation was passed in 1996, it was a Liberal government. It was around the time I first joined the police board and the problems with the witness protection program have been known since at least 1996. During that very long period of time when the Liberals were in power, they took no action. I know from my own personal experience that local municipal police officers were pointing out that they did not have budgets for this and they could not make use of the program.

My question to the hon. member is, in the broad sense, where was he and where was his party? The government has been slow to bring this forward but it is certainly faster than the Liberals were.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Speaker, that is factually incorrect.

In 1993 Prime Minister Jean Chrétien took office and within three years we had the actual core legislation, the legislation that is now being amended. The Conservatives have been in government longer than the Chrétien government had been at that time. At the end of the day, the Liberal Party of Canada and Prime Minister Chrétien responded quite quickly.

What I will recognize is that in my comments I made reference to the closing of those two community police offices, something that had a real negative impact. The provincial NDP did absolutely nothing. The provincial NDP did not access the resources being provided by Ottawa to put more police on the streets. If the NDP, heaven forbid, ever form government, I suspect it would be a disaster.

Government Orders

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are having a wonderful history lesson here, so I thought I would chime in on this. I remember back in 1998, as a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police academy, under the leadership of the then Liberal government, we were told that the depot would be closed, that there would be no more recruiting of police officers. That is why into the future our government had to bring in the recruitment fund to deal with the major gap in policing numbers. The Liberals did that during a time when we knew that two-thirds of Canadian police officers were about to face retirement age, so there was absolutely no forethought or planning in that. Thank goodness we were able to recover that.

Let us skip ahead. In 2011, our government introduced crime prevention programs. The Liberal members voted against 138 grassroots projects, including in Winnipeg, in which 16,000 youth have participated.

I just thought I would add my two cents' worth into that wonderful history lesson we were having.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, part of history is reality. If we look at the actual numbers, if his programs were all so successful, one would ask why the gang-related issues of today are getting worse. They are not getting better. There are more gang members today than there were five or six years ago. If the initiatives the government has taken were actually worth the value it has assigned to them, one would think the numbers would be going down.

I want to leave it on a positive note. I suspect in 2015 a Liberal administration will make sure we get the numbers going in the right direction, and that is down. To make it relevant to the bill itself, I would suggest it was in fact the Liberal Party that initiated this whole process back in 1996, through former prime minister Jean Chrétien.

• (1630)

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, just to continue this history lesson the way I would see it, my point, which I think the member for Winnipeg North has missed, is that when the program was introduced in 1996, municipalities and front-line police said right away that there were problems with it. The Liberal government was in power for another 10 years and never fixed those problems.

I admit this is a bit of a strange debate. The Conservatives took seven years to fix it and the Liberals did not fix it within ten years, so both are a bit slow. That is all I am saying here. The member has skipped over the fact that the criticisms we are trying to fix today were well known while the Liberal government was still in power.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I detect a bit of potential remorse, if we recognize the fact that with a couple more years it would have been amazing what the Liberal Party could have done. One could say we would have had a nice national child care program, a Kelowna accord and all sorts of wonderful things.

However, history will show that the New Democrats voted with the Conservatives, which killed those programs. Ultimately, maybe we would have had this bill a whole lot earlier had the NDP not supported the Conservatives back in 2005 or whenever that was.

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will come back to the central point here. There is a witness

protection program, whether started by the Liberals or fixed by the Conservatives or finally repaired by us. It does not seem to matter, because it is underfunded. I wonder how, even between 1996 and 2006, there was not enough money to do all the witness protection that needed to be done. Nowhere is that more evident than the Air India disaster.

Could the member actually comment on that?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, it would be important to substantiate a comment of that nature with some sort of empirical evidence to show where the demand was and when it did not meet the requirements financially.

What we do know for sure is that this legislation would be expanding the witness protection program. If we were going to be expanding the program to include other things, we could anticipate that there would be a need to properly resource it. If we did not properly resource the expansion of it, at the end of the day, we would be limiting the ability of our different agencies to ensure it was effective.

Yes, we passed the legislation. One would like to think that the government would work with other jurisdictions to make sure there are adequate resources on the ground, so that we can fully utilize the program, because if we fully utilized the program it would have a positive impact for all Canadians.

[*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 hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, Employment Insurance; the hon. member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Foreign Investment; the hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood, National Defence.

The hon. member for York South—Weston.

[*English*]

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to speak to a piece of legislation that we actually support. We support the notion and the direction of this legislation, but we are concerned about whether or not this will be resourced. That is going to be the \$30 million, \$50 million or \$100 million question. When it comes time for the Minister of Finance to bring forward a budget, will he bring forward a budget that will put money where the Conservatives' collective mouths are? It is all well and good to talk about witness protection, to talk about protecting victims and to talk about reducing crime in Canada, but unless money is provided to actually do those things, they are not going to happen. To this point, the Conservative government has not shown a willingness to put real money into real crime prevention and getting at the roots of crimes before they actually happen. I class witness protection as partly crime prevention.

Government Orders

Generally, we in the NDP support the direction this legislation is taking. We are pleased that the government listened to our request to expand the witness protection program. It would be expanded to include other items such as organized crime. National security agencies would have access to this program, including national defence, CSIS and so on, so there could be the possibility of witness protection for more than what is currently covered.

We are counting on the government to provide funding. We are going to be paying close attention to the budget, whatever day it happens, whether it is the beginning of March or the end of March, to see if it will put forward the funding required to do what the bill intends to do.

The member for Winnipeg North suggested earlier that I have to come up with figures. We do not have to go much further than last year, when there were 108 requests but only 30 were approved. Not a lot of money was spent last year. It was something like \$9 million. That is a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of money we spend on crime in this country. That is a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of money we spend on jails and jets. A tenfold increase in that spending would be good for Canada, for Canadians, for solving crimes, for finding and punishing criminals. We hope and pray that the Conservatives come up with that money.

In Toronto, where I am from, several serious problems of gang violence have gone on for a number of years. While generally violent crime is down across the country, there are still gangs. The Toronto police force has a guns and gangs unit, and it has an organized crime unit that does reconnaissance, that actually hunts down criminals. I have spoken to Toronto police officers and to the superintendent of 12 Division, which is where my riding is. They told me they are looking for the ability to find witnesses. The problem they face is that witnesses will not come forward. Why will they not come forward? It is because they are afraid or in some cases it is because they have taken some oath. In most cases it is because they are terrified that there will be repercussions, that they cannot be protected, that they cannot be sheltered from harm. In the case of organized crime, this legislation would provide the police with the opportunity to offer protection to potential witnesses of violent crime in my city.

I go back to the Danzig shootings of last year where 24 people were shot, two of whom were killed, at a simple neighbourhood barbecue as a result of gang violence. The police have had extreme difficulty in finding people who will come forward and testify. The police know that many people know what happened, but there is a climate of fear and of intimidation and of it not being possible to be protected. The bill might go some way in allowing police forces to offer a sense of security to people, which they cannot offer now, particularly in the case of gang violence and gang-related crime. We suspect there is some measure of gang involvement when 24 people are shot at once and two of them are killed.

•(1635)

In addition, there is a significant-sized Somali population in my riding and in the riding of Etobicoke Centre immediately to the west. That Somali population came here over the course of the last 15 years from a country that was riddled with unrest, that had no effective government. Those people came here as undocumented

refugees. They still cannot get documentation and so, in some cases, it is still not possible to completely finalize their status as immigrants to Canada.

That community is terrified of some of what the current Conservative government has done to it since the beginning of the majority government. I am referring of course to the immigration changes that have come from the immigration minister. The mothers of those children are terrified that those children, who have only ever known Canada, as a result of falling into a bad crowd, would not just go to jail but would be deported to a country they have no connection with whatsoever, to Somalia, where it is dangerous just to be, let alone to grow up. These mothers of these boys, and most of them are boys, have pled with me and with the member for Etobicoke Centre to change that law, to fix that law, to fix that big hole that is causing their children to be in such terrible jeopardy.

Yes, it is true they have fallen into some bad habits. "Bad habits" is probably too small a word for it. They have done some seriously bad things. The mothers believe that part of the reason is that they have been abandoned by the system over the course of the last few years.

There was, put in place by the current government when it was a minority, a series of measures aimed at tackling youth violence before they got to gangs, with intervention programs, mediation programs and mentorship programs funded in part by the Minister of Public Safety, to allow community agencies to get at these kids before they joined these gangs and went afoul of the law. There have been tremendous successes in some of those agencies and some of those programs, but they are being cut back. They are being ended.

The answer we get from the Conservative government is that was a three-year program, the three years is up and, therefore, we do not need to do this anymore.

The people running the program know that the program is successful, but they also know that if the government ends the program, the next generation of kids is going to fall off the wagon. Those kids are going to end up in crime, have a propensity to join a gang and are not going to succeed.

In addition, we have had, in my riding anyway, huge cutbacks to the immigrant settlement services that were being provided over the past 10 years, to the point where whole agencies have had to shut their doors. One agency was urged by the ministry, by CIC, to sign a five-year lease. Six months later, after it signed the five-year lease, it had all of its funding cut. Now it is sitting, holding a five-year lease for something it cannot afford to do.

That is the kind of event that is going on in the community now. That is the kind of reality that this community faces. What ends up happening is the kids end up in gangs. The kids do not see hope. They do not see jobs. There are not a heck of a lot of jobs in my riding. There is not a heck of a lot of choice.

One youth said to me, "I can either go work part time at something like McDonald's or some other small retailer for \$10.25 an hour and maybe work 20 hours a week and maybe make 200 bucks. Or, in five minutes, I can go on a street corner and make \$400 by selling drugs. What choice would you make?"

Government Orders

•(1640)

It was not because he was trying to give me a lesson in morality; he was trying to give me a lesson in economics. These kids cannot afford to live or eat, and they know they do not have access to the good jobs that remain in Canada. Those jobs are disappearing. The industrial heartland of Ontario has been under attack over the past few years. Hundreds of thousands of good-paying industrial jobs have disappeared and been replaced by service sector jobs, at \$10 and \$12 an hour. No one can feed a family on \$10 and \$12 an hour.

I am not condoning the selling of drugs. My point is that it becomes very easy and economical for these kids when they are faced with these dire choices to choose a life of crime. We are trying to prevent that. One of the ways we hope to prevent that is by making it more difficult for them to succeed in a life of crime by making it easier for witnesses to come forward. When it is easier for witnesses to come forward—

An hon. member: Wow, you brought it back to the bill.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: We are back to the bill. Exactly. We are making it easier for witnesses to come forward, but we have to provide the resources to make it easier for them to come forward. We have to provide the money.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has published a good practices document for protection of witnesses in criminal proceedings involving organized crimes. It consists of 124 pages and is well worth reading. That document talks about how best to set up one of these programs. One of the things it talks about is funding. I am going to read part of the document. This goes back to the period 2005-06 when the Liberals were in power. It states that “the Witness Protection Program of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police dealt with 53 new cases involving 66 persons”. The cost of the program was \$1.9 million.

There are slightly more people in Italy than in Canada, but to give everyone an idea, there were 4,000 witnesses and family members in the year 2004 and the budget was close to \$84 million U.S. That is an enormous difference. That is 40 times more money for a witness protection program in a country that clearly understands that in order to defeat the omertas and try to deal with organized crime in an organized way, the funding has to be provided to protect the witnesses who come forward. Until the government actually does that in its next budget, we are going to react with some skepticism to the intent behind this bill. It is not that we do not doubt the veracity of the words. The words are there and they are good words. It says the bill should cover more people, events and crimes and the system should work better. However, it cannot work better if we starve it.

A constituent of mine has run into the starving of the RCMP in his personal dealings. He has discovered that because the amount of money involved in the crime committed against him is less than some magic number that the RCMP deems appropriate, it will not investigate. He is going to be left dangling in the breeze because the RCMP does not have the resources to investigate the crime. In his case, it is \$70,000 that was essentially stolen, and the RCMP does not have the resources to investigate a crime involving that amount. It said it has bigger fish to fry. That is the problem with the

government's funding of the RCMP: it is not sufficient to do the job the government has given it to do.

New Democrats agree with the government giving it this job, but it has to be given the resources. We cannot starve it and tell it to exist on the budget it has. It does not work that way. People like the constituent in my riding who is now out \$70,000, plus all kinds of legal bills over the years, is being told by the RCMP too bad, so sad; it is not going to do anything about it because it does not have the budget to deal with smaller crimes. This smaller crime involving \$70,000 to this individual in my riding is two years' salary for many people in my riding. It is four years' salary for some people.

•(1645)

This is a situation where the RCMP is under-resourced in many ways, and threatened with even smaller budgets by the Minister of Public Safety, suggesting they are overpaid. However, at the same time with this bill, there is a bigger demand being placed on those resources. We agree there is nothing wrong with this bigger demand. We like it. However, please put the money in the budget to pay for an appropriate level of witness protection that will ensure Canadians can come forward to testify safely in good conscience, and protect other Canadians from crime by making sure the bad guys, not those people on EI, but the real bad guys, are the people being put in jail. That is the whole point of this legislation, and I agree with it.

The other part of the report from the United Nations is a good disclosure of what kinds of things it considers to be organized crime. Organized crime is not just drug running. Organized crime, which is part of what is covered by the bill, includes the smuggling of persons into the country. I would hope that the bill would help police forces stop the organized criminals from smuggling people into this country. It is not done by putting the victims in jail, which is what the Conservative immigration bill has done; we do it by ensuring we find ways to catch the criminals. If the bill includes in its mandate such crimes as human smuggling, I am all for it.

Terrorism is one of the crimes the United Nations defines as organized crime. The United Nations also considers corruption to be part of organized crime. As we have seen in Quebec in recent weeks, there is enough of that to go around for all of Canada, and it is spreading to other places. Since corruption is part of organized crime, does that mean the bill will allow witnesses to come forward in the corruption investigation in Montreal and be protected by the government and the RCMP from fear of retribution as a result of disclosing the corruption that may be happening in that province, and may be in other provinces as well.

There is a lot to say that is good about the bill. However, I will come back to our central point. Unless we put the money in the program, it is not going to have teeth. It is not going to have the ability to do the job. We can say all we want about protecting witnesses, but if we cannot afford to do it then witnesses are not going to come forward. We are going to be right back where we started from and we will not be any further ahead.

Government Orders

Members on this side are hopeful. There may be some minor issues that we need to deal with in terms of the language of the bill at committee, but we want to see it expeditiously passed. We want this measure to reach royal assent in a hurry, so we do not have any intentions of stalling it. However, we will be paying close attention to what the finance minister will be saying in his next budget about the funding of programs like this, and other programs that are designed to make Canada a safer place.

• (1650)

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if there were a recurring theme in that intervention, it was spend, spend, spend. The NDP members stand often and speak about spending, and they have a big chequebook over there. I think they have found the magical mystical money tree because there is money for everything.

I am not aware of any budget suggestions that the NDP has sent to the Minister of Finance. We have expanded the amount of money we are spending on the RCMP and come forward with a number of very comprehensive measures aimed at safe streets and communities, but how much more money should we give to the RCMP? What is the dollar figure that the NDP feels the RCMP is being shortchanged? I am not aware that it is being shortchanged.

When we present a budget and ask the NDP members to seek efficiencies and work as efficiently as they can given their responsibilities, that is a responsible way to operate government. I would like to hear how much more money the member feels the RCMP should get.

• (1655)

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, that is a good question. I would ask the member if the Conservatives have costed the bill. Do they know exactly what the bill is worth in terms of dollars and in terms of the number of people who would be able to be witness protected as a result of the bill coming forward? I do not see a costing attached to it. However, when we are in power, we will be costing everything and will be making sure that we do not overspend or spend more than what Canadians expect a reasonable and responsible government to spend.

We want enough money in the budget for measures such as these. They are such good measures that they ought to be endorsed with a financial amount from the Minister of Finance. If it means that less subsidy goes to a big oil company, that is a decision the Minister of Finance is going to have to make.

When legislation is put forward that expands the purview of the witness protection plan, the government cannot then say that it is not going to spend another nickel on it. It just does not work.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, some provinces have their own programs, but I believe that there is a strong obligation for the national government to provide leadership. Part of that leadership means that the government would have to work with the different provincial entities to further develop the program.

Expanding the witness program will mean a need for additional resources. To achieve success in the program, the federal government will need to work with the provinces and territories to develop

the program so that it really hits its peak. That includes the issue of properly resourced funding. I wonder if the member might want to provide comment on that.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, clearly there would need to be proper accountability in terms of funding, both at the provincial and federal levels. I hope this is not going to be another exercise in transferring the cost to another level of government such that the federal government announces a program but makes somebody else pay for it. That seems to be a recurring theme on the other side. I hope that is not the case.

I hope that when we have measures brought forward to increase public security on a national scale that a national government will actually provide national resources for it. In a situation where we create a system that a provincial entity would have to follow, the province would have to consider those things. The bill before us deals with crimes that have national implications, and it should be nationally resourced.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to expand on the costing. The parliamentary secretary asked how much we would spend on it, but this is a government bill. We have not seen any figures. We have not seen how much the government intends to put into this. Yet Conservative members are asking us to tell them how much we would spend.

I think it is important that we understand how much a bill like this would cost. We think it is an important bill. We think it is something that needs to be done.

What does the member think about the government sharing information with us?

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, it has been very difficult. As members know, the Parliamentary Budget Officer has had to go to court to try to get budgetary information from the government. It is very difficult to get actual financial details on what the government intends to spend or on how it is spending money.

We would hope that when a government puts forward a bill that is clearly going to have a cost attached to it and that clearly expands the scope of a federal program, it would come up with the actual figures on the cost of the bill, perhaps in committee, and would put those figures before Parliament so that we could all look at them.

• (1700)

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, these hon. members, with due respect, and I am sure with great intentions, have kind of missed the mark on this.

We are talking about the witness protection program and the legislative changes that have to be made to it. Nobody is asking for more money. The RCMP is not asking for more money. It spends about \$9 million a year.

An hon. member: How much more money—

Ms. Candice Bergen: The member did not listen to my hon. colleague's question, and that is okay.

Government Orders

We are talking about the witness protection program administered by the RCMP. It costs the RCMP about \$9 million a year. The range of entries into this program varies. For example, the year before last, there were 16 admissions. The following year, there were 30 admissions. It changes all the time. The RCMP does a great job of budgeting, and within its operational budget, it is prepared for this legislative change.

Let us start with this premise. It seems that there is no issue the NDP would not throw money at, whether it is needed or not. Nobody is asking for more money. The RCMP is not asking for more money. It is asking for legislative changes. Police officers and provinces are asking for these changes. We have responded.

We appreciate the support and the comments from the critics for public safety for the NDP and the Liberals. We understand that they may have some concerns coming to committee.

I am very happy that other members are speaking to this bill, but some are getting way off topic in terms of cost. Have those members consulted any of their constituents with regard to the witness protection program and these necessary changes?

Again, nobody is asking for more money for this. No more money is needed.

Mr. Mike Sullivan: Mr. Speaker, there were 108 requests, and only 30 were granted. I would hope that this was not because there was not enough money. What this line of discussion is about is whether there will be enough money for the significant expansion of the scope of the witness protection program.

The RCMP's own website states that “[t]here are instances when the costs of witness protection may impede investigations, particularly for smaller law enforcement agencies”. The costs means budget.

Whether or not the RCMP has its hand out asking for more money, it is up to us as parliamentarians to determine how the expansion of this service, the witness protection program, will actually be funded. If it costs more than \$9 million, does that mean that there are going to be fewer police officers in Esquimalt? Is that how it is going to be funded?

I would like to know where the money is going to come from. If it is not going to come from a redirection of priorities by the government, from something into public safety, then we would like to know how it is going to happen.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will share my time with the member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River.

In addition to telling us about the nature of our world and our origins, astrology also serves as a wonderful time marker. Much like two orbits crossing, on this rare occasion, my opinions are crossing with the Conservative government's. I will support Bill C-51. But much like two stars that align but do not touch, I want to add that the government could do much more to ensure that the witness protection program is successful.

To be clear: I applaud this bill. It is certainly a step in the right direction. However, time will tell if it goes far enough. I think that,

after the provisions are in force for a few years, there will be three things the public will think are insufficient: the expansion of the eligibility criteria, co-operation with the provinces and the adequacy of funding.

Since the NDP called on the Conservatives to review the witness protection program in 2007, the earth has travelled around the sun six times. As they say, all things come to those who wait. All things? That is what we will see.

In 2007, the NDP started urging the government to address the problem of coordinating the witness protection program with the provinces. We repeated the demand a number of times, notably in 2009 and 2012. I am pleased that the Conservatives were open to our ideas, but I deplore the fact that the funding was not there so that these changes could be implemented properly.

Buying fighter jets is not the only way to protect the public. We also protect them by doing whatever we can to help people help us. This is the case with street gangs, for example. Naturally, a gang member would want to be assured of safety before testifying. The same should go for every first-hand witness. These people are key elements in the government's fight against threats to public safety. If the money is invested properly, I am positive that this can work.

The witness protection program makes communities throughout the country safer. In fact, witness protection often guarantees the success of an investigation. My fellow Quebeckers know something about that. Witness protection gives the police access to useful, first-hand information. It is deplorable that we have had to wait so long to extend protection to street gang members, for example. But we have had to wait a long time. In 2012, 108 potential witnesses tried to sign up for the witness protection program. Of the 108 people prepared to divulge important information to investigators, only 30 were accepted by the government. The government will probably say that those 30 people cost millions of dollars. That is true, but that is what our taxes are for.

Since coming to power in 2006, the Conservatives have increased the deficit by almost \$150 billion and reduced corporate taxes by about \$50 billion. Clearly, it is mainly about how we choose to spend the money.

Were dozens of cases closed due to a lack of money or poor procedure? That is really what we should be asking with regard to 2012.

Are we talking about 78 cases that could have been solved, but were not for lack of evidence? If the answer is yes, it was high time for action from this law-and-order government.

We also really wanted to review another problem raised by the program: coordination. At present, offences pertaining to national security are excluded from the witness protection program. We saw what happened with the Air India investigation.

●(1705)

One man, Mr. Hayer, was killed in 1998, and a number of others received threats. Mr. Hayer was therefore unable to testify, and the affidavit he gave the RCMP in 1995 became inadmissible.

Government Orders

Could this man's death have been prevented with better protection? I think so. Could the inquiry have gone further if there had been better protection? I think so. Mr. Hayer was the editor of the *Times of India*, in British Columbia. It is absolutely outrageous that we were unable to protect him.

I wonder why it did not occur to the Liberals at the time to look at the issue of witness protection a little more closely when that tragedy occurred. It is also sad to see that the Conservatives have not included more of the recommendations that came out of the Air India inquiry in their bill.

It should also be noted that in 2010, the RCMP submitted a report calling for beefed-up witness protection. It was December 2012 before we even found out about that report and a few months after that before the Conservatives did anything with it. It has been a long haul. It was high time.

The Conservatives do not seem to realize the magnitude of the costs being incurred right now by local police forces for witness protection. Several Canadian provinces have programs in place to ensure witness protection, but unfortunately, there is not enough money and federal-provincial co-operation is lacking.

Since Bill C-51 does not include any budget increases, I really have to wonder how we will achieve results that are any better.

The government should acknowledge the viewpoints of the RCMP, the provinces and the official opposition. There is no room for partisan politics on this issue. This is not the time to be dilettante. If the government wants to ensure witness protection, it must do so with all the necessary financial investments; otherwise, the proposed changes will remain but empty rhetoric.

One recommendation that came from the Air India investigation involved an eligibility process that is more transparent and requires greater accountability. Bill C-51 does not include any provisions in that regard. Why will the government not commit to making the program more transparent?

The bill contains no provisions allowing for an independent organization to administer the program based on the recommendations made in the Air India investigation report. The RCMP will continue to bear the responsibility for the program, which will eventually place it in a conflict of interest, because it will be both the investigating body and the one to decide who benefits from protection.

That said, I am giving this bill the benefit of the doubt, and I will support it at second reading, in the hope, of course, that the government will not disappear when it is time to pay.

● (1710)

[English]

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her support of this bill.

We have heard a couple of times, and again in the member's speech, that resources are going to be an important factor in dealing with this program. However, there is one thing that has been missed in all the presentations by members of the opposition. That is that appropriate sanctioning and sentencing is also a key element. While our government has moved forward in Bill C-10 to put in meaningful

sentences and sanctions for people who commit crimes, the faster removal of foreign criminals act and other like legislation, those are the kinds of things, partnered with resources, that encourage witnesses to come out.

I know, as a front-line police officer dealing with victims and witnesses, that if I am a witness, and I do not think there is a substantial likelihood of the person getting any meaningful conviction, I am not likely to move forward as a witness to testify. It is not solely the resources that need to be put forward; it is meaningful sentences. Our government is doing that.

Instead of continually pounding on the government to throw more money at it, I wonder if the member will support future bills our government puts forward to make sure that this important element of protecting witnesses and victims is covered and that we actually complete the circle by providing meaningful, appropriate sentences for people committing crimes, .

[Translation]

Ms. Francine Raynault: Mr. Speaker, I do not believe that increasing sentences will encourage people to testify.

I wholeheartedly disagree with the member across the aisle. Increasing sentences will not protect witnesses.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the member would recognize or provide comment on what we believe is the need to have a separate body to oversee the admissions to the witness protection program and possibly even something to deal with disputes between the protectees and the RCMP, which was something the Liberal critic talked about.

[Translation]

Ms. Francine Raynault: Mr. Speaker, yes, it is important to have an independent body so that the entity overseeing witness protection is not judging itself.

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for shedding some light on the subject we are dealing with today.

I could understand why, at first, she was enthusiastic about this bill. But now I am somewhat confused. The members on the other side of the House are telling us that there will be no extra money to put new measures in place.

In her speech, my colleague said that the number of people put in the witness protection program is low compared to the number of requests. At the other end of the spectrum are all of the community organizations that are working to prevent crime by tackling its root causes. They have had their funding drastically cut. It is clear that the Conservatives are singing that familiar refrain of "cuts, cuts".

How can we hope that the bill will get the funding it needs to meet its goals?

● (1715)

Ms. Francine Raynault: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

Government Orders

I do not know. The government gives and then it takes. It is cutting funding to the organizations that help people. If we want more witnesses, we would absolutely have to increase funding for the organizations that help people with problems.

When we have 30 out of 108 witnesses receiving protection, that is not a lot. Perhaps more than 108 people would want to become witnesses if they had better protection.

[English]

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to the bill today and to let the members opposite know that I will be supporting it, at least at second reading. It is an important bill. I have some reservations, which I will speak to in a moment, but I will also speak to some of the good things in the bill and why we need to get it to committee for discussion.

First, the NDP has long called for the government to enter the witness protection program and to ensure the safety of all Canadians who are in potential danger. Since 2007, the NDP has specifically called for better coordination of the federal and provincial programs and better overall funding for the program. Our demands were repeated in 2009 and again late last year by our member for Trinity—Spadina. If I have time, I will speak to that.

I certainly support Bill C-51 and the government's efforts to improve the witness protection program. There is a bit of history there, which I will also talk about in a moment. For people who are following the debate in the House and those who may be watching at home, we have heard about costing. Money has become a point of debate, and I would also like to bring it up at the risk of having a couple of questions from the members opposite, particularly from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety.

The parliament secretary has said that the government refuses to commit to any new funding. She also mentioned there were 30 Canadians in that program in the last year, but that only represents about a quarter of the people who actually applied to get into the program. That would indicate to me that there were probably more than 30 last year who should have been in the program, and the police forces could have used the program to a better end by including more people in the program.

It seems to me that saying there is no new funding for the program means that it would come from elsewhere. I suppose \$400 million a year from the Senate would be helpful to expand the program, but that is another whole debate that perhaps I will not get into right now. However, we are concerned that this Conservative requirement that the RCMP and local police departments work within their existing budgets will hinder the program and hinder a bill of legislative changes that are good.

Bill C-51 would expand the eligibility criteria of the witness protection program to include gang members as well as witnesses who are recommended by CSIS and the Department of Defence. This is a good expansion of services, but how would the money situation be sorted out when there is no new funding for it?

One of the glaring things in the bill, which I hoped would have been addressed, is provisions for an independent agency. My friend from Winnipeg mentioned an independent agency to operate the

program in one of his questions. This was recommended in the Air India report.

The RCMP would continue to be responsible for the program. That leaves the RCMP in a potential conflict of interest by being both the agency that is investigating and also the organization that decides who gets protection. There are some conflicts. I do not think they cannot be worked out, but just to make the government aware, these are some issues in the bill that we will be bringing up and talking about during the public safety committee and with the witnesses we see there.

• (1720)

To recap, New Democrats are pleased to see that the government is listening to NDP requests to expand the witness protection program. It is a little late in coming. There has been some give-and-take over the last number of years. If the Conservatives want to ensure the success of this new expanded witness protection program, they are going to have to commit to some funding. The NDP has always been committed to safer communities and one way to do that is through the witness protection program. It keeps our streets safe by giving police services the extra tools that they require to fight street gangs, for example.

The Witness Protection Program Act was first put forward in 1996 but unfortunately governments of the days in between have really done nothing to respond to the criticisms of the system. Overall, it is a positive step but we need to see if the Conservatives are going to provide the resources that really count for communities. In my riding of Thunder Bay—Rainy River, we have seen services cut. We have seen Service Canada cut to the absolute bone. Lots of jobs have been lost in Service Canada. We have seen our veterans office closed. We have seen immigration close. I do not know if the government has a good track record in terms of making sure that the resources are there to make these programs work, so naturally there is a concern about Bill C-51.

The government front benches are mostly Mike Harris throwbacks from the earlier Ontario years. That is in fact what the Conservatives did in Ontario. Downloading became the order of the day and Ontario is still trying to recover from that. I am concerned that is the direction the government might be going in.

For the folks at home, let me talk about Bill C-51 and some of the good things that are there. It proposes a better process to support provincial witness protection programs and expands the program to include other agencies with national security responsibilities. Bill C-51 would expand the eligibility criteria of the witness protection program to include various requests from the RCMP, including such people as gang members, and covering a whole new group of people who give assistance to federal departments. The federal departments and agencies with a mandate relating to national security, national defence and public safety would also be able to refer witnesses to the program. These are good things. It would also extend the period for emergency protection and clear up some technical problems in coordinating with provincial programs.

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Provinces, such as Ontario and Alberta, for example, have been pushing for a national revamp of the witness protection program for some time, including more recognition of their existing programs. Bill C-51 provides for the designation of a provincial or municipal witness protection program so that certain provisions of the act apply to such programs. That is also a good thing. It also authorizes the Commissioner of the RCMP to coordinate, at the request of an official of a designated provincial or municipal program, the activities of federal departments, agencies and services in order to facilitate a change of identity for persons admitted into the designated program.

Lots of Canadians of course would think of witness protection in American media, movies, television shows and so on. We have quite a different system here. It is certainly not as widespread or as widely used. I am concerned when so many people apply for the program and police services give value to the people who are applying, and only a few, a third or a quarter of them, are accepted into the program. I can only assume that is because of the limited financial resources that are available.

I welcome questions from my hon. colleagues and perhaps we can flesh this out a bit more.

• (1725)

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I ask a question of my hon. colleague, I just want to remind him that sometimes assuming something can make us look not as good as we should. I would caution him not to assume that the reason the RCMP is not admitting every single person who wants to be admitted into the witness protection program has anything to do with money. It has to do with the RCMP doing what it does well, which is operational activity, law enforcement. It looks at and assesses the threat, and it makes a decision based on whether an individual and his or her family need protection or whether there are other ways to deal with the individual as a witness.

I would just caution the opposition. I know today its members are really going on that line. They want us to throw more money at the situation, when what is being asked for are changes to the legislation. I appreciate the member's support for the bill. I am looking forward to his co-operation during committee and with moving it through.

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure there was a question there, but I would like to continue along the vein that the parliamentary secretary outlined.

The Conservatives have been in government for almost seven years, and in that time we have heard repeated calls from the RCMP and the provinces for change. It has taken a long time to bring some of these changes forward, and I am glad to see these changes.

As far as costs are concerned, let me just quote something from the RCMP website if I may. "There are instances when the costs of witness protection may impede investigations, particularly for smaller law enforcement agencies", and yet the Minister of Public Safety said it needs to do this within its existing budget. The reason I brought up the whole idea of costs in my part of the debate is that it seems to be a big concern.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I heard with interest the parliamentary secretary say there

was danger in assuming things. I would like to ask the member what he thinks about the minister's assumption that we can expand this program without additional resources. It seems hard to figure out how we can admit more people and more kinds of people to this program within the existing resources.

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, that was a good question. Personally I like it when a bill comes forward that we can support, at least at second reading. I like it when we can get a bill to committee where we can talk about things and pinpoint one or two particular issues of great concern if we want a program to work well. If the government is going to introduce a bill, if it is going to change some legislation, then it has to make sure it will be successful or there is no sense in bringing it forward in the first place.

If I do have the opportunity, I would like to ask the government a simple question, like one we would hear in question period. Is the government going to invest, yes or no?

• (1730)

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River focused a lot of his presentation on making the money available and on jobs. I find that ironic because he is a member of a party that has been working with some radical groups to slow down every resource project we have been developing in this country, and that is starting to show some negative results. Alberta has a deficit now of about \$7 billion. That is going to start reflecting directly on the revenue coming in to the federal government. On the one hand the NDP keeps asking for money, and on the other hand it keeps working with radical groups to slow down development of the resource sector. The member has to answer to this. He has to bear some responsibility for this.

I would like the member to comment on that.

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, my friend across the way tries really hard, but he is often confused. That was a good example of a confusing question. The parliamentary secretary was concerned about making assumptions, and yet that member was making assumptions. We are doing quite well and moving ahead with resource development in northern Ontario, thanks very much. I do not really know what the member is talking about.

We talk about money and resources, because we want to make sure that changes happen and that they happen for the benefit of all Canadians, and also so we can all work together in the House. People in my riding are constantly asking me why we do not work together in the House, why we are not trying to bring forward the best legislation possible. I am standing in this debate to say to the other side that I listen. Let us make this work. Let us make this the best possible legislation, but let us be transparent about it. Let us talk about the things in this legislation about which we are concerned.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will try to be as brief as possible.

I am pleased to rise in the House to say that I support a government bill—at second reading, at least. It is a jewel, and I hope we will see bills like this more often.

Government Orders

The government has a very hard time consulting people and developing bills that truly address the realities of everyday life. We have seen that over and over with all kinds of bills. I could name a few, but I would rather focus on Bill C-51 right now.

This bill addresses certain points. What is most obvious is the lack of money. We have heard many times in the House that the program will not be funded.

It is very worrisome that this government claims to be a good manager of the economy but cannot see the need to have resources available when it proposes changes. The government has missed the mark.

Once again, I condemn the government for failing to hold enough consultations. If it had taken the time to consult people, especially the provinces that have been calling for a new witness protection program, it would have seen that resources are needed and that the provinces need support.

The fact that we have gotten to this point today is due in large part to the Air India inquiry. The Air India bombing was devastating. Many lives were lost. It took years, decades, before we could begin to understand what went wrong and what could be learned from this tragedy.

After Justice Major released his report on Air India, the Government of Canada presented its game plan. In its 2010 action plan, it spoke specifically about witness protection:

• (1735)

[English]

Witness Protection — Delivering better and more effective protection for witnesses.

[Translation]

The bill before us today stems in large part from the fact that the Conservative government read the report and is trying to find solutions. I commend it for that.

The Conservatives said:

[English]

To further enhance its federal Witness Protection Program and address current challenges, the Government will: introduce more transparency and accountability into decisions concerning admission to the Witness Protection Program; promote the fair and equitable treatment of protectees by focusing more on their needs; and enhance the way sources of mutual interest to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the RCMP are handled.

Perhaps what is missing here is, again, financing all of these goals. It is great to list them, but it would also be great to finance them.

[Translation]

To understand what the government is trying to accomplish with the bill before us, we must go the Public Safety Canada website, which provides a definition of a witness entitled to protection under the witness protection program:

[English]

Definition of Witness

A witness is defined [by the witness protection program] as someone who gives or agrees to give information or evidence, or agrees to participate in a matter relating to an investigation or the prosecution of an offence. Generally, there are three categories of people who may need protection under the federal [witness protection program]:

agents, who are directed by the police to accomplish certain tasks in the course of the investigation and are compellable witnesses; witnesses, including “innocent bystanders” who have information about a crime and decide to come forward, or individuals who, because of a relationship with the witness, may also require protection; and repentant witnesses or co-accused individuals who agree to testify against a fellow accused.

[Translation]

That is all very nice. However, let us not forget that during the Air India inquiry, one of our witnesses was killed before he could testify.

I think that proves how urgently this program needs to be overhauled. Because of the program, a key witness at such an important inquiry was unable to testify and was killed as a result.

Quite frankly, witness protection is not too much. We must not forget that there have been expenditures under the program before us. I will come back to that because it is important. The program accepted only 30 people out of 108, at a cost of \$9 million. Therefore, for the year that ended in March 2012, \$9 million was spent to protect 30 people. For an investigation such as the Air India investigation to be conducted properly, quite frankly the \$9 million would have been a good investment at the time. We missed an opportunity to better protect people.

We have before us a bill that could help us, give us some avenues to explore and even offer solutions. It is not a bad bill. We can even applaud many of the measures. However, since the Witness Protection Program Act was passed in 1996, there have been few improvements.

In the past, the Liberal and Conservative governments did little to respond to criticisms. When Bill C-223 was introduced by a Reform member in 1999, we supported it. The NDP also wanted to move forward. Unfortunately, the Liberal government at the time thought otherwise and defeated the bill.

Once again, I congratulate the members of the House who really wanted to improve how witnesses who need protection are treated. The members across the floor will recall that the Reform Party has a lot in common with the Conservative Party. At least they will agree with me on that. A consensus among us would have been nice, so we could move forward with this bill. It is too bad the Liberal Party did not move forward on this when it had the chance.

Since then, there have been many calls for improvements. We must not forget that the hon. member for Trinity—Spadina introduced a bill on this in November 2012 in response to the problems that the Toronto area was having with street gangs.

The new bill would definitely help address these issues. It is important to keep moving forward, but we need to do so in co-operation with the provinces. Co-operation is seriously lacking. Provinces like Ontario and Alberta that have many Conservatives members—who, incidentally, should listen more—have been pushing for the program to be renewed and improved for quite some time now.

Based on the provinces' requests, the changes set out in Bill C-51 are simply inadequate. They need to go a lot further.

Government Orders

● (1740)

[English]

Inter alia, Bill C-51 does the following:

(a) provide for the designation of a provincial or municipal witness protection program so that certain provisions of that Act apply to such a program; (b) authorize the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to coordinate, at the request of an official of a designated provincial or municipal program, the activities of federal departments, agencies and services in order to facilitate a change of identity for persons admitted to the designated program....

[Translation]

What I was saying is that the person's identity must be changed. But the provinces simply are not in the position to be able to do that themselves.

But the RCMP is able to help people change their identity. They need licences, a new ID card, a new social insurance number and perhaps even a passport. Many federal documents are required. And no organization is in a better position to help these people than the RCMP.

All this is funded by the federal government in co-operation with the provinces, and that is what I dislike. It is critical that we find a way to better fund the bill before us today.

I hope that when this is debated in committee, the government members will propose improvements to the bill so that the programs will be better funded in co-operation with the provinces. The request that the provinces are making, that the program be better funded, is key.

An article was recently published in *Maclean's*. I want to quote certain parts of it that support what I have been saying and the claims from the provinces and other stakeholders. We hope to see these claims when the bill is studied in committee.

In December 2012, the Conservative government made the following announcement:

[English]

The Conservative government plans to introduce long-anticipated legislation today to modernize the federal witness protection program...

Revelations five years ago that a protectee committed murder while in the program triggered a wave of review and discussion.

Très inquiétant.

The legislation is expected to include a more independent process for deciding who gets into the secretive program, as well as improved training and more sophisticated practices for handling protectees.

Some members have sued over the program, while others have been kicked out.

The proposed federal changes follow recommendations from a Commons committee, an inquiry into the 1985 Air India bombing and extensive consultations with the provinces.

Several provinces have their own witness protection programs, but often they provide only short-term assistance. In addition, obtaining new federal identity documents for protectees requires co-operation with the Mounties.

The proposed changes to the Witness Protection Program Act, passed in 1996, are expected to simplify the process of obtaining these crucial documents and generally improve relations with provincial agencies.

Ontario and Alberta have been pushing for more federal recognition of their witness programs as part of the national revamp.

[Translation]

I want to emphasize that there were consultations and that the problems raised during those consultations were, for the most part, related to expensive technical issues. Once again, there is no support to move ahead with what needs to be done. I think that the government could come up with a bill that better meets the needs if it were to take the provinces' comments seriously.

We would like to see a more transparent system, a system that does a better job of meeting needs for the purpose of determining who is eligible for this program. So far, this is not necessarily clear because even the government has a hard time answering the question. Still, this is a step in the right direction. We want the Conservatives to start providing the necessary resources to ensure that the current program meets the needs in our communities.

Many have stated that the need to protect people is greatest right in communities, in street gangs. We want people affected by street gangs to feel comfortable testifying so that, ultimately, our streets can be safer. To make that happen, people need easier access to this program. They have to know that they will be protected. I doubt that is the case now. I am not sure that they would put their faith in the bill before us. Once again, this bill would benefit from more thorough debate in committee.

To date, the government does not seem to have recognized that operating a regional police force is very expensive. The fact that it costs the provinces a lot of money and that no money will be coming from the federal government is a problem. Unfortunately, that is often the case with the government. It legislates changes at the provincial level or drops a federal responsibility hoping that the province will pick up the slack. Then the province has a hard time paying for a program it does not have the means to pay for. In the end, the federal government will tell people that it has conquered the deficit because it has decreased spending when all it will really have done is transferred costs to the provinces and municipalities, which will have to find ways to make up the shortfall.

The Harper government is terrified of increasing taxes. That is all well and good, except that it leaves the provinces no choice but to increase their own taxes.

● (1745)

For the taxpayer, provincial and federal taxes are all the same: they are taxes. The Harper government has nothing to brag about. I would even say that it should be ashamed.

[English]

In the provincial witness protection programs that involve crimes of a federal nature, the RCMP takes over and charges local police departments the full cost, something that many local departments cannot afford. The RCMP's own website states that there are instances when the costs of witness protection may impede investigations, particularly for small law enforcement agencies.

Government Orders

[Translation]

The municipalities I know that have their own police force and smaller municipalities with smaller police forces will find it very difficult to fulfill the obligations that the federal government is imposing on them, or at least that the bill we are studying in the House plans to impose.

Once again, it is an improvement, and I congratulate the government, but we must do much more. Unfortunately, this government has a great deal of difficulty understanding just how great the need is and how crucial it is that the need be met.

Our society is protected by the combined efforts of the federal, provincial and municipal governments. Together, we can help solve the problems we face. However, it does not help to impose new criteria without providing the resources required to enforce or even implement the criteria. The government is creating a situation that is doomed to failure. This must be avoided at all cost.

The NDP has long been calling for better co-operation between the federal government and the provinces. We are pleased to see an improvement in that regard. That being said, without the necessary funds, it will be hard to ensure that the programs being proposed here today will get very far. I think this is going to create even more problems for the local police forces, which will have a hard time meeting the obligations imposed by the federal government. We must prevent that. Closer co-operation would have truly improved the situation, but that is not what we are seeing today.

I am very pleased to vote in favour of this bill, at least at second reading, but it is time for the Harper government to start realizing that we need better co-operation.

● (1750)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. I remind hon. members not to refer to other members by name. You can refer to them by the name of their riding or by their title, but not by name.

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, you are absolutely right. I accept your admonishment and I will do my best to avoid using proper names. The members of the House of Commons sometimes have difficulty obeying this rule, because we have to speak in a strange way in order to obey it, so as to avoid addressing the person directly and instead speaking through you, Mr. Speaker. We will continue to respect this time-honoured tradition.

As for witness protection, although we began this debate as a result of the Air India inquiry, I think today's debate should focus on protecting Canadians from the street gangs that exist primarily in large urban centres, where the need is greatest. We see that. People are being injured or even killed by these gangs. It is crucial that young people be able to co-operate with police forces as much as possible, but this is posing a problem right now.

I would like to quote part of an article by Jim Bronskill that appeared in *The Canadian Press* on February 12, 2012:

[English]

Youth gang members—not just mobsters, bikers and other traditional protectees—should be allowed into the federal witness protection program as part of a sweeping modernization, says the RCMP.

[Translation]

The RCMP says that this protection needs to be expanded. Bill C-51 responds to the RCMP's request to a certain extent, which is good. However, no one seems to know where that money will come from. Let us not forget that this program is not very costly. In 2011-12, the program cost only \$9 million.

If we want to improve the system, it is going to cost a little more. The Conservatives are keenly aware of this. It is important that they realize this and that they provide additional resources.

During the committee examination, what resources will they add to their plan?

[English]

Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the few short minutes that I have I want to bring the debate back to the actual bill and its contents.

My hon. colleague, in his remarks, talked a lot about what the provinces that have their own provincial witness protection programs have asked us, the federal government, to do. We have responded to those requests. What they did not ask for was more money to implement their programs. What they asked for were some changes so that they could get identity documents changed for the people under their purview and protection. We have responded to that by saying that they could be federally designated. There is no cost associated with that. I wanted to clear that up.

However, I also want to ask my hon. colleague if he has looked at how the legislation has broadened the way that people involved in the witness protection program can be protected. Right now it is only their name and address that is protected, which is a very narrow and small amount of information.

Has my hon. colleague looked at that part of the bill and would he comment on whether he supports that?

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, absolutely, the bill includes a lot of improvements. I congratulate the government for having brought forward a number of improvements.

I do not think the provinces are in any way naive here. When they ask for more services and more resources, everyone understands that those resources do not come for free. Quite the contrary, I think the government needs to put forward a serious plan of action, one that would bring forward the programs that it is proposing and realize them concretely, but also that we can fully discuss at committee how these resources are going to be paid for.

I would love to hear the government, which always tells us how well it manages our economy, tell us exactly how it will manage to provide resources to our provinces that require the help. Again, unfunded mandates are a problem that we see an awful lot of in the United States. I would like to see Canada buck that trend and actually start working in partnership with our provinces. That is something that I think—

● (1755)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please.

Government Orders

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Honoré-Mercier.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, earlier, when I asked the member opposite a question, I said that protection involves costs. People need to be protected; they might need to be moved, professionals may need to be paid.

In this bill, the eligibility criteria for this program would be expanded. That looks great on paper, but there are costs involved. To those who say that their government has done a lot to protect witnesses and that it has tried to take action, I would say that the government needs to put its money where its mouth is. A great bill without the necessary budget to make it work is nothing but smoke and mirrors.

I would like my colleague to talk about the lack of funding, when it is funding that is needed to make this program work.

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member and congratulate her on the work she does in her riding.

To answer her question, this government does nothing but boast. It says that it is bringing in programs, that it wants to help people. But when it comes time to pay the bills, the government is nowhere to be found. It is completely against raising taxes, and it is so ideologically driven to reduce the federal deficit that it finds itself in big trouble.

The Conservative government must consider how it will pay for the programs it is introducing. Employment insurance is a good example of how this government simply did not understand that saving money at others' expense is no way to operate and no way to work with the provinces. It is just moving spending from one level to another, but there is only one set of taxpayers. This government is having a hard time understanding that cutting at this level creates a nearly dollar-for-dollar increase at the provincial level.

It is truly unfortunate that the government has decided to transfer this responsibility. It is a bad idea. I do not think that this is what the provinces asked for during the discussions. They did not ask the government to give them additional responsibilities without covering the cost of those responsibilities. This is critical, but unfortunately, the Conservative government is having a very hard time understanding it.

[*English*]

Hon. Lynne Yelich (Minister of State (Western Economic Diversification), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to the questions asked, the continued insistence and focus of the NDP members on the lack of RCMP resources, and what they plan to do at committee. The parliamentary secretary assured the House that money was not the focus of the bill but regulations.

Does the member and his party intend to hold the bill up at committee, in spite of assurances that this is a regulatory change and not about money? Are they are losing focus on supporting the bill?

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for that question but I am perplexed as to why she came to that conclusion. We are here to collaborate and to help. Everyone agrees the bill needs to be brought forward and needs to be put into effect as soon as possible, subject to the discussions at committee.

As for which party is going to be causing any kinds of delays at any particular level, I do not see how any party at this point is creating delays. The Conservative Party should be looking at why it took so long to bring the bill forward in the first place. The Air India inquiry started many years ago and the requests from the RCMP have been known for years. Again, I applaud the Reform Party member who brought the private member's bill forward ages ago, which we supported. The government had ample opportunity since to bring changes forward and it simply has not. As far as delaying tactics, I do not think they come from this side of the House.

● (1800)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member is aware that the primary purpose of the legislation is to enhance a program that was established in the nineties in regard to the witness protection program. We recognize the value in terms of witnesses who are compromised by testifying, whether it is against organized crime or a potential terrorism act. In order to get them to testify, the idea of expanding the program through the legislation will provide an additional tool for our police agencies across the country.

I wonder if the member would comment on just how valuable that is in terms of supporting our police forces, in this case the RCMP, by giving them yet another tool to use. This could be a very valuable tool in terms of being able to secure prosecutions in the future.

Mr. Philip Toone: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely right that more tools presented to the RCMP is going to lead to a better success rate as far as our prosecutorial ambitions are concerned. I have a certain difficulty with the Liberals telling us how we can improve the bill when they had so many opportunities to improve the situation in the past. I do not understand why today they are now saying this is the right way forward, when in the past, when even small modifications were proposed, they were always refusing it.

I congratulate the Liberals for finally moving forward. Perhaps being the third party has helped them realize that they need to present concrete ideas to the Canadian people. I am happy that we are all moving together and I look forward to the debate at the committee stage.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to rise in the House to speak to Bill C-51, which is intended to make witnesses in Canada safer.

Naturally, the NDP will support the underlying principle so that the bill can go to committee. However, the NDP is once again asking the government to broaden criteria for witness protection program eligibility to ensure the safety of all Canadians who might be in danger.

Government Orders

To that end, my colleagues in the House will recall the remarks made by the member for Trinity—Spadina last November. She stood up, as I am standing today, to urge the government to support the work of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and our local police forces. The federal witness protection program does not have enough funding, its selection criteria are too narrow, and there is not enough co-operation among the three levels of government when it comes to protecting witnesses.

My colleague from Trinity—Spadina also pointed out that our local police forces and the RCMP have a very hard time convincing witnesses to speak out against street gangs, a scourge that also affects my riding, Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine.

The NDP is committing to building safer communities. One of the ways we plan on doing that is by improving the federal witness protection program and giving police forces additional tools to combat street gangs. I speak from experience with the urban context in my riding, but it is just as important to protect potential witnesses who live in the suburbs or in rural areas across Canada.

In Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, the police are working hard to combat the influence of street gangs. My riding is a suburb of Montreal. We are talking about Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Uptown and the suburbs of Lachine and Dorval. Street gangs and human trafficking are serious problems in an area of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. There is a lot of prostitution, drugs and \$25-an-hour hotels, if you know what I mean.

Eastern Lachine also has a lot of problems with drugs and street gangs. Members of the Dalbé-Viau high school community, which is in the area, are afraid because people often come to recruit students after school. The police are very focused on the issue of street gangs in my riding.

When the local population feels safe, it co-operates with the local police force in order to better serve the neighbourhood. However, our police forces do not have enough resources. For local communities in Canada, strengthening the federal witness protection program will improve co-operation with local police forces and the RCMP in their efforts to fight violence and will increase the safety of our communities.

I am talking about the lack of resources. The east end of Lachine has a big problem with street gangs. However, we are lucky because the local newspaper, *Le Messager Lachine & Dorval*, publishes two pages every week where police station No. 8 provides information about crimes that were committed and asks for help from the community.

I believe this is a good example of a local newspaper working together with the police force. However, it also shows that the police force really must lack resources, since it has to go through the community newspaper to ask for help from witnesses to crimes involving street gangs. This does not happen in other parts of my riding. When such crimes are committed in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, the newspaper does not work with the police force. The police have to go out and find witnesses, because it is not easy and they are very afraid.

Earlier I talked about prostitution in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine. As indicated by a Conservative member, one who has

worked very hard on the issue of human trafficking, victims are often the ones who become prostitutes. It is very difficult to seek them out and get their testimony. These victims are afraid for themselves and their families. They do not always trust the police; they have to be sought out. If they are not given adequate protection, of course they will be less likely to give testimony.

• (1805)

Since 2007, the NDP has been asking the government for this on behalf of Canadians who do not have legitimate protection. We are thrilled that this is finally before the House today. We have been calling for this for some time, and as my colleagues have mentioned, this government has been in power for seven years. The Liberals did not take care of this matter either. We need to do something, and fast.

I would like to focus on three key points that, I think, still need to be discussed regarding Bill C-51: expanding the eligibility criteria, co-operation with the provinces, and insufficient funding.

As for expanding the eligibility criteria, for quite some time now, the federal witness protection program has been criticized for its eligibility criteria, which are too strict, because not many witnesses are admitted to the program.

According to a Public Safety report, only 30 of the 108 cases assessed for the program were accepted in the year ending on March 31, 2012. This translates into an admission rate of 28%. Since we are good parliamentarians, this compels us to really look at the program's shortcomings and ask some questions here today.

We are talking about witness protection. But the government says it is tough on crime. I do not understand. To be tough on crime, we need help from witnesses. That is the key to solving crimes. If there are no witnesses to provide information, charges cannot be laid. It is key that we protect witnesses because if we do not, they will not come back. No witnesses will ever come forward, and that will not set a good example for others. In the case of street gangs, it is often internal witnesses that come forward. If gang members know that one of their gang friends told the police about a crime that had been committed and then that friend is never seen again, it is a given that they will not want to testify.

The eligibility criteria have been expanded. Bill C-51 says the following, and I quote:

expand the categories of witnesses who may be admitted to the federal Witness Protection Program to include persons who assist federal departments, agencies or services that have a national security, national defence or public safety mandate and who may require protection as a result;

Bill C-51 will expand the eligibility criteria for the witness protection program—and I am very happy about that—in particular, by including a new group of eligible people, those who assist federal departments.

Consider the case of a person who wants to testify against an organized crime group or a street gang. Think about the stress such individuals will experience and the courage they will need to testify. Add to this the fact that these witnesses will most likely be testifying against someone they know. This is where the federal witness protection program comes into play.

Government Orders

As I said earlier, federal departments and agencies that have a mandate related to national security, national defence or public safety will also be able to recommend witnesses for the program.

Human trafficking is a real problem in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Many young women work as prostitutes, often without earning any money themselves, because they have a pimp. The documentary *Avenue Zero* addresses this issue. It raises a number of questions and paints a picture of the human trafficking problem in Canada today. The documentary was filmed in various parts of the country and ends in my riding. It is not a Quebec production as such, but the closing scenes were filmed on Saint-Jacques Boulevard in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, where a number of seedy hotels used by prostitutes are located.

I recall very vividly a victim who gave testimony to a female RCMP officer responsible specifically for human trafficking. The victim recounted how it had taken her a very long time to testify against the people who were abusing her and forcing her into a life of drugs and prostitution.

● (1810)

It makes my skin crawl. She initially testified that she did not always trust the police because it was hard for them to think of a prostitute as a victim. She stated that she was now very happy because she knew that the City of Montreal was working hard to make officers assigned to neighbourhood police stations more aware of the fact that, in the world of prostitution, prostitutes are not always the criminals, but rather the victims.

She explained how she needed a lot of time and courage, how she feared for her life, and for the lives of her sister and parents. She had to go to the police, but that was hard to do without being spotted. Once she arrived at the station, she had to tell everything she knew and the police recorded it all.

These actions require extraordinary courage. There is no denying the existence of vast sex trafficking networks in Canada. Proposed legislation on human trafficking is before the House right now because trafficking is going on around us and the victims require protection.

When I see that there were 30 people under witness protection, I have to ask myself some questions.

The same goes for drugs. Often, the people involved are young. The Polyvalente Dalbé-Viau is a high school in Lachine, which is in my riding. Lachine has a troubled history because of street gangs. There was once a cannabis café in Lachine. That brought a lot of problems to my neighbourhood. Since then, people have been going to the school and recruiting young people to sell drugs, recruiting young women to go into prostitution, and bullying. If nobody wants to testify against such people because there is no protection, as I said earlier, then what is the point of the program?

Another purpose of Bill C-51 is very useful:

(h) extend the period during which protection may, in an emergency, be provided to a person who has not been admitted to the federal Witness Protection Program;

I think that this is important too because the bill will extend the emergency protection period. It will eliminate some technical problems related to coordination among provincial programs.

The second point I want to discuss about the federal witness protection program is co-operation with the provinces. I think that is very important. As a number of my colleagues mentioned, a certain level of coordination is necessary, but right now, that coordination is not consistent. Ontario and Alberta have called on the government to revamp the witness protection program. Bill C-51 would allow for the designation of provincial and municipal witness protection programs so that some provisions of the act apply, which I think is very good.

It would also authorize the RCMP commissioner to coordinate, at the request of appropriate, non-political officials of a designated program, the activities of federal departments, agencies and services in order to facilitate a change of identity for persons admitted to the designated programs.

As I said, I think that is very important.

And, since the government does not seem to be paying attention, I will repeat what we have been saying all day: there is not enough funding.

It is clear that changes cannot be made and more people cannot be protected unless there is more funding. That makes no sense at all. How can the Conservative government improve the witness protection program if it does not allocate the necessary funding and personnel?

The government must invest money to bring these measures to fruition, as called for by the RCMP. Why did the Conservatives refuse to provide additional funding for this program? No one knows.

It will be very difficult for local police forces and the RCMP to work with the existing budget and effectively manage the growing demand for this program.

● (1815)

If I recall correctly, the current program cost \$9 million during the 2012 fiscal year, which is not that expensive. However, if we want to protect people, we have to allocate the money needed. One plus one equals two. This will put a huge operational burden on witness protection groups.

As my colleague and friend mentioned earlier, it is difficult for local police forces to set budgets for protecting witnesses. The context varies from one city to the next. A city like mine, Lachine, has lots of expenses related to all kinds of other things. In my opinion, based on the new criteria, many witnesses will be accepted into the program. We cannot keep accepting people and then refuse to pay for them. That makes no sense. Perhaps the Conservatives do not realize how much money this could cost.

The RCMP website states the following:

There are instances when the costs of witness protection may impede investigations, particularly for smaller law enforcement agencies.

The RCMP website states that, under the current criteria, there is not enough money to conduct in-depth investigations. There is a shortage of witnesses and no money to protect them.

Government Orders

Today, the Conservative government is telling us that it will admit more witnesses because it is expanding its criteria. That is a good thing; I agree. It is a step in the right direction. But they are telling us that they will admit more witnesses without providing more money. That does not make sense.

We are also concerned about transparency. In May 2010, the RCMP submitted a report to the Minister of Public Safety in which it requested that the witness protection program be enhanced. We were never informed of this. We managed to obtain a copy of this report in December 2012 through the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act.

The government has difficulty being transparent and this is another prime example of that.

In conclusion, this is definitely a positive piece of legislation. I am very pleased that the criteria are being expanded. I believe that protecting victims is the most important consideration in these cases but that this is an area that needs improvement, as proven by the fact that only 30 witnesses were admitted to the program in 2012. If we want to punish crime, we must first be in a position to call witnesses in order to ensure that a crime was indeed committed and that the investigation will be conducted efficiently. In my opinion, it will be difficult to use these new tools without the necessary funding. When the bill is studied in committee, I hope that the government will be open to discussing the possibility of making amendments.

Today, the parliamentary secretary often repeated that the objective of the bill is to expand the criteria. That is fine, but we have to be able to use these new criteria and apply them with the help of the requisite resources.

• (1820)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have made reference to this bill throughout the day as one that brings us forward in recognizing the importance of the witness protection program. Ultimately, we would like to see it go to committee.

We had a couple of concerns or ideas on the issue and expressed those to the parliamentary secretary in hopes that the government would be open to ideas that might improve the legislation. One is the possibility of having a separate body created to oversee admission to the witness protection program. The second is a mechanism to deal with disputes between protectees and the RCMP.

Could the member provide some comment on those two thoughts?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for the question.

When a Liberal member rises and says that we should create an independent organization to protect witnesses, I immediately have to wonder why this has not been done in the past. The Liberals were in power long enough to do something about it.

That said, if the Liberals propose this in committee, although I am unfortunately not a member of that committee, my NDP colleagues will definitely question the witnesses in that regard and try to ensure that better decisions are made.

We support this bill at this time, so that it can be sent to committee for further examination. I am sure that everyone will be open to these kinds of things.

[*English*]

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question to my hon. colleague is with respect to the fact that parliamentary secretary after parliamentary secretary stands in the House and asks the NDP to applaud the work the Conservative government is doing. To this point the New Democrats have said good job on bringing witness protection measures forward, but, first, what took so long, and, second, we know the three important aspects of the witness protection program are the eligibility criteria, support to the provinces and funding. We see that the first two are being addressed somewhat in this bill.

The government is addressing some of the concerns raised in the Air India inquiry, as well as by the RCMP and the provinces, but how does my colleague from Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine think the government plans to fund them when there are no concrete measures in this bill for funding allocations?

• (1825)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her very relevant question.

My speech had three main points, one of which was co-operation with the provinces. I think this aspect will be improved. Another point was expanding the eligibility criteria for witnesses, and this aspect has been improved considerably.

In the case of Air India, one witness was ready to testify, but unfortunately he died. So, there were no more witnesses, because people were afraid. That is normal.

I am trying to imagine what it would be like to be young and get caught up in a street gang. By all accounts, if I were to testify and denounce someone, I would need to be absolutely certain that I would be protected. It is extremely stressful; it would take a lot of courage to do it.

It is important to provide the tools needed. It would not require much funding. We could compare this to other government spending: for instance, one minister orders photo ops that cost millions of dollars, while another uses a helicopter like a taxi cab. Then the Conservatives tell me there is not enough money to protect witnesses. Come on. What country are we living in?

To answer my colleague's question, there are flaws. The RCMP made three recommendations. It needed more money and the government has not come through in that regard. I hope that the government will be open during review in committee, that it will move forward and invest more money in this. If we want to protect witnesses, then we need money.

Adjournment Proceedings

[English]

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to follow up on my Liberal colleague's question with regard to the commission, so to speak, that would oversee the witness protection process. I am wondering if my colleague from Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine would offer her thoughts on the importance of keeping that separate from the RCMP, in a way that does not put undue leverage in the hands of the RCMP in terms of bringing a witness forward.

[Translation]

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Mr. Speaker, as my colleague said, it is important to decide whether we want an independent agency to take care of that.

A study is absolutely essential. Witnesses can confirm this for us. Do we need an independent agency? I think so. We will have to study this matter further.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We have time for one short question and response.

[Translation]

The hon. member for Trois-Rivières.

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening closely to the debate for hours. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is no funding set aside for this program. I would be pleasantly surprised to see something in the budget, but I will not count on it.

I am very disappointed to see that the government is asking everyone to do more with less. It is asking that of us, of the RCMP, of everyone except itself. The bill does not reflect any of the recommendations that came out of the Air India inquiry, for one. That inquiry recommended a transparent eligibility process and more rigorous accountability.

Finally, what is this wishful thinking? What are the Conservatives doing by giving us this bill and asking us to find a way to make it happen?

• (1830)

Ms. Isabelle Morin: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member from Trois-Rivières for his excellent question.

That was the key part of my speech. The Conservatives do not understand the costs that will be incurred at the local level. If they did, this bill would not be before us today.

As I said, improvements need to be made in three areas. It is true that the Conservatives improved two of those, but they are basically asking us for a miracle. I am sorry, but these days we cannot do more with less. And that is exactly what the Conservatives are trying to have us believe. That is what they always say. They say that less money will be allocated, but the same services will be available and that more people will have protection with the same services. That is not possible. We can see it happening now. Ministers are telling us that everything is fine, that cuts have been made to very important departments—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order.

The hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine will have two minutes for questions and comments when the House resumes debate on this motion.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, once again, I rise to speak to a topic that is becoming increasingly urgent as we approach the infamous EI black hole.

Protests have been mounting in recent weeks. Workers are increasingly frustrated and the minister is ignoring the thousands of people across Canada who are denouncing this reform.

She would rather play word games to try to put this issue to rest, but Canadians are not fooled. This is not a clarification of the EI rules. It is a radical reform that poorly conceals a Conservative ideology of attacking our social safety nets and the diversity of our economy. The employment insurance program does not have overall regional economic objectives. There are monthly quotas that the investigators must meet, but that is very different. The investigators did not save \$500 million last year by combatting fraud. There were hundreds of millions of dollars saved because there were errors in the system, most often on the Service Canada end.

Statistics even show that less than 1% of employment insurance payments are the result of fraud. A reporting mistake made by a claimant or a Service Canada employee does not necessarily constitute fraud.

Will the minister agree to stop treating all unemployed workers like fraudsters and criminals?

This past fall, I asked the minister why she had decided to end the pilot project that provided five additional weeks of benefits and allowed seasonal workers to get through the infamous spring gap. This pilot project, which the minister herself deemed useful and effective, was used to get through the period where benefits had run out, but income from seasonal work had not yet kicked in. This measure had been in effect since 2004 in those regions of Canada with high unemployment rates. The government decided to implement it across the board as part of its action plan to deal with the most recent recession.

Canadians learned in the last budget that this measure would be eliminated altogether. But what will happen in regions where the unemployment rate is still high? In her answer to my question, the minister told Canadians that the unemployment rate had gone down enough for this measure to be withdrawn.

This pilot project was created to support regional economies that rely on seasonal employment sectors, primarily regions in eastern Canada. Let us therefore follow through on the minister's logic and look at the facts.

Adjournment Proceedings

Between January 6 and February 9, 2013, the unemployment rate in certain regions was up to 17.3% in Newfoundland and Labrador, 11.2% in Prince Edward Island, 10.9% in western Nova Scotia, 16.2% in eastern Nova Scotia, 13% in Charlottetown, 17.6% in Restigouche, and so on. Although the Canadian unemployment rate is 7% right now, how can the minister not take into account the regional differences, the seasonal nature of work in the regions and the fact that many regions are facing a high unemployment rate, as I just described?

Does the minister believe that those rates are low enough to permanently abolish a pilot project that was helping Canadian families to get through the off-season without starving to death?

•(1835)

[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 am pleased to respond to the hon. member regarding her concerns about employment insurance and seasonal workers.

[Translation]

Employment outcomes for all Canadians is something that this government is very concerned about.

[English]

Our government is focused on job creation. In fact, we have helped to create over 900,000 jobs in the country since the downturn of the recession.

As the hon. member already knows, our country faces ongoing skills and labour shortages. Therefore, it is important that we make changes now to ensure the employment insurance program is working effectively for Canada and Canadians.

The fact that the extended EI benefits pilot project came to its intended end date certainly does not mean we have abandoned seasonal workers. Thankfully, Canada has some of the strongest growth in the G7. That is why the temporary extra five-week pilot project was allowed to expire.

This EI pilot program was a temporary measure. It was brought forward in 2008 and extended to 2010 by Canada's economic action plan, to help EI recipients during the recession. This project was always meant to be temporary. In fact, a couple of the regions that were covered by the pilot finished early because they had 12 consecutive months of unemployment below 8%. One of the regions under this pilot had almost 5% unemployment for a significant period of time. All EI claimants, including those who are seasonal workers, can continue to benefit from other recent EI measures introduced by our government.

One important improvement that we have made includes the variable best weeks initiative, coming into effect April 7, 2013. This change takes a pan-Canadian approach to calculating EI benefits. This means that people living in regions with similar labour market conditions will now receive similar EI benefits.

[Translation]

We have also introduced, through economic action plan 2012, a new national working while on claim pilot project.

[English]

Previously, EI claimants could earn an equivalent of 40% or \$75 of their weekly benefits without seeing a reduction in their benefits. However, if their earnings were above that threshold, their benefits were reduced dollar for dollar. This created a disincentive to accept work beyond that earning threshold.

Under the new working while on claim pilot project that came into effect August 5, eligible claimants are able to keep EI benefits equalling 50% of every dollar earned while on claim, up to 90% of their weekly insurable earnings used to calculate their EI benefit amount.

The intent is to encourage claimants to accept all available work while receiving EI benefits and earn some additional income while on claim.

As our government remains focused on jobs, growth and long-term prosperity, we are committed to supporting workers and ensuring that EI enables a strong and competitive workforce for all Canadians in every region of the country.

[Translation]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Mr. Speaker, my first question is: where is the job?

I have asked this question in the House before and I will ask it again. What is the Minister waiting for? Will it take the occurrence of serious and regrettable incidents for her to take action and reverse this measure?

Right now, thousands of Canadian families are readying themselves for the spring gap. There is an urgent need to act if we want to avoid catastrophe.

Will the minister take the time necessary to meet with people from the regions?

She needs to go see them. They want to talk to her. She needs to listen to their problems and try to really understand their financial situation.

Given her government's ill-conceived policies, could she, at the very least, show some openness, some willingness to discuss and consult with them? This should have been done from the beginning.

These people are on the cusp of a black hole. They can see it coming. They are about to be swallowed by it.

[English]

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, our government is making significant investments to help Canadians in every region of the country find work. Connecting Canadians to available jobs in their local area is vital to supporting our long-term economic growth and productivity as well as the quality of life for all Canadians.

These changes are about helping unemployed workers and providing them with opportunities to get back into the workforce.

Adjournment Proceedings

● (1840)

[Translation]

The changes we have made to employment insurance are needed to ensure that this program remains fair and efficient. In other words, these changes are designed to help Canadians find work faster and keep it.

[English]

As I have said many times in this place, personal circumstances will always be taken into consideration, and for those who are unable to find work, EI will continue to be there as it always has been.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville not being present to raise the matter for

which adjournment notice has been given, the notice is deemed withdrawn.

[English]

The hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood not being present to raise the matter for which adjournment notice had been given, the notice is being withdrawn.

The motion to adjourn the House is deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:41 p.m.)

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