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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, February 27, 2014

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, February 27, 2014

The House met at 2 p.m.

Prayers

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1405)

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING

Mr. Brent Rathgeber (Edmonton—St. Albert, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the government, specifically Employment and Social Development Canada on winning yet another prestigious Teddy Waste Award yesterday. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation holds this annual black-tie event to celebrate the best of the worst in government waste.

Employment and Social Development Canada was awarded the federal Teddy for its \$2.5 million wasted during the 2013 Stanley Cup playoffs, advertising its non-existent Canada jobs grant. If it is going to advertise a non-existent government program, why not do so during the most expensive advertising time that taxpayers' money can buy?

Despite assurances of progress from the Minister of Employment and Social Development, the Canada jobs grant program still does not exist, and I eagerly await the 2014 hockey playoffs to see if this Teddy will be successfully defended.

Seriously, I would like to thank the Canadian Taxpayers Federation for its commitment to protecting hard-working taxpayers, an important function that the Conservative government abandoned long ago.

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BRANDON—SOURIS

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week I took a whirlwind tour of my constituency of Brandon—Souris. I engaged in meetings with local veterans, farmers, seniors, small-business owners, NGOs, municipal officials, and many more to hear their feedback on the budget and the new building Canada plan.

I can report that the people of southwestern Manitoba are pleased that we are returning to balanced budgets without cutting transfers to

the provinces for services like health care, the way the Liberals did in the 1990s.

As an MLA for 14 years, I know that staying closely connected to the people we represent is the most important job of an elected official. That is why I continue to be open and accessible to the people of Brandon—Souris. To all of my constituents, my office is there to serve them, to deliver exceptional constituent services, and to connect them to the federal government. I look forward to working together so we can ensure that the communities of Brandon—Souris reach their fullest potential.

I would also like to welcome KAP executive and staff members who are here working on behalf of their farm members today in relation to the CFA convention that just finished.

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[*Translation*]

CANADA POST

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives forced Canada Post workers to accept a collective agreement that reduced their benefits and worsened their working conditions, all in the name of the country's economic security. They also claimed that the postal service was an essential service that could not be disrupted. Now they are changing their tune and saying that Canada Post can no longer afford to provide services in urban centres.

What happened to essential and the economy? The Conservatives like to twist the facts to suit their own purposes. Several cities have already opposed the measure, and the most vulnerable people, those who will suffer because of the changes, feel that the government has abandoned them once again. This is yet more evidence that the Conservatives do not know how to govern this country in a way that promotes unity. They would rather divide people than get them onside.

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[*English*]

WINTER OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I rise in the House to recognize and congratulate my constituent Denny Morrison. As we all know, Denny captured silver and bronze in speed skating at the Sochi winter Olympics, as northeastern B.C. and the rest of Canada woke up early to cheer him on.

Statements by Members

I would also like to recognize Denny's teammate Gilmore Junio, who gave up his spot in the 1,000-metre race, which gave Denny the opportunity to capture silver for Canada. This was a wonderful demonstration of teamwork and the Canadian Olympic spirit. Congratulations to Denny, Gilmore, and all of our Olympians. They have done Canada proud.

I would also like to wish our best to our Paralympic athletes, who will compete in Sochi starting March 7.

Go, Canada, Go.

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COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to recognize two generous volunteers in my riding, Emmett and Mae O'Connor. The couple resides in Sydney Mines and has been offering community service since they both retired in the early 1990s.

Unsettled by the prospect of retirement, they set out to find a way to better occupy their time and decided to start volunteering in their community. Both at the age of 80, Emmett and Mae spend their days assisting at the Harbour View Hospital in Sydney Mines, doing everything from watering plants to helping with exercise programs and reminiscing with the patients. The O'Connors play an integral part in the hospital's day-to-day operations, having volunteered more than 20 years now.

Emmett also volunteers for Meals on Wheels, the Kiwanis Golden K, and the Red Rowe housing project. The O'Connors also generously host hospital residents and staff at their cabin in Cape Breton every summer.

Emmett and Mae are two of our community's longest serving and most celebrated volunteers. They have set a true example for all Canadians, and it is my great pleasure to recognize their contribution before all members today.

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UKRAINE

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, twice in 10 years I stood on stage in Ukraine's Independence Square speaking to hundreds of thousands gathered in revolt against, ironically, the very same president, Yanukovich, for the same reason: cheating Ukrainians of their democratic rights. This revolution, though, had one important difference: linguistic inclusivity. Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking people all gathered together with one voice of protest at Euromaidan, representing eastern Ukraine, western Ukraine, the Crimea, representing linguistic national unity.

As Ukraine's parliament guides the path of the nation's future, may they project a positive message of national consultation to address all concerns of linguistic inclusion to forge a common agreement. Language is the heart and soul of the person, of the family, of the community, and of well-being. Excluding a community or region's first spoken language in governance would needlessly divide. Linguistic fairness is essential as Ukrainians journey together through the national challenges that lie ahead.

Slava Ukraini.

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●(1410)

CANADA POST

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I and my colleague from Vancouver Kingsway recently hosted a community forum, where we heard from hundreds of constituents and concerned citizens about how upset they are about Canada Post ending home delivery. They wanted to know why the Conservative government is not standing up for them.

They applauded that Vancouver City Council has unanimously called on Canada Post to suspend the cancellation of home delivery. We heard loud and clear about the safety concerns and the impact on small businesses, seniors, and people with disabilities. People expressed strong support for their letter carriers, who play a critical role in keeping our neighbourhoods safe. My 93-year-old mother Margaret, who lives alone, supports her letter carrier. Margaret knows there is no evidence to eliminate this important service. It is a further erosion of public services driven by a political agenda.

Our community has joined with many others across Canada who say no to the elimination of home delivery.

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WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to congratulate Larisa Yurkiw on her recent performance at the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia. Larisa is a Canadian skier from Owen Sound who specializes in women's downhill alpine skiing and women's super-G races.

Following a devastating knee injury in 2010, she was cut from the Canadian team and was on her own to fundraise her way to Sochi. Larisa worked hard and qualified for the Olympics with a career-best run. She fundraised on her own, just so she could don the red and white and represent Canada in Sochi.

At the games, Larisa raced hard and in the women's downhill race finished only 1.86 seconds off the gold medal winning time. What an effort. Larisa's performance at the games was incredible. She worked so hard to even be there and has shown all Canadians that anything is possible when one sets one's mind to it.

I speak for all Canadians in saying that we are truly proud of all she has accomplished.

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PICKERING AIRPORT

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to quote the Mayor of Pickering, Dave Ryan, who stated:

We thank the Government of Canada for bringing 40 years of indecision to an end; and providing clear direction on the Pickering airport.

Moving forward, the City of Pickering and its residents ask that the Government of Canada employ an open and transparent process with opportunities to share, analyze and comment on relevant documents and decision-making on the use of the federal airport lands.

The City of Pickering and Durham Region have constructed their infrastructure to support the development of the Seaton lands, which will see housing for 60,000 people and some 30,000 jobs materialize over the next 10 years. With this in place, infrastructure for Seaton is sized to accommodate the future Pickering airport.

There is a desire in the city of Pickering to move ahead with this project.

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INTERNSHIPS

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday in Toronto, a group of students made their voices heard around the issue of unpaid internships, and I would like to applaud their engagement and courage. Their intervention underlines a disturbing reality for many young people across the country.

These days, the chips are stacked against them. They graduate with record student debt, only to find that those jobs that a generation ago were entry level positions are now unpaid internships; unpaid. Today, we are asking young people to work for free. There are many excellent internship programs out there, but due to a lack of clear rules in some parts of the country and a lack of enforcement in other parts of the country, large and very profitable corporations at times exploit young people's desperation for jobs and do not pay them anything.

It is why I am proud to stand with my NDP colleagues here in the House of Commons and the NDP provincial member for Davenport, Jonah Schein, to call on the federal government and governments across the country to tighten and enforce the rules for unpaid internships. Making a young person work for free is not fair and it is oftentimes illegal.

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THE BUDGET

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with last night's budget vote only our Conservative government stands with Windsor and Essex: \$631 million for DRIC, \$500 million more for the auto industry, \$305 million for rural broadband, help for apprenticeships and youth internships, and priority public service hiring and enhanced benefits for our veterans.

Now, while Windsor's mayor praised this budget, the NDP MP for Windsor West called these measures bad for Canada. Reports have it this MP was recently in D.C.

Did he tell Congress members he voted against funding a new bridge to the U.S., against helping Michigan with the DRIC, against a project to deliver thousands of U.S. and Canadian jobs, using U.S. and Canadian steel? I think not.

This record is an offence to America and a disgrace in Windsor. Windsor residents deserve more than just lip service. While Windsor's two NDP MPs serve their leader, our leader and this government are serving the people of Windsor and Essex.

Statements by Members

● (1415)

[Translation]

PIERRE ELLIOTT TRUDEAU AIRPORT

Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the financial performance of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Airport is worrisome.

Over the past four years, it has fallen to fourth on the list of Canada's busiest airports, behind Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary. There are currently no direct flights between Montreal and large cities in South America or Asia, even though those are growing markets.

[English]

The federal government has not paid enough attention to Trudeau airport in the last few years. Trudeau airport should not be just another transit airport. An economic decision based on the value of opening up connections to these markets must be made.

This means more people flying out of Trudeau airport directly to destinations such as Shanghai, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires.

An increase in the number of such direct flights is absolutely necessary. We can do this while respecting the health of those citizens surrounding the airport.

The Government of Canada must act now.

* * *

JUSTICE

Mr. Robert Goguen (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, every day in Canada, children are the victims of sexual abuse.

[Translation]

Sexual abuse of children causes unimaginable harm and may have serious consequences that affect victims into adulthood and throughout their lives.

Yesterday, the Minister of Justice introduced comprehensive legislation to crack down on predators who exploit and abuse children.

[English]

The tougher penalties for child predators act will ensure that offenders receive prison sentences that better reflect the serious nature of these crimes.

A key aspect of this legislation is not only mandatory sentencing but consecutive sentencing for those who victimize more than one child. This means no more discounts for those who are convicted of multiple offences.

This is in stark contrast to the Liberal leader, who said that he would not rule out repealing mandatory sentences for anyone.

On this side of the House, we believe that people who sexually abuse a child should go to jail. I call upon all members, and especially the Liberal leader to support this vital piece of legislation, and further protect our children and communities.

*Statements by Members***HIS HIGHNESS THE AGA KHAN**

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we were truly fortunate to welcome and hear a moving speech from His Highness the Aga Khan, a man whose great example of compassion, tolerance, inclusiveness, and respect for human dignity inspires not only the thousands of Ismaili Muslims here in Canada and millions more around the world, but all people across the globe, myself proudly among them.

In his 57 years as the Aga Khan, he has sought to highlight the importance of humanitarianism, the necessity for education and development far and wide, and the absolute need for understanding that different cultures, religions, and languages are not a threat but a gift.

Here in Canada, we strive to meet his example. It is a sign of his deep esteem for Canada that the Aga Khan established his Global Centre for Pluralism here in Canada. That he was awarded honorary Canadian citizenship in 2010 is a sign of our deep esteem for him.

On behalf of the Liberal caucus and all members of this House, I wish to extend my sincerest thanks to His Holiness the Aga Khan for honouring us today.

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THE SENATE

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, back in early November, just before the Liberal leader praised China's basic dictatorship, he publicly stated that his unelected and unaccountable senators voted freely.

Then, in another unbelievable twist, the Liberal leader stated the Liberal senators were no more. They were booted from the party, no longer welcome to fundraise or engage in Liberal political activities. Thus the independent Liberal senators became Senate Liberals, and now apparently Liberal senators again.

Just yesterday, as the Liberal senators turned Senate Liberals announced, in an apparent contradiction, that they would no longer have whipped votes, Liberal senator Mobina Jaffer was hitting the fundraising circuit at a new Bay of Quinte Liberal EDA.

Of course, this comes just after senators were spotted at the Liberal convention teaching their leader how to duck-and-cover out the back door. The Liberal leader's half-baked senatorial ploy is not fooling Canadians.

* * *

[Translation]

ETHICS

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are giving us a pretty good idea of what things were like during the final years of the Liberals' reign.

Conservative Party cronies such as Duffy, Brazeau, Housakos, Wallin and Gerstein filled their pockets with taxpayers' money, while fundraising for the party that appointed them.

Some will say that Liberal Party cronies are still fundraising for the party that appointed them, despite their leader's promises, but that is another story.

Let us get back to the issue at hand, our senators.

Two words: Colin Kenny. Is that not reason enough to abolish the Senate?

Seriously, why should Canadians have to put up with the Conservatives wasting public funds after everything they went through with the sponsorship scandal?

Just think of the PMO staffers who eat pizza on the taxpayers' dime instead of making a sandwich, or the former president of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation who wastes millions of dollars in taxpayers' money to promote an employment program that does not exist. Enough is enough.

Canadians deserve better than a Conservative government that disregards the provinces' wishes and uses taxpayers' money as if it were its own.

* * *

● (1420)

[English]

LEADER OF THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the next federal election is over a year away and the NDP is already waving the white flag.

This week, the anti-trade leader of the official opposition passed the pipe, trying to make a deal with the pro-drug trade, high on smiles, low on substance, leader of the third party. He was toking the flames of the coalition fire.

Everyone knows what a Liberal-led NDP high-tax coalition would mean for Canadians. It means massive spending increases, budget deficits paid for by tax hikes on hardworking families, and a reckless plan to legalize marijuana, making it easier for children to smoke.

When the high-tempered leader of the NDP is more willing to shed his party than his beard—

The Speaker: I think we have veered into a personal attack toward the end of that statement and we will move on to oral questions.

The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in order to vouch for someone at the polls, one has to show a valid ID that provides his or her name and address. If there is any evidence of fraud being committed, then one can simply contact anyone who vouched for another voter. It is quite simple. If there is fraud, investigate it. Why eliminate vouching altogether?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the NDP is factually wrong. We cannot contact the voucher because, according to page 68 of Elections Canada's own compliance review, in 45,868 cases there was no record kept of who the voucher or the voter was. That is roughly 40% of the cases where vouching is used; in other words, 45,000—plus cases where there are no records kept of the voucher or the voter. That is not fair and with the fair elections act it will be gone.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if we need to renovate our home we do not have to demolish it.

Fix the problem. Do not eliminate something that helps Canadians vote.

[Translation]

Exactly how many people have been prosecuted for voting illegally?

Yesterday, at the minister's suggestion, the Prime Minister claimed that there were cases. Well then, exactly how many are there?

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I do, let me point to the second factual error of the day for the leader of the NDP. If he thinks it can just be fixed, why does he not read in the Neufeld report where that was tried. It states:

During two of these elections, quality assurance programs involving Onsite Conformity Advisors...were applied. However, vouching irregularities still averaged 21 percent during [these] monitored elections. This indicates that overly complex procedures cannot be remedied simply by improved quality assurance.

That is a fact.

[Translation]

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have all noticed that the person who yesterday told the Prime Minister that there were cases is refusing to answer the question.

The minister cannot answer the question because his claim that there is a massive problem with fraudulent voting is completely unfounded. That is false.

Is the minister saying that the government is going to prevent hundreds of thousands of Canadians from voting because it is incapable of properly training people? Is that their policy?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the case of voters who have someone vouch

Oral Questions

for them, more than 50,000 errors were documented in an Elections Canada report.

• (1425)

[English]

Speaking of cases of fraud, according to Elections Canada, which signed a compliance agreement, there were people who used the voter information card to vote more than once in highly publicized cases that happened in the leader of the NDP's own hometown.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the fact that the only case he can cite was a comedy stunt on a TV show shows his total lack of ability to prove there is systematic fraud. That is the government's evidence for getting rid of a system that helps Canadians vote.

Millions of Canadians vote using vouching or Elections Canada voter cards. If the minister cannot say how many cases have been prosecuted, why take these options away and make it more difficult for millions to vote? Is it not because the minister wants to make it more difficult to vote for people who do not vote Conservative?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the fact that a comedy show could execute this kind of fraud is evidence of how easy it is to carry it out. He makes a joke out of the whole process when he refuses to acknowledge what Elections Canada said, that there are errors with one in six cases of voter information cards that are sent out, which are allowing people to vote more than once or in ridings in which they do not live.

There have been documented cases of violations in this regard. We are putting an end to it.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, documented cases like the bogus information from the member of Parliament for Mississauga—Streetsville is all the member has.

The unfair elections act requires Elections Canada investigators to warn elections fraud suspects that they are under investigation. This would be new.

We want to know why. Is it because most of the suspects happen to be Conservatives?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a procedural safeguard that Elections Canada already follows in its own policy manual.

* * *

[Translation]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' lack of honesty is such that they are announcing more infrastructure money for municipalities, but will reduce these funds by 90% on the first of April.

Oral Questions

We have to make investments in order to grow our economy so that the middle class can benefit. Instead of investing, the government is making cuts and pretending to invest. How can the Conservatives believe that cutting infrastructure spending will help the economy?

[English]

Mr. Peter Braid (Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would have two messages for the Liberal Party. The first is that contrary to the Liberals' belief, budgets do not balance themselves. The second is that contrary to their beliefs, money does not grow on trees.

On this side of the House, we will balance the budget by 2015, and we are making record investments in infrastructure with stable and predictable funding over the next decade. That is leadership.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is predictable all right; it is down 90%.

When a government is responsible for the weakest economic growth since R.B. Bennett, maybe the member will agree that the Conservatives clearly are doing something wrong. The only solution they can think of is to cut infrastructure spending by 90%. That is not what they promised Canadians.

Instead of planning to help our economy grow so that all Canadians, especially the middle class, can benefit, the Conservatives hide their cut as a future broken promise for money they will never actually spend.

Why is the government more interested in creative accounting than investing in infrastructure to support the Canadian economy?

Mr. Peter Braid (Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is very clear that the buttons on that member's calculator are not working properly.

In our budget last year, we announced the longest and the largest infrastructure plan in Canada's history. Since we became government, we have tripled investments in infrastructure.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities welcomes our investments over the next decade. It welcomes the fact that over 70% of the funds will be dedicated to municipal infrastructure priorities.

We are getting the job done.

• (1430)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' 10-year infrastructure plan is nothing more than a five-year cut, followed by a wishy-washy five-year guarantee for money they know very well may never get spent.

So when household debt is at an all-time high and our economic growth is decreasing year over year, the Conservatives are only promising to increase infrastructure spending in 2019. It does not matter what calculator one punches that into, it is too far down the road.

Why is the government cutting funding for infrastructure, for highways, roads, bridges, and sewer systems, which the municipalities need today?

Mr. Peter Braid (Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in addition to our record investments, an important component of the new building Canada plan is the gas tax fund.

Here is what our government has done with respect to the gas tax fund: we have extended it; we have doubled it; we have legislated it; and moving forward, we will index the gas tax fund. There is over \$22 billion for municipal and provincial infrastructure priority needs specifically through the gas tax fund.

These are record investments. The municipalities and the provinces welcome this.

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DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform keeps making the bizarre claim that Elections Canada's efforts to engage voters have actually caused voter turnout to decline, yet he has failed to provide a single shred of evidence to defend this outlandish claim.

Will the minister now table proof, real proof, of the causal link he claims exists between Elections Canada's voter information programs and declining voter turnout?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the causal link is actually with the misdirection of the publicity away from the basic information that people need to cast their ballots. According to Elections Canada's own information, 60% of people who do not vote fail to do so because of everyday life issues, such as being out of town. It might help those people to know that they can vote early. The vast majority of young people do not know that, however. That is just one causal example of how better basic information would help people cast their ballots if they had that information in their hands. The fair elections act will give it to them.

Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister is apparently having trouble understanding what the word "causal" means.

Let us see if he can better explain his bizarre comment about fake voter ID. Could the Minister of Democratic Reform table actual examples of the use of fake voter IDs? We are looking for real examples here, not ones performed for a satirical news show. Does the minister have any?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, actually, the ones that were done for the satirical show were real examples, for which Elections Canada had to sign compliance agreements with the violators who undertook them. They called it Elections Canada's two-for-one voting special. Each of them received two voting cards and each of them voted twice.

When there is an error in one in six of voting cards that go out, that is a risk to our electoral system. We will protect 39 other forms of ID so that Canadians can vote, but we will prevent fraudulent voting from happening.

[Translation]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' botched reform of the Canada Elections Act will prevent the chief electoral officer from hiring technical experts or specialists without the approval of the Treasury Board. That basically means that Elections Canada could not have hired experts to investigate the Conservatives' fraudulent calls unless the Conservative minister in charge of the Treasury Board had signed off on it.

Does the minister really believe that this provision is appropriate?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, this provision already exists for other officers of Parliament who work independently of Parliament and have to investigate both Canadians and politicians. This provision is normal and already exists in the legislation.

• (1435)

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the reform proposed by the Conservatives requires that Elections Canada not retain voter data for more than a year. With that type of provision in place, it is possible that the fraudulent calls would not have been investigated because the data would have been destroyed too quickly.

Why does the minister not want the data to be retained for a longer period of time?

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think she is speaking about the voter contact registry, which will require anyone making an automated or mass call to make, for the first time ever, a formal registry with the CRTC. That would provide data that investigators could rely upon in the event there are allegations after the fact and, by the way, so that authorities can track calls as they are happening.

That being said, there will also be a year-long requirement for the scripts of those calls to be kept around. That is a requirement that does not currently exist, but will exist in the future under the fair elections act so that we can track fraudulent calls by political impostors.

[Translation]

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, electoral reform is very controversial. Tens of thousands of Canadians have signed a petition asking for it to be amended. The Chief Electoral Officer, Marc Mayrand, pointed out numerous issues with the reform. Experts from across the country have identified certain changes that should be made.

The minister cannot deny that this reform is far from perfect. Will the minister amend his reform and integrate the concerns raised by experts and the public?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is clearly the work of a committee. We will hear witnesses and will agree to worthwhile amendments.

[English]

Earlier, the leader of the NDP suggested that it was somehow unusual that the investigator would contact the subject of an

Oral Questions

investigation. This is what the current information bulletin says: "When an investigation is launched, it is customary to contact or meet with the parties who are the subject of the complaint...". That is the current policy of Elections Canada.

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[Translation]

ETHICS

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we learned that Senator David Tkachuk, one of the Prime Minister's henchmen in the Senate, asked Deloitte auditors about the contents of the report on Mike Duffy just the day before the report was released. He also asked for information about how the investigation was conducted.

Does the Prime Minister truly believe that such interference on the part of his senator is acceptable?

[English]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said and as the Prime Minister has already said, these three auditors appeared before a Senate committee and they verified that the work they had done could be held in the highest of confidence and that the Senate could accept these reports confident that they had done their work without interference.

[Translation]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, oddly, on March 25 of last year, the same day that Deloitte told Senator Tkachuk it had a complete report with or without Mike Duffy's collaboration, Nigel Wright wrote a cheque to the Conservative senator for \$90,000. What a coincidence.

Did anyone in the Prime Minister's Office talk to David Tkachuk or instruct him to do anything in particular on March 25 of last year?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the answer is the same in French. The three auditors confirmed that the report was confidential.

[English]

At the same time, senators and the House can have confidence in the report that was tabled.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is more news on the government's interference in a Senate audit.

On March 25, Senator Tkachuk contacted Deloitte and asked what would be said in the audit if Mike Duffy refused to co-operate. That very same day, Nigel Wright in the Prime Minister's Office gave Mike Duffy \$90,000, and the very next day Mike Duffy told the audit he was refusing to co-operate.

Does the Prime Minister really expect Canadians to believe that Senator Tkachuk's interference in the Deloitte audit was just a coincidence?

Oral Questions

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the three auditors appeared before a Senate committee and confirmed that the report was kept completely confidential and that senators and the House could have confidence in the report they tabled.

• (1440)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have been stabbed in the back before, which is why I no longer believe the stories the Conservatives are telling.

I already knew that Michel Fournier, a good friend of the Liberals who was also known as Zorro, awarded a contract to repair and renovate the Jacques Cartier Bridge to SNC-Lavalin. Then, miraculously, as though this happens every day, he suddenly had a Swiss bank account with \$1.5 million in it. The contract awarded to SNC was worth an estimated \$110 million. However, we now know that this contract cost an extra \$17 million.

Can the government tell us the status of the Zorro investigation and what happened to the additional \$17 million?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, right from the beginning this government has always talked about how important it is to maintain the highest ethical standards, and it is a standard that the Prime Minister has maintained right from the beginning.

That is why one of the first acts that we brought forward was the Accountability Act. We passed that through the House to take out the corruption, the influence of big unions and big money, in the system.

We know now that the NDP leader is throwing in the towel. He is prepared to enter into a tax-and-spend coalition led by a Liberal leader who thinks that the budget simply balances itself. We will make sure that never happens and that Canadians can have a good, competent government for a very long time.

* * *

FINANCE

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Conservative broken promises are piling up but Canadians are not going to be duped any more. They remember phony Conservative promises to cut diesel taxes in half and to deliver income splitting. What about the government's failed greenhouse gas plan or its wait time strategy? What about its promise to renew infrastructure that resulted in a 90% funding cut to our cities and our communities?

How can anyone trust a government that continually breaks its biggest promises?

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we made a commitment and a promise to Canadian families, ordinary Canadians, that we would lower taxes and we have kept that promise.

Stats Canada announced that the median net worth of Canadian families has increased by almost 45% since 2005. This confirms that middle-class families are better off today under this Conservative

government than they ever were under the former Liberal government.

The federal tax burden on families today is at the lowest level in 50 years. We will keep our commitments to families.

[*Translation*]

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Prime Minister did not want to tell us who speaks for the government on fiscal policy.

Regarding income splitting, the discrepancy between the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance could not be any clearer.

I therefore must ask again: who speaks for the government on fiscal policy? It is a very simple question. What is the answer?

[*English*]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal Party continues to bring forward questions about next year's budget—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. I will once again ask members to hold off on their applause until the minister has finished answering the question. I am sure members will be happy to applaud him then.

Hon. Kevin Sorenson: Mr. Speaker, that is correct.

Only this Conservative government can be trusted to lower taxes for families. The Liberal Party continues to worry and wonder about next year's budget. We brought forward a budget this year that would lower taxes for Canadian families, that would help middle-class families. We have said that in 2015 we would have a balanced budget.

We have a good budget this year. We will have a great budget next year.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, back in 2002, finance minister Paul Martin resigned from cabinet, or was removed from cabinet—

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: Order, please. I just reminded members to hold off on their applause. Surely they could not have forgotten so quickly?

Let us allow the hon. member for Markham—Unionville to finish asking his question.

• (1445)

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, they do not like his balanced budgets.

He resigned from cabinet or was removed from cabinet, depending on the interpretation. At the time, the Prime Minister referred to this as “political and administrative chaos”, but now history is repeating itself.

Given their differences over income splitting, will the Minister of Finance be removed from cabinet, will he leave on his own, or, as in 2002, will there be conflicting stories about what really happened?

Oral Questions

Hon. Kevin Sorenson (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we committed to Canadian families that we would continue to lower taxes. We made a commitment that we would cut the GST. We have cut it from 7% to 6% to 5%. We talked about a tax-free savings account. We delivered that for Canadians. Now, over 9 million Canadians invest in their retirement through a tax-free savings account.

We introduced pension income splitting for seniors, which the opposition opposed. It also voted against tax cuts for families. It votes against the middle class. We will continue to bring forward tax measures that will help the middle class.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the tragic death of Loretta Saunders, an Inuk woman from Labrador, is felt deeply in my province, as it is across Canada and by every member of this House. As one indigenous leader put it, "There's something wrong in Canada if aboriginal people have to live this fate".

We here, the elected representatives of the people, have a duty to act. Will the government agree to call a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women?

Hon. Kellie Leitch (Minister of Labour and Minister of Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first let me express my condolences to the family and friends of Loretta Saunders.

The one thing I will note is that our government has taken concrete action to deal with the tragic issue of murdered and missing aboriginal women. In fact, in economic action plan 2014, we will invest an additional \$25 million to deal with this tragic issue.

What I say to the member opposite is that we have taken action and we will continue to do so. Why do you not stand up for aboriginal women?

The Speaker: I would remind the minister that we do not address our colleagues directly. Rather, we go through the Chair and use the third person.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Loretta Saunders was writing her university thesis on missing and murdered indigenous women when she went missing herself. Today, our community mourns.

Over 800 indigenous women have been murdered or have gone missing since 1990. It is time for us to acknowledge this crisis and for us to act. Will the government establish a national action plan on violence against women?

Hon. Kellie Leitch (Minister of Labour and Minister of Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member opposite mentioned, I think we all mourn when a family loses a loved one. As I mentioned before, we express our condolences. I express my condolences to the family of this young woman.

With respect to action, our government has taken action. We have invested in economic action plan 2014. We have invested additional funds with respect to a DNA-based missing persons index.

We have taken action. In fact, this government has focused substantially on action, and we encourage the opposition members to join us in that action.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Delilah Saunders-Terriak vowed to continue her sister's fight for stolen sisters. It is long past time that we addressed the reasons for why indigenous women are five times more likely to be killed than other women.

Members of this House and the government have a role to play. Will the government continue the work of Loretta Saunders? Will it institute a national action plan and call an inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women?

Hon. Kellie Leitch (Minister of Labour and Minister of Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think all members of this House express their condolences to the family and are deeply concerned with respect to this tragic issue.

As I have said multiple times in this House today, we have taken action and we will continue to take action. I want to commend those who are part of the special parliamentary committee that is looking into this issue.

I encourage all members of this House to join with the government. Let us make sure that we are taking action to deal with this tragic issue.

• (1450)

[Translation]

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Loretta Saunders, a young aboriginal woman from Labrador, was conducting university level research on missing and murdered aboriginal women. Her own murder, I am sure everyone would agree, is a tragic irony. We must honour her memory, just as we must honour the memories of all of these missing and murdered women.

We waited too long before getting to the bottom of the residential schools problem. Will the government avoid making the same mistake and will it launch a public inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women?

Hon. Kellie Leitch (Minister of Labour and Minister of Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government continues to take concrete action to address this tragic problem.

[English]

As I mentioned before, we all in this House express our extreme condolences to the family of this young lady, Loretta Saunders.

I will say, though, yet again, that we have taken action. We will continue to do that. There have been multiple actions taken by this government, all of which the opposition looked to not support. We would encourage—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please.

The hon. minister still has a few seconds left to finish her response.

Oral Questions

Hon. Kellie Leitch: As I mentioned, Mr. Speaker, we have taken action, in this budget alone, budget 2014. We encourage the opposition to support that budget.

* * *

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 1968, Lincoln Alexander became Canada's first black member of Parliament. He would go on to serve as a cabinet minister, as chancellor of the University of Guelph, and as Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. He was named to the Order of Ontario and named Companion of the Order of Canada.

His legacy of fighting against racism and for diversity and equality is one that my constituents, and all Canadians, cherish.

February is Black History Month. What better time is there to recognize his contributions to Canada? Can the Minister of Canadian Heritage tell the House about our government's plans to further honour Lincoln Alexander?

Hon. Shelly Glover (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. Lincoln Alexander fought for human rights with dignity, yet with unmatched passion. Canadians are rightly proud of his many accomplishments from a long life of public service.

To pay tribute to his life and legacy, I am happy to announce that Senator Meredith's bill, Bill S-213, which will recognize January 21 of each year as Lincoln Alexander day, will receive the full support of Conservative members of Parliament when it reaches the floor of the House of Commons.

I look forward to all parliamentarians, both here and in the Senate, honouring this great Canadian.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the employment minister may think a "my way or the highway" ultimatum makes him look good, but his refusal to negotiate is hurting some of Canada's most vulnerable.

The Collaborative Partnership Network provides crucial support for hundreds of people with disabilities, but the failure to reach a new funding agreement will mean the layoff of 200 disabled Nova Scotians on March 31.

Will the minister commit today, at the very least, to providing this network with the bridge funding it needs to continue its work?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. This government has made truly record investments in supporting skills development for persons with disabilities: the labour market agreements for persons with disabilities; the \$500 million per year we have given to provinces through the labour market agreement for skills development, for which they have flexibility about how they spend it under our revised proposal for the Canada job grant; the ready willing and able initiative, included in this year's budget.

Objectively speaking, this current Minister of Finance has done more to ensure federal support for persons with disabilities than any finance minister in the history of Canada.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Mr. Speaker, people with disabilities have to overcome enormous challenges and work hard to meet their needs. They should not have to pay for the federal government's stubbornness.

Organizations such as Collaborative Partnership Network provide people with disabilities the support they need to find a job and keep it.

If the minister will not negotiate in good faith with the provinces, could he at least commit to providing bridge funding so that organizations like Collaborative Partnership Network can continue their work?

● (1455)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot guarantee how the provinces spend federal government grants.

However, I can say that even in the federal government's initial offer for the Canada job grant, the provinces would keep 85% of the transfers for labour market agreements. I do not understand why the Nova Scotia government is talking about cuts to such a valuable program, when it will keep 85% of the grants, even under the initial offer.

* * *

CANADA POST

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the suburbs north of Montreal are among the first to lose home mail delivery.

Back home, the city of Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines adopted a resolution demanding to be consulted before any changes are made to its postal service.

The city of Terrebonne is concerned about having community mailboxes in its historic downtown. It fears that this will detract from the charm and heritage of Old Terrebonne.

Will the minister promise to consult the municipalities and consider other solutions before imposing draconian changes on the postal service?

[*English*]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in 2012, Canada Post delivered one billion fewer letters than it did in 2006. We also know that currently two-thirds of Canadian households do not receive mail at their door. We also know that Canada Post has a responsibility to be self-sufficient and not be a burden upon the taxpayer. This is what this plan would do.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us stay on the topic of illogical Conservative decisions with serious consequences.

Quebec mayors are furious. The new building Canada fund significantly reduces funding for cultural and sport infrastructure projects. The government says that it is making sport a priority, but it refuses to give municipalities the resources to build arenas, pools and gymnasiums.

Can the minister explain why he decided at the last minute to change the selection criteria for projects funded by the building Canada fund?

[English]

Mr. Peter Braid (Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to announce that our government made a financial contribution today to the ice oval project in Quebec City. This contribution comes from uncommitted funds under Quebec's allocation of the existing 2007 building Canada fund, under which, of course, amateur sport infrastructure is eligible.

As always, we look to provinces, territories, and municipalities to prioritize their infrastructure projects that are important for their regions.

Any province that has uncommitted funds under the existing 2007 fund can make similar—

The Speaker: Order, please.

The hon. member for Westmount—Ville-Marie.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the immigration minister spoke to media about Canadian sanctions against Russia if it interferes in Ukraine, and then appeared to back down.

Would the Prime Minister tell us whether he has taken any further direct steps to make it clear to Russia that it should not interfere in Ukraine's democratic transition process?

Speaking of sanctions, would he explain why he has removed the economic sanctions against Yanukovich and his gang that he announced barely a week ago?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if there is any explanation that needs to be made, it is perhaps by that member as to why he said the other day that the Liberal leader did not need to apologize for his comments.

Canada extends its sincere congratulations to the people of Ukraine on their new cabinet. Events in Ukraine have moved extremely quickly. The Yanukovich regime is no more, and people are achieving their goals. Because of the actions taken by this government, Canada is ready to freeze the assets or restrain property

of those responsible for the violence in Ukraine if and when the new Ukrainian authorities make such a request.

* * *

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration misled this House when he said the 14,000 Syrian immigrants admitted to Sweden since 2012 were temporary. That is wrong. They are permanent.

In contrast, Canada has committed to accept a paltry 1,300 refugees. What is worse, the minister is keeping community sponsors in the dark by refusing to tell them how many refugees they can bring in. Facing an impending refugee crisis, why will the minister not let them bring the refugees to Canada?

● (1500)

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is in fact the case that many of the Syrians admitted to Sweden were either already there when the conflict began or are there on a temporary basis for now, as they are in Germany.

Canada remains among the most generous countries offering spaces for refugee resettlement. We have recently heard the request for a larger level of support from the international community. In 2014 we will be considering that request.

In the meantime, we would ask that all members of the House reach out to private sponsors and sponsorship agreement holders across this country to make sure that we fill the 1,300 places available. They have not—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Drummond.

* * *

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for many years the Conservatives have been fighting climate change with half measures. We are now beginning to reap the serious consequences of their inaction: the acidification of our oceans is increasing at an alarming rate and our marine ecosystems are dying.

In British Columbia, 10 million scallops died before reaching maturity. I love scallops. A producer in the region has had to scale back production and cut jobs.

Do the Conservatives realize that their inaction is starting to get expensive for the environment and the economy?

[English]

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are taking action to strengthen the health of our oceans, particularly on this issue of ocean acidification. We are doing important research on its potential impact with local, regional, and international partners. We are currently considering applications for more projects to examine this important new problem. We have already made significant investments to investigate the effect of higher acid levels on scallops and other sensitive species, and we will continue to do more.

Oral Questions

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' plan to fight climate change is to deny, dither, delay, and just pray it will all go away. Well, the plan is failing, and it is hurting B.C.'s economy.

More than 10 million scallops are dead in the water around Parksville and Qualicum Beach. A dangerous spike in ocean acidification from CO₂ in our atmosphere is killing these scallops. Local producers are being forced to slash production and lay people off.

When will the government stop sticking its head in the sand and realize that climate change is real, is hurting the environment, and is costing Canadians their jobs?

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we do recognize that this is a very important issue, and that is why we are investing in the research into ocean acidification. We have made significant investments to investigate the effects of the higher acid level on things like scallops and other shellfish. My department is currently considering applications for more projects to examine this important new problem. We will continue to do the science.

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JUSTICE

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my constituents are increasingly concerned that while the overall crime rate is in decline, instances of sexual violations against children appear to be on the rise. These are some of the most horrific crimes that can be committed. The fact is, one victim is one too many.

Could the Minister of Justice please inform the House about the government's latest efforts to combat the sexual exploitation of children?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Kildonan—St. Paul not only for the question but for her leadership and hard work on behalf of women and girls.

She is correct when she states that in fact these terrible crimes are on the rise. Almost 4,000 children were reported sexually assaulted in 2012, up 6% over the previous two years. That is why we have tabled comprehensive legislation to crack down on child predators. This includes mandatory incarceration and consecutive sentencing for those convicted of multiple offences against children.

I encourage all members of the House to pass this legislation quickly. Let us unite in sending a message: "If you assault children, you go to jail".

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, sadly, last Monday retired sergeant Anderson lost his battle with PTSD and ended his life. I would like to express our deep condolences to his family and friends.

For years the government has failed to hire enough medical experts to treat soldiers with PTSD. In fact, the Conservatives' 2010

hiring freeze ensured 60 positions remained vacant. A month ago, the defence minister finally agreed to lift the freeze and fill the gaps.

Can he now tell us how many of the 60 positions have been filled?

● (1505)

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government takes the issue of member suicide very seriously indeed. We have done more than any other before when it comes to caring for our ill and injured men and women in uniform.

Today the Canadian Armed Forces have nearly 400 full-time mental health professionals and are working to hire more.

We provide mental health care through 29 clinics across Canada, and support is provided through the entire career and deployment cycle of Canadian Armed Forces members and into their veteran years.

* * *

[Translation]

TAXATION

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives claim that they are serious about cracking down on tax evasion. However, they decided to abolish 3,000 jobs and cut \$250 million from the Canada Revenue Agency's total budget.

That is why I tabled a motion proposing concrete measures to fight tax evasion, with the first step being a study of how much money is being lost to tax havens.

Will the Conservatives make the fight against tax evasion a priority and support my motion?

[English]

Hon. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are not taking any measures to reduce CRA's compliance resources.

In fact, there are nearly 400 more tax auditors today than when we formed government. Further, we have increased the size of our international audit program by over 40% and identified nearly \$4.6 billion in unpaid taxes.

On the other hand, the NDP and Liberals have opposed more than 75 measures that we have taken to improve the integrity of the tax system. We have heard nothing but empty rhetoric from that side.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today, constituents of Chatham-Kent—Essex received positive news.

Would the minister for science and technology and FedNor please update this House on the new opportunities in the Leamington area and for residents of my riding?

Hon. Greg Rickford (Minister of State (Science and Technology, and Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Chatham-Kent—Essex, along with the member for Essex and our hard-working minister of state for FedDev for all the hard work they have been doing to assist the people of the Leamington area on maximizing their economic opportunities following the Heinz plant closure.

Due to their hard work on the file, I am pleased to stand in the House today and confirm that Heinz has signed a letter of intent with the Highbury Canco Corporation to acquire and reopen the plant.

Our government will continue to focus on jobs, growth, and the long-term prosperity of—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, sadly, it has now been two months since Canadian journalist Mohamed Fahmy and two other colleagues were arrested in Egypt.

They are now on trial for being journalists. Egypt's crackdown on press freedom is clearly unacceptable, and it is time for Canada to take a strong stand.

What is the government doing to free and bring Mohamed Fahmy home, and will the minister urge Egypt to uphold the right to freedom of expression?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadian officials are providing consular assistance to Mr. Fahmy and are in communication with his lawyer.

We stand with the Egyptian people in their efforts to build a stable, inclusive, prosperous, and democratic Egypt based on respect for human rights, tolerance, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law.

Canada continues to call on the Egyptian government to protect and to promote the right of journalists, in keeping with Egypt's new constitution and the aspiration of all Egyptians to build a fully democratic country.

* * *

[Translation]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the federal government needs to stop hiding behind the National Energy Board to avoid ruling on Quebec's conditions for authorizing a reversal of Enbridge's 9B pipeline, which goes from Ontario to eastern Montreal.

This morning, the Montreal metropolitan area, the Union des producteurs agricoles and Équiterre took their cue from members of the National Assembly of Quebec and demanded that Enbridge fulfill the 18 conditions in the report produced by the Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries, Energy and Natural Resources.

Business of the House

Will the government make a commitment that it will refuse to give the Enbridge project a green light until it is in full compliance with Quebec's 18 conditions?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, an independent regulatory board will make a decision regarding this pipeline project and we will obviously respect the outcome of this regulatory process.

* * *

● (1510)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise on behalf of the official opposition to ask the government what it has planned for the House for the remainder of this week and next week.

[English]

Specifically, this week we are continuing to see the government's refusal to allow the committee studying Bill C-23, the unfair elections act, to travel, consult, and meet with Canadians and hear from them about their own democratic process. The homeless, first nations, seniors, and new Canadians are all groups that will have their ability to vote limited.

We now see the spectacle, as you have witnessed, Mr. Speaker, and we look forward to your ruling, of the government backbencher who tells tales about the phantom menace of vouching, in a ludicrous effort to give his government some backup on this bad bill. He also, at one point, suggested that Canadians could use death certificate identification to vote. That was one of the suggestions he had. These are strange conclusions. I will leave it at that, because this is the Thursday question.

When will the government actually put the member for Mississauga—Streetsville away on this file? He sits on the committee studying this bill, which is worrisome to all or many Canadians.

Finally, New Democrats are willing to confirm committee travel for all parliamentarians studying legislation and doing committee investigations if the government House leader is willing to confirm today that one of those committees, it could be the procedure and House affairs committee, could study and consult with Canadians on their democratic rights in Canada.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the members of the procedure and House affairs committee are very much looking forward to when the NDP members cease their filibuster and actually allow the committee to get on with the business of hearing from witnesses. It is the NDP, in fact, that for many months called on this government to ensure that legislation was in place by the end of this spring. Oddly, its efforts to prevent any evidence from being heard on this legislation is in contradiction to that. I look forward to that changing, now that the House finally voted on that question conclusively this week.

Routine Proceedings

I would also like to note that something else the House voted on this week is Canada's economic action plan 2014. The House endorsed a plan that sees our government on track to balance the budget next year, all the while keeping taxes low and protecting the programs and services upon which Canadians rely.

Unfortunately, the hon. member for Papineau voted against this sound budget, which received both accolades and praise from all parts of the country and diverse sectors of the economy. Perhaps the member does not appreciate the extraordinary effort that went into such a fiscally sound budget. After all, the Liberal leader does hold the view that budgets balance themselves. We know better. We understand the hard work that fiscal leadership actually requires and the hard work that governing demands, something with which he is apparently unacquainted.

[Translation]

With the budget adopted, the House will work on other legislation. Today, we will start the second reading debate on Bill C-24, the Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act. Tomorrow, we will start the second reading debate on Bill C-25, the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation Act. That debate will continue next Wednesday, if need be. Monday, we will start the second reading debate on Bill C-18, the Agricultural Growth Act. Tuesday shall be the sixth allotted day. Finally, we will resume the second reading debate on Bill C-20, the Canada-Honduras Economic Growth and Prosperity Act.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[Translation]

MAIN ESTIMATES 2014-15

A message from His Excellency the Governor General transmitting estimates of the sums required for the service of Canada for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2015, was presented by the President of the Treasury Board and read by the Speaker to the House.

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a message from His Excellency the Governor General, bearing his signature.

* * *

• (1515)

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the first report of the Standing Committee on Official Languages entitled “The State of French Second-Language Education Programs in Canada”.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present the NDP's supplementary opinion. We are concerned about the fact that most of the committee's recommendations do not reflect all of the testimony given and the fact that the committee did not include a number of key recommendations in its report.

We would like therefore like to supplement the committee's report with the following information. We urge the Department of Canadian Heritage to increase the funding allocated to future memoranda of understanding for minority language education and second-language education.

The NDP is therefore calling on the Government of Canada, in partnership with the provinces and territories and through CMEC, during the negotiation of future memoranda of understanding, to develop a strategy to create a continuum of French second-language learning, from elementary school to post-secondary institutions through to the labour market; to take the necessary steps to promote access to French as second language programs at the post-secondary level; and to improve, based on the resources available, its support for French as a second language programs in Quebec so that anglophone minority schools in that province can offer high-quality French as a second language programs, thereby contributing to the vitality of the anglophone minority in Quebec.

The NDP hopes that the Minister of Canadian Heritage will implement these recommendations in order to ensure that immersion programs in Canada grow and flourish.

[English]

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Speaker, I have two points. Yesterday I might have used a word that was out of turn, and for that I want to apologize. I am referring to the word I used, which was “blackmail”. I hope that is accepted.

However, there is a more important issue we need to discuss today, and that is what is happening in Venezuela.

Wording has gone back and forth, and I believe that everyone is okay with it. If members are not, they can stand up and say differently.

The motion I put forward is as follows:

That the House express its deep concern at the escalation of violence in Venezuela; convey its condolences to the families of those killed or injured during the ongoing public protests; ask the Government of Canada to urge Venezuelan authorities to proactively de-escalate the conflict and protect the human rights and democratic freedoms of Venezuelan citizens; that the Maduro government release all those detained during the protests, that all government interference with the peaceful protesters should cease immediately and that those people who have perpetrated the violence should be brought to justice and bear the full weight of the law; encourage the Government of Canada to play a leading role in supporting a political dialogue in Venezuela that respects legitimate grievances and differences of opinion; and to call for an end to divisive rhetoric and actions that only delay and jeopardize the inclusive political solution that the Venezuelan people deserve.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley is rising on a point of order.

Mr. Nathan Cullen: Mr. Speaker, to my friend from the Liberal Party, speaking of processes and respect for Parliament again, as he said at the beginning of his attempt to have unanimous consent, language is right now going back and forth between the parties. We are close to an agreement. I am not sure what part of “we are working on it” and “yes” he does not understand.

We agree with the principle of needing to declare our intentions on the issue that is facing the Venezuelan people. The member continues to do this day after day. I hope that it is not in some effort to be denied so that he can issue a press release. I would not suggest it unless it had not happened in the past.

We are working on the text. We will come back to the House once all the parties in the House agree, which has been the principle in this place since it was first built. If my friend would respect those institutions and that democratic principle, we would move forward on an important issue rather than trivializing it by continuing to perform, and I hesitate to use the word, stunts, but it happens again and again.

He knows full well that we are attempting to negotiate the very text he seeks to have adopted. We agree with the principle but not with the manner with which he continues to do this action. He grandstands on an issue that is important to people. We should do it better and show it the respect it deserves. I hope that all hon. members would agree with that sentiment.

• (1520)

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I would simply say, for the government side, that we had wording that was presented today that we were willing to accommodate. It was the same with the wording yesterday, which we were willing to accommodate. However, notwithstanding our willingness to accommodate those particular wordings, we believe that there is a practice here, and I adopt the comments of the opposition House leader with regard to that process and how much better it would be if we could indeed have true consensus here in this House.

We have been very accommodating and will continue to work with the evidence to try to come to something that everyone can agree on.

The Speaker: I look forward to that consensus being reached. The Speaker will then test the House to see if the consensus is there, and we will move on accordingly.

* * *

PETITIONS

CANADA POST

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to table a petition on behalf of Canadians who are concerned about cuts to Canada Post mail delivery that will negatively impact on the elderly and persons with disabilities.

My riding of Mount Royal is home to many seniors, and I share their concerns about the serious risk to their well-being if forced to walk in hazardous weather conditions to get their mail, which arguably might well violate the equality provision of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Accordingly, I join with the petitioners and call upon the government to suspend this ill-conceived plan.

Routine Proceedings

IMPAIRED DRIVING

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a number of constituents who have signed a petition regarding impaired driving and Canada's laws being too lenient. The petitioners are concerned that the laws should be tougher and that new mandatory minimum sentences for those persons convicted of impaired driving causing death be implemented.

The petitioners ask that the Criminal Code of Canada be changed to redefine the offence of impaired driving causing death to vehicular manslaughter.

[*Translation*]

SYRIAN REFUGEES

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions to present today.

One of them was given to me by Amnesty International, which is calling on the government to take action to help the millions of Syrians who have fled Syria and also those who are still in that country, where the situation is very difficult and dangerous.

[*English*]

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition calls upon the House of Commons to immediately undertake public consultations across Canada to amend the Canada Elections Act to ensure that voters can cast an equal and effective vote to be represented fairly in Parliament and to ensure that voters are governed by a fairly elected Parliament, where the shared seats held by each political party closely reflect the popular vote.

[*Translation*]

VIA RAIL

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition today from citizens who are concerned about the quality of rail services delivered by VIA Rail. They want quality services to be maintained, particularly on the Halifax-Montreal route, which passes through my riding.

We are seeing constant budget cuts, and the public would like to maintain access to quality services close to home. That would give them fair access to rail service, which is a clean and economical means of public transportation.

The public urges the government to do everything it can to improve rail service to allow for daily service between Halifax and Montreal.

[*English*]

CANADA POST

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions to table today, which are signed by Albertans.

Government Orders

The first petitions draws the attention of the House to the cuts to postal service. The petitioners are deeply concerned about the slashing of hours; the impact on seniors and those who are disabled; the loss of 8,000 good-paying jobs; the impact on cash-strapped families, small businesses, and charitable organizations; and the rising cost of stamps.

The petitioners call upon the government to stop the devastating cuts to our post service.

• (1525)

OLD AGE SECURITY

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition from Albertans expresses concern about the changes to old age security, which are hurting the poorest of seniors, who count on old age security benefits for daily living. The petitioners are concerned that it means that they will have to work two more years, at a loss of \$12,000 from the average senior's pocket. It is difficult for seniors to live in this way. The petitioners call upon the government to return old age security eligibility to 65 years of age.

[Translation]

SYRIAN REFUGEES

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present two petitions today.

The first petition is from people in the Trois-Rivières area and has to do with the millions of Syrians who have fled Syria. This is a very serious humanitarian crisis. The petitioners are urging the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to take action by granting temporary visas and increasing aid for Syrian refugees.

[English]

LYME DISEASE

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from residents of Caledon, Ontario; Barrie, Ontario; Salt Spring Island; and other locations. I am very honoured that so many petitioners are rallying for support of Bill C-442, the bill to bring about a national shared approach on the threat of Lyme disease. More Canadians are suffering from Lyme disease all the time, yet it is preventable and easily treatable if we could only share best practices and put in place the measures under the bill. It will come up for second reading on Monday.

* * *

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 Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

STRENGTHENING CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP ACT

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): moved that Bill C-24, An Act to amend the Citizenship Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, my thanks to all who are joining us for today's second reading debate on an important bill. I am delighted to rise today to speak to Bill C-24, the strengthening Canadian citizenship act. These are the first comprehensive reforms to our citizenship act in more than a generation, since 1977. Its aim is very clear. It is to strengthen and protect the value of Canadian citizenship. This was a commitment our government made in its most recent Speech from the Throne, and it is one that we are keeping with today's debate and by making this a legislative priority of our government.

[Translation]

As everyone knows, our government has transformed Canada's immigration system over the past eight years to better meet Canada's current needs and those of its economy and to ensure that it serves our national interests. Having done that, we must now improve the process for granting Canadian citizenship to qualified applicants. In Canada, the two go hand in hand. Immigrants want citizenship, and the quality of our immigration programs depends heavily on the quality and integrity of our citizenship program. We have to ensure that our policies and practices properly reflect the tremendous value of Canadian citizenship.

[English]

That is the reality that has driven this legislation, that has driven our thinking, that has driven the support that this government is receiving across the country for these reforms.

Canadians take enormous pride in their citizenship, an unprecedented pride.

Mr. Devinder Shory: Hear! Hear!

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. Speaker, I hear the member for Calgary Northeast endorsing that view. Canadians across this country are passionate about their citizenship as never before.

This government is passionate about the contribution of the member for Calgary Northeast to this bill. This has been the work of many hands, including those of my hon. colleague the member for West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country and many others who have been absolutely instrumental in weaving together the reforms that we are now presenting and debating.

Why is citizenship seen as being so important? What is citizenship in the 21st century? It is an ancient concept. Some have traced it back to biblical times, to the Holy Scripture. In many different countries some refer to the holy covenant that the people of Israel had with their God, a kind of contract between a whole people and a God that had given law, according to which those people felt obliged to live.

Government Orders

In ancient Greece, the concept of citizenship achieved a new level and a new recognition of the role of individuals in participating in the life of their cities, of their communities, of their political entities. It became clear even in the fourth and fifth century before the Christian era that true freedom, true human potential in all of its facets, could only be realized when people work together on the basis of laws, when no one person was the arbitrary master of others, that slavery was an inferior way of living, and that the freedom that underpins citizenship would be one of the primary aspirations of humanity, and so it remains today.

Citizenship is quite simply the opportunity to be at our best. It provides the opportunity to participate in institutions that have been handed down to us by generations over generations. It is a balance between the responsibilities that go with participation on the one hand, and the obligations and rights on the other hand. Citizenship is sharing in the civic life of a country, in the full sense of the word, not just holding a passport. It is not just coming every four years on voting day to mark one's ballot, although both of those are absolutely fundamental aspects of our citizenship.

Citizenship is participation in the fullest sense, participation in the needs of our neighbours, participation in voluntary organizations, participation in the economy and the economic excellence that a country like Canada has managed to achieve. These are the gains of freedom to which citizenship has opened the door over centuries, indeed millennia, and which have been achieved on a level in this country that we think is without parallel in the history of humanity.

What is Canadian citizenship? What is our version of this great global legacy to which so many aspire but few actually achieve in the highest sense; where freedom is a reality for individuals, including minorities?

In Canada, our citizenship has involved first nations and Inuit. It has involved their languages and culture, their love of the land.

● (1530)

[*Translation*]

This has involved the creation of institutions that date back to Cartier and Champlain, and to their colleague Mathieu da Costa, whom we honour during Black History Month every year in Canada. It goes back to the era of New France when people like Frontenac, La Salle and La Vérendrye set off to discover an entire continent. They were forging a vision of a country that inspires us to this day.

[*English*]

It is also a citizenship that as you know, Mr. Speaker, has striven to make institutions as representative as possible.

There was already a conseil souverain under the ancien régime at the time of Nouvelle-France, but we know that Canada was one of the first countries to establish assemblies in the two Canadas. In Nova Scotia, a representative assembly was established as far back as 1758, which was among the earliest in the British Empire.

Through the War of 1812, when those traditions were challenged and our numbers were augmented by those who had fled the United States decades earlier during the American Revolution and in the decades leading up to Confederation, we fought in this country to have not only assemblies and honest government, free of corruption;

we also fought to have accountable, responsible government. It was citizens across this country, in cities, towns, rural areas, and urban centres who paved the pathway to Confederation. They underpinned that national policy. They brought us, strong and free, into the 20th century, when the story of a larger Canada, and a Canada that eventually adopted a Citizenship Act in 1947, begins.

It is a tremendously exciting legacy. It is one that we all have a responsibility to live up to in this day and age. It is one that we are seeking to renew and reinforce with this bill.

The bill has three highlights. First, it aims to reinforce the value of citizenship by strengthening that value and improving the efficiency of processing. It would also deter citizenships of convenience and the idea that the passport is all that it is about. It would deter the idea that Canadian citizenship could be, for some, a flag of convenience without the full participation of Canadian life that we know is so essential to the success of our country.

Secondly, it is about maintaining the integrity of citizenship. It is about combatting fraud, which we have to do across our programs as the challenge of fraud becomes more sophisticated throughout modern life. It is also about deterring disloyalty. There are those who would plant disastrous ideologies through the Internet, or through other forms of recruitment, and into the minds of our young people and turn them against Canada. We are pleased to be able to report that those are a very limited number in this country, but we want to deter that kind of behaviour altogether.

Finally, as always on this side of the House, we want to honour those who serve Canada. There are several measures in this bill that would do so.

● (1535)

[*Translation*]

I would like to begin by discussing, in more detail, ways to reinforce the value of citizenship. As I said, Canadian citizenship is considered extremely valuable around the world, and our policies must reflect and reinforce that value.

I do not think that all hon. members of the House understand just how desirable Canadian citizenship is to people around the world. Many people admire us, respect us and want to become immigrants and citizens.

Among the measures in Bill C-24 that will achieve that objective, I would like to point out changes to residency requirements for granting citizenship, in other words, the time period during which those seeking citizenship must be present in Canada before they may apply for it.

These changes will promote the integration of new immigrants by changing the residency requirement from three out of the four years preceding the application to four out of the six. The bill also clarifies that residency means physical presence in Canada.

*Government Orders**[English]*

In other words, we would ask those who apply for Canadian citizenship to make that commitment explicitly and upfront, to be physically present in Canada not for three out of four years but for four out of six years. That is something we did not do before.

[Translation]

Canada's presence requirement will help newcomers better integrate into Canadian society. For people to understand Canada's social and cultural norms, they need to experience them. Nothing can replace experiencing our customs, landscape, institutions and communities first-hand.

[English]

I would like to add, before we get too far into this, that the rules would only apply after this law comes into force and after the necessary orders in council have been gazetted, changing the regulations in this respect. So anyone who is making an application to become a Canadian citizen now or for the foreseeable future as this bill moves through this House and the other place, will be treated under the current rules. I want to be absolutely explicit on that point.

As well, citizenship applicants would no longer be able to use the time they spent in Canada as non-permanent residents to meet the citizenship residence requirements. Again, this would reinforce the value of citizenship by requiring applicants to demonstrate a commitment to Canada through permanent residence. We do this for most permanent residents, so why should we not do it for all in a country where equality is such a highly prized principle, and a defensible principle in this case? Any move to part ways with that principle would risk confusing a situation that in the past has been confused and has led to abuse on a significant scale.

Another proposed measure relating to residence requirements would require applicants to declare, prior to obtaining citizenship, their intention to reside, something that I have already mentioned.

However, these are not the only measures in the bill that would reinforce the value of Canadian citizenship. A proposed amendment would require more citizenship applicants to meet the language and knowledge of Canada requirements.

• (1540)

[Translation]

We want to ensure that potential citizens can speak French or English when they apply for citizenship, which will enable them to become full-fledged members of Canadian society. We also want to ensure that they have adequate knowledge of our country.

Consequently, if Bill C-24 is passed, applicants aged 14 to 64 will have to meet language requirements and pass a knowledge test in one of our two official languages.

Right now, applicants aged 18 to 54 are required to meet language and knowledge requirements.

[English]

I must say that we are making this move because the language and knowledge requirements we have put in place so far have proven to

be so successful and popular. They have actually increased the interest in and popularity of Canadian citizenship. All of those who come to this country understand how important it is to know the place they are living and to have some knowledge of the local languages, at least during their working years or high school years.

[Translation]

Second, a number of the measures in Bill C-24 will give us more effective tools for fighting citizenship fraud and, more broadly speaking, ensuring the integrity of our system.

Bill C-24 contains provisions that target unscrupulous citizenship consultants. Under these provisions, the government will have the ability to designate a regulatory body whose members would be authorized to act as citizenship consultants. Individuals not authorized to act as citizenship consultants or representatives will be charged with an offence, and the sentences will be harsher for fraud and false statements related to citizenship matters.

[English]

As we know, this reflects or mirrors in many ways a move that my hon. colleague, now the Minister of Employment and Social Development, made with regard to immigration consultants. It has had an extremely positive, felicitous effect. We trust that the same would happen for the smaller group of citizenship consultants.

Currently, the Citizenship Act bars applicants from citizenship when they have been charged with or convicted of an indictable offence in Canada, or if they are serving a sentence in Canada.

The provisions in Bill C-24 would expand criminal provisions to bar applicants for equivalent foreign convictions. No, we would not accept bogus foreign convictions. There would be a provision by which a person who had been falsely charged and convicted abroad by a repressive regime, an abusive regime, an autocratic regime, could still become a Canadian citizen on the basis of an administrative and, if necessary, judicial review here in Canada.

If passed, Bill C-24 would also streamline the process to revoke citizenship acquired by fraudulent means, leading to timelier revocation decisions while still ensuring legal recourse to individuals.

As well, measures in the bill would ensure that international adoption safeguards are met.

Finally, on the integrity and fraud front, dual citizens and permanent residents convicted of terrorism, high treason, treason, or certain spying offences, or who received a specified minimum sentence, would be similarly affected.

Let me emphasize. This is a matter that relates only to dual nationals or to those who are permanent residents seeking to become citizens.

Government Orders

However, there is the following aspect, unfortunately, to our global reality today. According to CSIS, 130 Canadians are fighting with extremists somewhere in the world, with terrorist groups that have been listed by Canada or that face listing by Canada, some 30 of them in Syria. There is a real question for us, and I think for most Canadians, about whether those Canadians, when they are dual nationals, have not literally breached their contract with Canada. This legislation, thanks to the hon. member for Calgary Northeast, would allow us to take action against them.

I almost passed over one of the most popular parts of the bill, the measures that would make the citizenship program more efficient and ensure that qualified applicants become citizens more quickly. These include a streamlined decision-making model that would reduce the duplication of work from a three-step to a one-step process, giving the government authority to define what constitutes a complete citizenship application, and ensuring a more uniform judicial review system for decisions under the Citizenship Act.

● (1545)

[Translation]

A third group of provisions in Bill C-24 will pay tribute to those who serve Canada. One of those provisions would extend the granting of citizenship to the children of persons born or adopted abroad whose parents were working for the Government of Canada or serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. Under another initiative, permanent residents who are serving in the Canadian Armed Forces would be granted citizenship sooner. The measures in the bill will allow the government to revoke the Canadian citizenship of people with dual citizenship who are members of an army or an organized armed group engaged in armed conflict with Canada.

[English]

In conclusion, I should mention the question of lost Canadians, those born before January 1, 1947, when the first Citizenship Act came into force, or, in the case of Newfoundland, before 1949, who have not so far been entitled to the benefits, privileges, and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship.

My colleague the minister of Minister of Employment and Social Development took the most important steps to right the grievous wrong that had been left unaddressed for decades. The bill would ensure that we take the final steps to make sure that the lost Canadians, the children of those who fought in World War II, those who were among the most committed to the defence and service of this country, enjoy all the benefits of Canadians, not just in the first generation but also in succeeding generations, as governed by the provisions of this law.

We are proud of the bill. We are proud to be presenting it on a day when His Highness the Aga Khan said in the House that Canada has among the highest activity of voluntary institutions and not-for-profit organizations in the world. We think that is proof of the value of Canadian citizenship, that is proof of the dynamism of our society, and those are the grounds for strengthening Canadian citizenship for a new century, for a new millennium.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for his speech.

I think the intent of the bill, which is to strengthen citizenship, is commendable. However, Canadians and many experts are already concerned about and opposed to a number of aspects of this bill.

The minister knows that two main concerns have been raised. First, under this bill, the minister retains the right to grant or revoke citizenship without public knowledge or court approval. The other very worrisome aspect of the bill, and the subject of my question for the minister, is that a person with dual citizenship who is charged with terrorism outside of Canada and serving a number of years in prison could have their Canadian citizenship revoked.

That measure does not distinguish between someone who was charged and given a fair trial and someone who might be charged and thrown in prison, a victim of a system that cracks under political pressure, for example, or a person who did not receive a fair and legal trial.

Under this bill, citizenship can also be denied to persons accused of committing certain criminal offences, even if those charges were laid outside Canada. That supports the fear that Canada would recognize charges laid in some countries where the legal system is not immune to political pressure.

Is the minister aware of this shortcoming and would he be interested in changing these aspects of the bill to ensure that justice prevails?

● (1550)

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. Speaker, with all due respect for my colleague, we do not see any flaws in our bill.

In my speech, I forgot to mention that we are updating our Citizenship Act to reflect the type of measures we see in the corresponding legislation of our allies and NATO partners.

According to my information, Portugal is the only NATO member that cannot revoke citizenship in a serious case of disloyalty such as treason.

Consequently, we believe that the true flaw was the fact that Canada was just about the only country to not be able to revoke citizenship from dual citizens.

The courts will play a very important role in cases of treason, espionage or terrorism.

If the honourable member would carefully examine the bill, she would find that when a Canadian with dual citizenship becomes a member of an armed force engaged in an armed conflict with the Canadian Armed Forces, the government must provide a declaration indicating all the evidence we have and presents—

Government Orders

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order. Moving on to questions and comments, the hon. member for Markham—Unionville.

[*English*]

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the minister on his speech.

Coming from a very multicultural riding, one of the things I do not like about the bill and find particularly hard to take, and there is a list of them, is the decision to apply the language test to people in the age range of 55 to 64, who have previously been exempt.

Many of my constituents and many new Canadians across the country find it offensive because, depending on the country from which they come, they may not speak the Queen's English but may nevertheless be highly productive, loyal members of Canadian society and make many contributions, and whose children likely speak very good, if not perfect, English and whose grandchildren will speak perfect English.

Many new Canadians find offensive the imposition of a language test on older, or relatively older, people, a category that I belong to myself.

Why does the minister impose this rather stringent language test on people in the age range 55 to 64 simply because they do not speak the Queen's English, but are nevertheless highly productive, loyal members of this country?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. Speaker, first, it is not the Queen's English; it is Canadian English and Canadian French that we are asking for. The Queen's English is an additional step any Canadian can take, but I myself have not yet made it to that lofty station.

Let us look at this. Why was it good enough for Liberal governments from 1977 to 1984 and then again from 1993 to 2005 to have the language requirements for this age group? There was only one year of a Liberal government when the age requirement was less, one year.

How many years did we have Liberal governments in the 20th century? We should talk about happier subjects.

It is fair to newcomers. We hear it from them. It is fair to Canadians that this minimum level of knowledge of our country and language be met. These are basic tools. They lead to better outcomes. According to our side of the House, 54 to 64 is not old. Those are the salad years for many people when they are in the prime of their careers.

We do find that a level 4 on a scale of 1 to 12 is an absolutely reasonable expectation. We will provide the settlement services and the language training for those who are not able to meet that standard.

• (1555)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I commend the minister for his excellent speech and the very important reform that he has brought to Parliament.

Will he not agree with me that in fact it was the Liberal government of former prime minister Mackenzie King, in 1946, that

introduced the Citizenship Act with a language requirement, which was extended in the fundamental citizenship reforms of the Trudeau government in this Parliament in the 1977 amendments that required, as the minister just said, language proficiency for Canadians between the ages of 18 and 65, and indeed that the member for Markham—Unionville ran for Parliament in the years 2000 and 2004 and served in this place for six years with the language requirement for citizenship exemption being above 65?

I was here with him, and I do not recall his ever raising this as an issue. I think the member is being a wee bit disingenuous.

Will the minister not agree with me that, on this matter of revocation from convicted terrorists and traitors, there is a misconception among some that citizenship is inalienable when in fact it is alienable, when in fact people can, under the law, renounce their citizenship, when it can be revoked if it has been obtained fraudulently?

Would he not agree with me that, when people go out and obtain the citizenship of another country, perhaps an enemy country of Canada, and engage in violent hostilities against Canada, perhaps violent treason, or join a terrorist organization that is in a form of warfare against Canada, these acts constitute a practical expression of disloyalty and a voluntary renunciation of their own citizenship?

Should we not take them at their word, rather than waiting for them to send in a form de jure revoking their own citizenship?

Hon. Chris Alexander: Mr. Speaker, I agree with the minister entirely.

Let us take the example of Afghanistan. There probably were cases—and when this bill is adopted we will have to document them—of Canadians of dual nationality who joined the Taliban or the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, for some time or other, which operates from Pakistan in Afghanistan, which was responsible for suicide bombings, and which was responsible for the death of a large number of our finest, our best young men and women who wore the uniform.

That does constitute a crime in our eyes. It is a terrorist organization, and so Canadians who join such a group would already face prosecution, whether they have only one citizenship or two citizenships. It is reasonable, not just in our country but in all free, democratic, self-respecting societies, those that have made the NATO alliance the success it is, to draw a limit.

Most of us receive our citizenship from our parents via birth in this country, and we are proud of that and no one can take it away from us. However, there are hundreds of thousands who become citizens every year and we have a responsibility, when there are cases of fraud, to investigate those and when necessary to revoke.

When there are extreme cases of disloyalty, we have a responsibility to look at the option of revoking citizenship when there is dual nationality. Of course we are not going to create a new class of stateless persons. It was a Conservative government that undertook that obligation in the early 1960s and we are proud to continue upholding it today.

On the other point the minister made, about the consistency of Liberals on citizenship and other matters, I think we have heard—

Government Orders

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There seems to be great interest in the question that is before the House this afternoon, so in the time that is allowed for questions and comments I would certainly like to allow members some latitude, but if they could keep their interventions short, more members will be able to participate in this important part of debate.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Pierrefonds—Dollard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House today to speak to Bill C-24, An Act to amend the Citizenship Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts.

The NDP agrees that changes to the Citizenship Act are badly needed. This act has not been revised since 1977, and some elements of our Citizenship Act create injustices. The NDP has fought a long time to correct some of these injustices. I enthusiastically welcomed the news that the government was preparing a bill to amend the Citizenship Act.

There are a number of good elements in this bill that the NDP is happy to see. We would be happy to support some of these changes that have been needed for a long time. However, true to form, the Conservatives have introduced a bill that is over 50 pages long and that amends all kinds of things and affects several aspects of citizenship.

There are so many things in this bill. Some are very positive, while others are worrisome. Civil society organizations, legal experts and other Canadian experts have already expressed some legal and human rights concerns. The public is very upset about some aspects of this bill, and I hope to explain why certain parts of this bill are worrisome and very problematic.

First, I will talk about what I am happy to see in Bill C-24. The NDP certainly supports the fact that this bill resolves the issue of people whose citizenship has been dispossessed, the so-called lost Canadians. I would like to give a practical example to show why it is so important to address this injustice.

John is two years old. He lives in the Eastern Townships in Quebec. His father is Canadian and his father's father is Canadian. Is John Canadian? No, he is not. Little John is here in Canada and lives with his Canadian father, but has only a temporary visa that will expire in May. The family's situation is rather unstable. Why does John not have citizenship? It is because his father, who is a Canadian and was born to a Canadian father, was born outside the country while his father was serving in the Canadian Forces. Instead of being proud to have a grandfather who served in the Canadian Forces, John is being penalized because his grandfather was serving outside the country when his wife gave birth to their child.

This deprives little John of medicare and day care, which is an enormous burden for the family. Little John is not the only one in this unfair situation. In fact, there are approximately 80 lost Canadians. These people are often in a tragic situation that also adversely affects many people who are close to them. The NDP fought for a long time for the government to resolve these unfair situations. From critic to critic, MP to MP, from motions to news releases, the NDP fought this battle, and we are pleased to see that,

today, justice will be served for these people who should already be Canadian.

The other positive aspect of this bill is the expedited access to citizenship for permanent residents who serve in the Canadian Armed Forces. In fact, this aspect, which the NDP already supported, is found in Bill C-425 from the last session. I would like to raise one issue, however. This bill will not affect hundreds or even dozens of people. It will affect only a few, perhaps five or 10. It is very rare for permanent residents to be accepted into the Canadian Forces. Usually, a person must already be Canadian to be accepted. Only in very exceptional cases are permanent residents allowed to serve in the Canadian Forces.

● (1600)

That being said, these people serve our country in an exemplary way. They meet important needs that only they can meet within our armed forces. In our opinion, it is therefore completely reasonable, acceptable and desirable to reward these individuals by expediting their access to Canadian citizenship, if they so desire.

The NDP also fought hard for the implementation of measures to train immigration consultants and to fight more effectively against fraudulent consultants. The hon. member for Trinity—Spadina spoke out loud and clear, as she called on the government to take action in this regard. In a news release made public in 2010, she called for the creation of a regulatory body to enforce the rules and protect the public. It was not until today that practical measures were proposed to better train immigration consultants. That is positive aspect of the bill, because many people are victims of immigration consultants who betray their trust—although most consultants are honest individuals. These are the good things I wanted to say about Bill C-24.

I would like to point out some parts of the bill that should be the subject of consultations with experts and the public because they are worrisome in some way or because people have differing opinions on them. The first is the longer term of Canadian residency required to obtain citizenship. The longer term is not necessarily a bad thing, and I understand the goal of it. It is a good idea to make sure that people with citizenship have lived in Canada for a certain period of time. This is good, but I also want to point out that this particular measure adds clarification that was not in the act before, making it very clear to people how many days they must reside in Canada before being eligible for Canadian citizenship. This measure makes sense.

However, we should talk about the ridiculously long processing time for citizenship applications. If the government is asking people to reside in Canada for a longer period of time, then it really must ensure that their applications are processed quickly and efficiently, which is what they might expect.

Increasing application fees is also a contentious issue. I will explain why. People certainly understand that the fees need to change. Fees for citizenship applications have not changed in several years. Now the processing fees will be higher than the fees people have to pay to submit their application.

Government Orders

However, why are these fees jumping from \$200 to \$400? What justifies that amount? So far, nobody has provided us with all of the information justifying that specific amount. Why not \$50 more or \$50 less? Does this amount really just cover the costs, or is it merely a way to get money from people who want citizenship? I would like a lot more information about that. If the government charges more, people are naturally going to expect better service.

This brings me back to the processing times, which are unacceptable. They have more than doubled under the Conservatives. Asking someone to pay more for a service is one thing, but providing a service that gets worse and worse is another. The government needs to make sure that higher fees go hand in hand with better service.

Furthermore, changing the age at which people must take the test in one of the official languages has upset many communities across the country. In the past, people aged 18 to 54 had to take the test in one of Canada's official languages. From now on, people aged 14 to 64 will have to do so.

I understand the importance of learning one of Canada's official languages. However, many people are worried. For instance, people aged 54 to 64 might have a harder time learning one of the official languages, studying for an exam or managing the related stress this could bring. Many people live within a community and could very easily get by in Canada without necessarily mastering a certain level of language. Such a change could cause a lot of stress, especially regarding the lower age limit at which people will have to take the test. Indeed, children as young as 14 will now have to take the test, and this could determine whether they get to become citizens or not.

●(1605)

What happens to a child who does not pass the test for some reason or another, while the rest of his or her family passes? Will that child be the only non-citizen in the family? Could this cause problems when the family wants to travel, for instance? Why impose a test with such serious consequences on children as young as 14, when we know that young people living here in Canada have to go to school in one of Canada's official languages and learn the language day in and day out? Why put that kind of pressure on a 14-year-old child? This is highly questionable. As I said, we had many discussions with a number of groups and individuals who all questioned this.

Another aspect worth debating that is upsetting people is the elimination of the use of the length of stay in Canada as a non-permanent resident. This measure is really troubling for many foreign students and temporary workers who have been in Canada for a few months, or even a few years, and who were planning on applying for citizenship in the near future. They now see that they might have to wait for many more years. This really changes their plans.

I have gotten a number of emails from my constituents and from people across Quebec and Canada. I think it is worth sharing some of them. For example, Abdoul Haseeb Awan said:

●(1610)

[*English*]

I chose and moved to Canada three years ago after being offered admission in world leading universities. I have won various prizes, grants and awards during the last three years.

After graduating as Master in Engineering, I chose entrepreneurship. I was promised a PR status within 12 months, which took 19 months. [Yes, the delays are very long. I will have to wait] 2 more years for citizenship.

That person contributed, studied here, worked here, created jobs here, and does not understand why we would deny him consideration for the time he has lived and contributed in Canada.

Another example is an email from Andras Korinek. I will quote a few sentences from his email. He said:

The second issue I see with this bill is the new method of counting residence days.

I personally came into Canada through a work permit and it took me 2 years to finally become a permanent resident.

I think the intention of the bill to make sure applicants are supporting Canadian society and sharing Canadian values are honourable, however, the metrics used to measure this are flawed. I am contributing to Canada by working here and paying taxes. I have a Canadian spouse, Canadian friends, I joined a local sports team. I would like to be officially welcomed into Canadian society as a proud citizen.

One last example, though I have a lot of them, is from Sultan Ali Ahmed, a McGill University student, who arrived in August 2007. He says:

...there should be recognition given to students graduating from Canadian universities, who were initially on study permits, started working after graduation and then applied for their PRs.

[*Translation*]

As members can see, many people are worried about seeing their plans change and are urging us to review this measure. This subject is worthy of an honest debate.

I would now like to talk about the elements that I do not even think are worthy of debate. I think they are extremely worrisome for several reasons. First, Bill C-24 increases the minister's discretionary power. Under this bill, the minister will now have the right to grant or revoke citizenship in special cases.

We have seen a lot of this from the Conservatives: using bills to grant themselves more discretionary powers. The NDP disagrees with this measure. This kind of discretionary power opens the door to turning our citizenship system into a political tool. The minister has said that he was not necessarily prepared to say to whom he would grant citizenship.

That a member of a political party could do such things behind closed doors is unacceptable. These are great powers. The citizenship process must be part of a system that people can trust because of its impartiality and transparency. I am very worried that by granting such powers to a minister we are moving in the opposite direction.

The bill raises another concern. According to the provisions of this bill, the minister can revoke citizenship—in the case of a dual citizen—when there is a suspicion of fraud. The key word here is “suspicion”. In fact, the minister has the power to revoke citizenship or to authorize a person to revoke it in his name if he is “satisfied on a balance of probabilities” that the person obtained citizenship fraudulently.

Government Orders

The problem is that the person will no longer be able to appear before an independent tribunal that would determine whether or not the allegations are true. That is important. A person with Canadian citizenship is a Canadian and should have access to a fair and just process under our justice system. It is worrisome in this case, and also in the case of someone who is accused of terrorism abroad and who must spend a few years in jail. Because of this charge, a person's citizenship can be revoked.

In a question to the minister, I mentioned earlier that the main concern in this case is that people can be accused of terrorism without having the right to a fair and just process in a country where the justice system is not immune to political pressure, for example.

We have already seen a number of such cases, even in Canada. People have been charged, spent several years in prison and then may have become heroes because they were imprisoned for political and partisan reasons. Someone behind me whispered the name of Nelson Mandela and, indeed, that could be one example. These are serious concerns.

In closing, this bill does not tackle the main problems with our citizenship system at present—the wait times and the backlog. The wait times are horrible. They have more than doubled under the Conservatives, who waited all these years before pretending to take an interest in the problem.

The government says that this bill will resolve the situation, but I am not so sure. Nothing in this bill can prove to us beyond a shadow of a doubt that there will be significant changes. On one hand, we are adjusting certain administrative measures to help the process run more smoothly or more quickly than before, but on the other, we are increasing the use of the residency questionnaire, which is extremely long to compile and analyze. Other criteria, such as a declaration of intent to live in Canada, are being added.

What is the point in making the system more efficient if we are asking the people who have to review the files to do extra work? How will that really help? People are fed up with being told to wait when they apply for citizenship and are entitled to it. They should get a response quickly and efficiently.

For a number of the reasons that I mentioned, I move, seconded by the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth:

That the motion be amended by deleting all the words after the word "That" and substituting the following:

this House decline to give second reading to Bill C-24, An Act to amend the Citizenship Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts, because it:

- (a) does not provide an adequate solution for reducing citizenship application processing times, which have been steadily increasing;
- (b) puts new significant powers in the hands of the Minister that will allow this government to politicize the granting of Canadian citizenship;
- (c) gives the Minister the power to revoke citizenship, which will deny some Canadians access to a fair trial in Canada and will raise serious questions since Canadian law already includes mechanisms to punish those who engage in unlawful acts; and
- (d) includes a declaration of intent to reside provision, which in fact gives officials the power to speculate on the intent of a citizenship applicant and then potentially deny citizenship based on this conjecture.

• (1620)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The amendment is in order.

I recognize the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

[*English*]

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am intrigued by my hon. colleague's remarks. I have a few questions for her, which I think may lead her to reconsider the amendment she has just proposed.

First, is the member aware that we have a legal obligation to charge the fees for the full cost of the service we are giving?

Is the member aware that the people whose emails she cites, Andreas, Sultan Ali, and there was a third, may actually have faster service by the time this bill becomes law? The processing times would be reduced from where they are today to under one year by 2016, which would mean that the four-year residency requirements combined with a speedy processing time would make them Canadian citizens even faster than they would be under the status quo.

Is the member not aware that there are cases where revocation of citizenship, above all, for fraud, for plain and simple proven fraud, is something that Canadians want us to undertake on the necessary scale to deter the kinds of abuses we have seen?

Is the member not aware that by proposing these amendments, by opposing this bill, she is opposing the will of the vast majority of Canadians who want to see their citizenship protected?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I always get a kick out of people who stand up and say that they know what the vast majority of Canadians want. Frankly, I am curious to know how the minister managed to poll the vast majority of Canadians.

That said, and this is odd, the arguments that the minister gave were in no way related to my objections to the bill. He knows that. He was there; he listened to my speech. I spent a lot of time talking about what I agree with and talking about elements of the bill that I understand. I am not necessarily opposed to increasing fees. On the contrary, I understand that fees need to be increased.

Can the minister give us more information about the reasons behind the \$200 increase? Is that the kind of increase that is required to cover fees?

Of course, if the minister is able to reduce wait times to under a year, that would be commendable. No one would object to that. However, the problem with this bill is that it does not prove to us that the Conservatives are going to make that happen.

It is difficult to believe that the Conservatives will reduce citizenship and immigration delays when we see their errors and failures in this area.

• (1625)

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the hon. member on her speech.

Government Orders

I want to ask a question because I agree with her, not with the minister. My question is about the conversation that just took place. It seems to me that if the government wants to increase costs for those wishing to become citizens, it should start by improving efficiency. Under this government, wait times doubled between 2007 and 2010. In its own document, the government said that wait times have increased because it did not invest enough resources in the system. It is the government's fault. If it wants to increase costs, it needs to start by improving efficiency.

Right now, the government is just making pre-election promises. It is saying that efficiency will improve, but nothing is certain. Efficiency has gone downhill.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I completely agree with my colleague that efficiency has gone downhill under the Conservatives. People have had more than enough of the wait times, and that is understandable. It is rather strange that the government is making promises for after the next election. We have to wonder how much value those promises have.

I would also like to talk about fraud. The minister touched on that earlier. There is certainly fraud within our citizenship system, as there is in any system. However, a small minority of people abuse the system. How can we combat fraud without penalizing others? That is an important question. We must especially ask ourselves whether someone suspected of fraud should have the right to a fair trial. I believe the answer is yes. If the individual is formally charged, I agree with being able to revoke citizenship, but not as part of a discretionary power.

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Pierrefonds—Dollard for her excellent speech, for the way she is dealing with the citizenship and immigration file and for doing such a wonderful job of defending these issues.

Our ridings are next to each other, and both of our constituency offices deal with a lot of immigration cases. Wait times are far too long, as we have mentioned. I would like to hear more about what she thinks about the economic and social costs that these wait times have on Canadian society.

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague. She is very active and always does so much for her constituents in LaSalle—Émard. Her work is always appreciated.

Some people who come to our offices have been waiting for a response to their citizenship application for three or four years. Is that any way to treat people? No. They have to fill out residency questionnaires, questionnaires that can be 50 to 200 pages long. They have to find documents anywhere from two to ten years old to convince people that their intentions are good. The government has to do what it has to do to ensure that our citizenship system is good, that it works for people and enables honest people to get their citizenship, but this bill goes way beyond that. It penalizes people and raises significant legal and human rights concerns.

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend my colleague on her speech.

I am wondering if she shares my concern. It seems to me that there is an underlying philosophy or vision of citizenship to this bill that creates two categories of Canadians. Earlier, the minister spoke

about terrorism. What do we do with a young person who is born in Quebec—who is not of French-Canadian or English-Canadian heritage but may be of Italian heritage, for example—who decides to get involved with a terrorist group? In comparison, what do we do with another young person who was not born in Canada—who arrived from Morocco, for example—who also has Canadian citizenship and joins a terrorist group? What do we do with them?

What concerns me the most is that in the citizenship philosophy put forward by the minister—with whom I have shared many experiences—there are good Canadians and bad Canadians, real citizens and fake citizens. For example, the minister would deny a Canadian child who was born in Quebec entry into Quebec or Canada if one of the child's parents is not Canadian. Children are dying in Syria because the minister seems to think that the parents are coming here just to give birth. It is clear that the minister feels there are different types of Canadians.

I would like to hear my colleague's thoughts on that.

• (1630)

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for the question, which covered many aspects of the bill.

Unfortunately, I will not have enough time to address all of them. I know that my colleague is very familiar with the legal systems in Quebec and Canada. Experts have talked about cases where a child born in Canada to one Canadian parent can have another citizenship, because some countries will grant citizenship to a child when one parent is a citizen. If that child, who was born and raised here, is accused of one of the crimes listed in the bill, he or she might not have the option of receiving a sentence here in Canada, one that is delivered by our criminal justice system and considered fair in relation to the crime. That is troubling. We have a legal system in place.

I am not saying that fraudsters and criminals should not be punished. On the contrary, I agree with the principle whereby people who commit fraud or other crimes should be punished. They must be sentenced, but the question is, how and by whom? Should it be by this minister or by Canada's fair and equitable legal system?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): 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 Lac-Saint-Louis, Health; the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst, Rail Transportation.

Resuming debate. The hon. member for Markham—Unionville.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to this bill. It also gives me great pleasure to say that the Liberals will be opposing this bill because we believe that it is not good for Canada. It is bad for Canada. We are therefore pleased to vote against it. We are opposing this bill mainly because it will make it increasingly difficult to become a Canadian citizen.

[English]

The government has already put up barriers in terms of rising waiting times. Under this law there are more and more barriers to becoming a citizen, as I will describe in a few minutes in more detail, and we do not think this is good for Canada.

Government Orders

As is often the case with a large and complex bill, it is not that we dislike everything in the bill. In particular, we like the legislation for lost Canadians, whereby citizenship will be restored to lost Canadians born before 1947 and to first generations born abroad. We are very much in favour of this measure. If the government were to produce stand-alone legislation on this topic, we would vote for it. However, given that it is surrounded by other pollutants that we cannot support, we cannot support the bill in its entirety. We would like it if we could support a separate bill on lost Canadians. We would certainly be happy to support that.

There is a second item on which we are in agreement with the government in spirit. We do favour measures to enhance the loyalty of citizens to Canada and to combat the issue of citizens of convenience. However, we are not convinced that the measures the government has proposed in this area are terribly effective, and we would have alternative measures. We might favour those. We do not think the government's measures in this area will be effective. We think that more harm is done by the barriers it is raising for well-behaved people, who are not citizens of convenience but hard-working, loyal, potential Canadians who are barred by various artificial means set up by the government from becoming citizens of this country.

The way I would like to put it, to frame it in more general terms, is that immigration policy has to be a balance between welcome and vigilance. One has to be vigilant because there are always some bad apples. There will always be some citizens of convenience with phony marriages. There will be people who want to play the system and people who are fraudulent. There are a very small number of people in that category, and for that category, one requires vigilance.

The vast numbers of people who come to Canada, whether as immigrants, visitors, or citizenship applicants, are good people. They are law-abiding people and should be welcomed. Yes, we require vigilance for the small number of bad apples, but we must also welcome the vast majority who are good.

It is my contention that Canadian governments, from John Diefenbaker to Paul Martin, have put the main focus on welcoming. The primary task was to welcome people to Canada, to welcome them to become landed immigrants and citizens and visitors. There was some focus on the bad apples, but the primary emphasis and priority was to welcome the large numbers of good people who wanted to come here.

All of that has changed under the current government. There is very little welcome. It is almost all vigilance. What we hear government members talking about day after day is people cheating the system, people with phony marriages, people who are citizens of convenience, as if that is the whole universe of people coming to this country. We agree that there are some of that type. However, the government spends all of its time talking about the bad side and the vigilance and at no time about welcoming people, which is the broader and more important task. I think it has tilted the priorities away from the traditional Canadian approach that we saw all the way from John Diefenbaker to Paul Martin.

• (1635)

Let me just give the House two examples, taken from the time of John Diefenbaker. John Diefenbaker, as the House may recall, was a

Progressive Conservative Prime Minister. The members on that side should approve of some of the things he did. I certainly do. I will mention two examples.

The first of these is the Hungarian revolution of 1956-57. Under John Diefenbaker, there was a huge blip in immigration because his government allowed in some 38,000 refugees from Hungary. That is a huge number, and I applaud it. I am glad that the minister is applauding too. The country in those days was half the size it is today, so that would be the equivalent of some 80,000 people today.

I am glad that the minister is applauding, because we were talking earlier about Sweden letting in 14,000 refugees from Syria permanently. He claimed they were temporary, but they were not. Canada has a miserable number of 1,300 Syrian refugees, and they are not even here yet, partly because he has not given the authorization to the community groups who want to bring in refugees. He applauds 38,000, which is very good, but he is struggling with 1,300 some 50 years later. However, that is a different topic.

The point I am making is this. Did those 38,000 immigrants, refugees from Hungary, all pass difficult language tests? I doubt it. They came pretty quickly. Did they have to wait years? Did they have to go through this barrier, that barrier, and the next barrier to come to this country? No, they got onto those ships pretty quickly and all 38,000 of them were here pretty quickly. They were also welcomed warmly when they came to this country.

We welcomed them under Mr. Diefenbaker, and that is good. There were probably a few bad apples in that 38,000, just as there are in the Canadian population at large. The current government would focus all its time on the few bad apples of those 38,000 Hungarian refugees, whereas the government of the day and our party would focus on the great good that all of those people and their children would do and have done for this country.

The second reason I would praise Mr. Diefenbaker is that there was a member of Parliament who was convicted of spying on Canada for the Soviet Union. He was not a Conservative or a Liberal. I think he was a communist, but he was a member of Parliament. In the process of that happening, his citizenship was taken away. Mr. Diefenbaker thought that was really bad. He thought that even a Canadian convicted of treason should not have his citizenship taken away, so he brought in a law that would not allow governments to take away individual citizenship.

Government Orders

That was Mr. Diefenbaker, a Progressive Conservative. He was a small-l liberal on these matters, and he was focusing on the welcome rather than on vigilance. The same story goes through to Pierre Trudeau, who invented the modern system of immigration and multiculturalism. I would praise Brian Mulroney as well, who was also open to immigration. He was welcoming and he did not spend all of his time talking about the bad apples. The same goes for Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin.

When we come to the current government, all of a sudden, the scales shift. Instead of welcoming people to this country, we spend all of our time talking about the small number of people who are not obeying the rules.

It works much better if we welcome newcomers with a smile, which we did, starting with Diefenbaker up until Martin, instead of welcoming them with a scowl, as the current government does. It is better to have “sunny ways”, as Wilfrid Laurier put it and as our leader recently quoted, rather than angry ways.

We welcomed people with a smile, from Diefenbaker to Trudeau, from Mulroney to Chrétien and Martin. With a smile, we had sunny ways. We had a smile for the newcomers. Now, under the Conservatives all they focus on is the negative side. So it is no longer sunny ways, but angry ways. That is not good for our country.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

Why is it not good for the country to act in such a hostile manner? One reason is that we are trying to build Canada and, in order to do so, we have to welcome those who come here to live with us.

In one way or another, we are all descendants of immigrants and thus we must extend a warm welcome. It is not necessary to always be angry.

The economic aspect is another consideration. We are competing for immigrants with countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. We all have an aging population. We all need these immigrants. Consequently, if we give them a warm welcome, they will come to Canada instead of going to Australia or other countries. There are sound economic reasons for attracting these immigrants to our country.

My final point concerns the public's attitude. If the only thing the government says is that there are dishonest people who enter into fake marriages and do all these bad things, the public will start believing that these immigrants are bad and that they are criminals.

[*English*]

What the government is doing is sowing division, because it is always putting the emphasis on the bad side of immigrants, the cases where they do not obey the rules, and saying nothing about the much larger positive side. That gives ideas to Canadian people who hear the government talking about these immigrants, these visitors, as not to be trusted, that they might be really bad people. I think it sows division in this country.

My view is to let sunny ways rather than angry ways prevail. Greet the people with a smile instead of a scowl and do not put up these new barriers all the time.

Now I will come to the five new barriers that we do not like. We could call them the five new scowls provided by the Conservative Party to would-be citizens.

The first scowl is the fact that the Conservatives have doubled the processing times. The minister boasts that they will reduce those processing times at some point in the future, but over five long years they have doubled these processing times from 15 months to 31 months, and the reason they give is in the document. It does not talk about it being a Liberal system. They say explicitly that they did not put enough money into this system and that is why the waiting times, the processing times, have doubled.

That is the first scowl they have sent to would-be citizens: “Sorry, folks, instead of waiting 15 months like you did in 2007, you have to wait 31 months”, and sometimes it is way longer. I have constituents who wait way longer than 31 months. That is the first scowl, the first barrier.

The second one is this hostile provision about language. It was okay until now that people aged 15 to 54 did the test. Now the Conservatives are imposing a difficult language test on those aged 14 to 18 and 54 to 64. Why? It is because they want to create another barrier, another scowl. Why was it not okay for those aged 54 to 64 to speak okay English but not fantastic English and still make excellent contributions to this country, and for their children and their grandchildren to speak perfect English? It worked well before. They are loyal citizens. I know them very well, both citizens and landed immigrants.

The third point, another scowl, is regarding the people who come here as temporary foreign workers or as international students. It used to be the case that half of the time they had lived in this country as a student or a temporary foreign worker counted toward the time for citizenship. Now the government scowls at them again and grabs away that time and counts it for nothing. What is the point? Do the Conservatives want to deter these people? Do they want to send them to Australia? Do they not want them to come to Canada? There is no point, except malice, except wanting to scowl at them, instead of applying the sunny face of Liberals and perhaps even the NDP.

• (1645)

The fourth point is that people now have to stay here four out of six years instead of three out of four. That is another scowl. What makes one think that people will be more Canadian just because we make them stay an extra year? One more year is extra time to wait. It does not necessarily make people Canadian or deter citizens of convenience. It is just another nasty move by the Conservatives to make the barriers bigger against nice people who want to become citizens of our country.

Government Orders

Those are four bad things, four scowls, four angry gestures. I will mention one more, and this is one I have some sympathy with. I have perhaps been a little negative so far, but the four I have mentioned are all scowls, which I do not think add anything. There is some sense to the fifth, the idea of increased physical presence, that in four out of six years people should be here more than half the year, some 183 days. I have some sympathy with that because I have some concern with the phenomenon of citizens of convenience. I think it might be going a little far. Let us say that someone comes in as a landed immigrant, works for the Royal Bank—we can name any company—and that Canadian company then wants the person to work in the U.K., India, or wherever. That person as a Canadian could do it, but as a landed immigrant could not for more than a certain time.

I think there are some problems with the detailed specification there, but I would suggest another measure, which is more focused on the true bad behaviours and not hitting everyone. There will be many people coming to this country who are not citizens of convenience, but who, for some reason, their employers want them to work overseas and they want to spend some time there. It does not mean they are citizens of convenience. Therefore, everyone gets tarred by that brush.

Why not have strict residence requirements for health care? That would really target people who are citizens of convenience. I understand there was a court case heard by the B.C. Court of Appeal recently, which upheld the government position on that. To me, that is a more targeted approach to direct against potential citizens of convenience. We would hit them, but we would not hit everyone. A lot of the government measures are targeted at the bad people, but they hit all the good people as well and, therefore, are inefficient and unwelcoming. That is why I say they are not sunny ways but angry ways. We should welcome people with a smile and not with a scowl.

• (1650)

[Translation]

The Liberals will clearly vote against this bill. There are other problems to resolve when it comes to revoking an individual's citizenship. For example, what happens in the case of dual citizenship? I can think of at least two people with dual citizenship in the House: the Leader of the Opposition and my colleague and former leader of the Liberal Party, the member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville. Would the minister have the power to revoke their citizenship and deport them? That is far too much power for a single person.

Someone who is born in Canada can also have dual citizenship, as is the case with the two members I mentioned. It is not limited to people who were not born in Canada.

The government's proposal does not provide for sufficient legal recourse. It gives one person far too much arbitrary power.

[English]

In summary, the main reason Liberals are opposing this bill is that we want to welcome people to our country. We want to smile when they come in and not frown. We want to make it less of a burden and have shorter waiting times for people to become a citizen, an economic immigrant, or a visitor. The whole Conservative system is

drowning in increased waiting times, which typically have doubled, drowning in red tape. This bill is yet another example of adding more and more barriers against the honest people who, thank goodness for us, want to become citizens of Canada. I say we should welcome them, not frown at them.

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is rather incredible to hear that question. The member talks of sunny ways, and then he goes on to make one of the most partisan speeches I have heard in any debate in this place.

Is this the new Liberal Party, a party of ogres, a party of scaremongers, a party that talks down the Canadian economy, that talks about doom and gloom when we have had the top job creation record in the G7 and are the only country in the G7 to have an AAA credit rating from all agencies and a positive outlook?

The Liberals will not acknowledge these simple facts. It is terrifying to think of how newcomers to Canada would choose to understand this stream of consciousness presentation.

Is the member opposite aware of some simple facts? Is he aware of the fact that this government has admitted to Canada, on average, over 40,000 more permanent residents than his government ever did? Is he aware that, under our government, we have had 1.4 million new Canadians become Canadian citizens?

Is the member aware that his government slashed immigration to its lowest levels in the late-20th century, in 1983-84 and then again in 1998-99? Is he aware that it was his government that brought in these language requirements and made the residency requirement, during the vast majority of their time in government in the 20th century, five years, which is actually more than is proposed in this bill?

Is the member aware of those simple facts? Is he aware of his utter hypocrisy?

• (1655)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we go to the hon. member for Markham—Unionville, there were a couple of suggestions in there, characterizations, if you will, of other hon. members. When we enter into that kind of debate, it is not helpful. I would just ask hon. members to keep that in mind in the course of their remarks.

The hon. member for Markham—Unionville.

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, I actually find it quite amusing that he should accuse me of being partisan, and you accuse him of being partisan, and then the second part of his speech goes into a partisan rant.

Let me just respond, instead of being partisan, with a few statistics that come from the member's own government's statistics.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Stop scowling.

Hon. Chris Alexander: With a few tweaks.

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Why are you scowling?

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, would he listen for just a second.

Government Orders

Since 2007, and I believe his government was in power then, waiting times have increased by 200% for family reunification immigrants, by 65% for live-in caregivers, by 55% for provincial nominees, by up to 113% for federal skilled workers, by 150% for visitor visas, and by 107% for citizen applications, and he says he is doing a good job.

Does the minister not know that time is of the essence when it comes to processing times for immigrants, for visitors, for citizens? His government has absolutely bungled it for eight long years.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my hon. colleague if he could comment on the new intent-to-reside test for citizenship, the whole idea that when people apply to become citizens, the government can assess whether they intend to reside in Canada.

Lorne Waldman is the current president of the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers. He is very respected. He is one of my former students. He talks about how arbitrary that will be and how difficult that will be to assess. Then he asks if this will become the basis on which the minister can exercise his power to revoke citizenship if a person happens to leave the country too early for the liking of the minister.

I am wondering about the insecurity that would create for average citizens, not knowing whether they can leave five months from now, six months from now, or 18 months from now without being at risk of having their citizenship revoked, because somehow or other, retroactively, a minister might say that it showed that they did not intend to reside in Canada in the first place.

Does the member have any concerns?

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, I also met the gentleman, and I read the article in which he said that. I can see the basis for concern. It speaks to the question of citizens of convenience. We want measures in place to deter that. I sympathize with that goal, in principle. However, with this specific measure, I agree that the minister could, in theory, take someone's citizenship away because he went to work overseas for a length of time, when he had previously stated his intent not to.

I do not always agree with the Conservatives, but I do not think it likely that a minister, even a Conservative minister, would do that. I do not take this risk that the professor raised too seriously.

However, there are a plethora of other reasons to oppose this bill, and we are opposing it without necessarily putting that point at the front and centre of our reasoning.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Markham—Unionville spoke a bit about the waiting times for people to get their citizenship. Being from the Montreal area, I know that the wait times there are easily four and sometimes up to five years. If person is not able to make the first appointment because of illness or some *imprévu*, as we say in French, it could go on and on. Some of these people have come here to become citizens.

I am wondering if my colleague has had any personal experience, being an MP from the Toronto area, where there are probably more immigrants waiting for their citizenship.

Second, what is my colleague's feeling about the fee, which is going to be increased. These are people who probably cannot afford to pay the fee. Sometimes they put off getting their citizenship, because they cannot afford the fee. How does the member feel about having an increase in the fee while having a decrease in services?

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, beginning with the fee, as I said to the minister, when the government has just bungled the job and doubled the waiting time, it is not the time to double the fee. That is totally unfair. Maybe if the minister halved the waiting time, as he has promised to do in some future period after the next election, that would be the time to raise the fee, but he should wait until he does it. He should not do it in advance on the basis of some promise that may or may not be realized. I agree that some of these people have a hard time paying the fee.

On the first question about people waiting for citizenship, it is a horror story. According to Statistics Canada, Markham happens to be the most multicultural community in the country, so 90% of my business is immigration related. We hear horror stories about people wanting to be reunited with their spouses, or grandparents wanting to come to the weddings of their grandchildren and being denied. Grandparent A is in exactly the same situation as grandparent B, yet one gets in and one does not, and nobody knows why.

For citizenship, some people have to fill out a form that adds two years to the wait time. The average is two and a half years, but it can be up to five years.

As I said in my speech, if the philosophy of the Conservatives is to scowl at newcomers, they do not care. If the Conservatives cared, they would have put money in between 2007 and 2012. The government would have put money in to prevent waiting times going from 16 months to 32 months, but it failed to do that. The government knew that it was causing waiting times to go up, and it neglected to put the required resources in. The government is utterly guilty of neglect.

● (1700)

Hon. Greg Rickford (Minister of State (Science and Technology, and Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to pick up on this scowl-smile argument. Imagine, when we came into government, what expression was on the faces of more than 840,000 immigration candidates. It was a reflection of the backlog and the abject failure of the Liberal government, as it was then, on citizenship and immigration. It bottomed out when one of the last Liberal ministers of immigration on record appeared to have made decisions from the House of Lancaster, an entertainment bar in her riding.

Government Orders

It is funny that the same people, the members of the opposition, and particularly that member, are now accusing our smiling minister of wanting too much power. They are the same ones who asked the minister to exercise his power by stopping deportations, issuing visas, granting citizenships, and keeping criminals in Canada, and the list goes on.

Is the member saying that he wants to prevent giving citizenship to those who qualify for discretion?

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, speaking of smiles on faces, one reason the Conservatives had a great big smile on their faces when they became government was that we left them with a \$13-billion surplus, but they were not able to manage that surplus.

An. hon. member: And it is still our fault.

Hon. John McCallum: Everything is always our fault, Mr. Speaker. We gave the Conservatives a \$13-billion surplus, they spent so much money that they frittered away that surplus. Before the recession even started, they were running a deficit. It is no wonder they had a smile on their faces when they saw that great big surplus.

In terms of immigration waiting times, the department, in its wisdom, does not give us numbers before 2007. That is the earliest we can go. That is the very beginning of the Conservative period. As I quoted, with all of those numbers, back to the minister, family classification went up by 200%. Others went up 100%. That had nothing to do with the Liberals. That increase in waiting times by 100% was under the Conservative watch. So I think—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Resuming debate. The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to join this lively debate. However, before I do that, let me just say that I will be splitting my time with the hard-working member for Calgary Centre.

I am pleased to rise to discuss how our government plans to strengthen the value of Canadian citizenship.

Canadian citizenship is about far more than the right to carry a passport, as some might think, or to vote. Canadian citizenship is a commitment and forever a connection to our great country, Canada.

Citizenship defines who we are as Canadians, including our mutual responsibilities to one another, responsibilities such as respect for the rule of law, contributing to the well-being of the Canadian community, and protecting our heritage and our traditions. Citizenship means that we share a commitment to the values rooted in our history, values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

As a government, we believe that Canadian citizenship is truly something special and should be valued. We believe that is what Canadians want. However, there are those who attempt to attach a monetary cost to Canadian citizenship.

The strengthening Canadian citizen act, Bill C-24, would send a clear message to those who attempt to take advantage of our generous system.

Canadian citizenship never was, is not now, and never will be for sale. A Canadian passport is highly valued around the world. However, we will not stand by as people treat our passport as a commodity that can be traded or sold to the highest bidder.

Our government takes citizenship fraud very seriously. We are taking action to ensure that those who are convicted of citizenship fraud face the full force of the law. This is very important.

There are those who, for their financial advantage, prey on people who are legitimately wanting to become Canadian citizens. They fraudulently approach them with schemes. We would like to crack down on those people. We believe it is incumbent on our government, on any government, to do that to protect law-abiding residents, permanent residents, and citizens in our country.

As of October 2013, the RCMP was conducting fraud investigations involving more than 3,000 citizens and more than 5,000 permanent residents, a majority of them related to residence fraud.

This is a serious issue, which is why we are bringing forward these changes to the Citizenship Act. These are individuals who create fake addresses, purchase fake phone lines, open ghost bank accounts, and draft false letters of employment in an attempt to show that they live in Canada. In reality, many of these individuals may have never set foot in Canada and probably live somewhere else in the world.

These practices demean and devalue what it means to be a Canadian citizen. The strengthening Canadian citizenship act introduced by our government would ensure that we are not only protecting the value of Canadian citizenship from those who would cheapen it but that we are also improving the citizenship system.

Unfortunately, there is a global industry of unscrupulous, unethical immigration and citizenship agents posing as bona fide consultants. These unscrupulous agents typically coach people to establish fake proof of residency in Canada in order to apply for and obtain our Canadian citizenship.

Do not just take it from me. Immigration lawyers like Raj Sharma also agree that this is a serious problem. He admitted:

...immigration fraud was rampant and you did see ghost consultants and unregulated consultants counsel individuals to embellish or exaggerate the time in Canada. Let's face it. The Canadian passport is an incredibly valuable commodity and individuals are willing to lie, cheat, and deceive us to obtain that benefit.

• (1705)

Currently, there are no tools in the toolbox to identify citizenship fraud upfront at the application stage. As a result, many applicants fall victim to crooked citizenship consultants. The strengthening Canadian citizenship act would change that. With our changes, applicants would have to declare on the citizenship application form whether they used an authorized consultant or representative. The key here is that the representative would have to be accredited and part of a regulatory body specified by the minister. This would put an end to crooked citizenship consultants.

Bill C-24 would increase the penalties for citizenship fraud to a maximum fine of \$100,000 or up to five years in prison.

Government Orders

We are also taking action to strengthen the residence requirements for citizenship. There has been a lot of ambiguity over what it means to be physically present in Canada. Our government is taking out the guesswork and making it clear. Prospective Canadian citizens would need to be physically present in Canada in four out of the past six years. Respected lawyer Richard Kurland stated:

It makes it easier. For the very first time there is going to be a definition for "residence". You'd think it would be in the law. It never has been. It is now 183 days in a year, four years on the previous six. So now you know in advance, using math, whether you're in or you're out.

Even *Toronto Sun* columnist Simon Kent agrees. As part of his comment, he said if people want to live in Canada, if they want to enjoy living in a free and prosperous country like Canada, they should spend time here, they should live here, and they should contribute to civil society. I know that sounds like something out of Politics 101, but it is basically saying to live here, enjoy the fruits of one's labour, pay one's taxes, show that one is committed. I think extending the period of permanent residency here from three to four years, or maybe even five years, before being able to take up citizenship is a fair and reasonable proposition.

This is a subject that is very close and dear to my heart; not only because I have the privilege of representing one of the most diverse communities in the country in my riding, the great riding of Richmond Hill, but also because I am very proud that my parents were immigrants to this country. They came here during John Diefenbaker's prime ministership in this House. They had to wait five years to get their citizenship. I remember because I was born and I was there. I remember how proud they were when they studied and they learned the language requirements they needed, and they went and wrote those tests and they spoke and obtained their Canadian citizenship. Let me tell members that I believe my parents are representative of the vast majority of Canadian citizens who have chosen this great country as their new home.

I heard with great attention what the critics from the opposition parties said, and I would be very happy to listen to and take any questions they might have.

In closing, I would just say this. The strengthening Canadian citizenship act demonstrates our government's commitment to ensuring new Canadians understand the value of citizenship. The changes would make it harder for those who wish to take advantage of our generous immigration system and would send a strong message. Canadian citizenship is not a right; it is a privilege for those who commit themselves to Canada, our way of life, our values, and our traditions.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his speech.

One thing worries me about today's debate, and this comes mainly from the minister. It appears that he is already jumping to conclusions by saying that we are opposed to making the citizenship system more effective or that we are against punishing people who cheat the system. He says this because in the bill, which is about 50 pages long, there are of course some measures that we agree with and some commendable intentions, but there are also other measures that are quite questionable and troubling, not only to the official

opposition but also to many civil society groups and experts in the field.

When I asked the minister earlier if he would be willing to review some aspects of the bill, he said he did not see any shortcomings in the bill.

I would like to ask my colleague, who is a fellow member of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, if this means that there is no room for hearing from experts and taking their recommendations into account. If the minister sees absolutely no shortcomings in his bill, when many groups have already expressed their concerns, does that mean that there will be no room for amendments in committee? We often see this, and I hope that that will not be the case when this bill is examined by the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

• (1715)

[*English*]

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Speaker, the minister said no such thing, nor did he allude to any such thing. The process in the House, and I think all members know, is that the bill will go to committee once it has passed second reading, and we will have an opportunity to study it at committee stage and hear experts. We cannot prejudge or preempt what the conclusions or decisions of the committee will be after it has an opportunity to study the bill at that stage.

One of the concerns the member opposite had was the fee. I do not know if she took the time actually to read the content of the bill, or at least investigate the reasons behind some of the things that are in the bill. She commented about our increasing the fee for Canadian citizenships. Had she done a little homework, she would have found out that it costs about \$550 for a Canadian application today. We are taking the fee to a proportion of that. Is it not fair for Canadians to expect that the cost of that application should be borne by the person who is applying and not by taxpayers?

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the parliamentary secretary. I never had the chance to congratulate him here in the House for his nomination since he became parliamentary secretary.

I have just a quick question. At the beginning of his speech he was saying that the reason the bill is before the House is that there have been a lot of fraudulent applications, like people living outside the country, and people using false documents. I would think that would already be breaking the law and I am not sure why he would need this extra piece of legislation. I would think we would need an extra piece of legislation to help people who want to obtain their Canadian citizenship.

I previously asked my colleague from the Liberal Party about being a member from the Toronto area. This member is from the Toronto area. Does he not see cases where it is a huge problem getting Canadian citizenship with proper documents? Applicants are waiting for way too much time and are also waiting sometimes because the fee is too high. Can he comment on that?

Mr. Costas Menegakis: Mr. Speaker, I will point the member to the bill. The bill clearly puts forth some excellent points in dealing with the regulation of the whole citizenship and immigration consultant industry.

Government Orders

In the second part of his question, of course I am a member of Parliament from the Greater Toronto Area. He will be happy to hear this, I am sure. One of the things the bill does is streamline the decision making process for granting citizenship. We are going to have more people within the decision making body now, people who are experts, officers in citizenship and immigration. Once they obtain all of the proper information, they will be able to grant citizenship, whereas today, the authority for that only belongs to citizenship judges.

If the bill passes through the House—and I hope all members see the light and pass it, because it really is excellent legislation—it would speed up the process from a three-step process to a one-step process. Those people coming into our offices would obtain their citizenship in under a year, as opposed to waiting the length of time they are waiting now.

Ms. Joan Crockatt (Calgary Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour for me to be here to rise to speak in support of Bill C-24, which really does demonstrate our government's commitment to strengthening the value of Canadian citizenship.

Canadian citizenship, as every one of us in the House knows, is among the most valued citizenships in the world and the bill would ensure that it remains that way.

First, let me be clear. We want newcomers to come to Canada. We need them to grow this country, as Canada has throughout its great history. They are the nation builders of today and the nation builders of tomorrow. The question is how we get there.

We have accepted 1.4 million new citizens to Canada since the Conservatives were elected in 2006. That is an unprecedented number that puts Canada among the top countries among our peers. That is a lot of people, and we welcome them.

We also believe we should help to prepare those people, those newcomers, in the very best way we can, so they can succeed here. Enter Bill C-24. It is in all of our best interests to do that.

What does this really mean on the ground? There are three things it means.

First of all, it means we want newcomers to bond with their new home. We want them to feel they are part of Canada. We believe they should have a strong attachment to this country by having a significant Canadian experience before they become citizens. Hence, that means adding one year, going from three years to four years' residency, or actually 1,460 days now, before they can become a citizen.

Second, we require that they, yes, actually be present here in Canada while they are building that understanding of Canadian values and way of life.

Third, to help our newcomers integrate, we believe they should know one of our official languages. It seems reasonable to most people. This will help our newcomers to succeed and it will help Canada to succeed by opening its doors to them.

Gillian Smith of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship works extensively with Canada's newcomers, and she said she has found overwhelming support among them for these kinds of changes. Our

newest citizens report that the measures that actually help them to foster their connections and attachment with Canada have had the most positive effect on their integration.

Their sense of belonging comes in large measure from actually experiencing Canada first-hand, its people, nature, culture, heritage, and yes, its cold winters, its hockey, its Tim Hortons, and all of that which goes along with being a Canadian. This is where our connections with each other really develop.

An understanding of one of our official languages and a deeper knowledge of these kinds of values and traditions help newcomers become active members of Canadian society a lot sooner. This will assist them on their path to seize the opportunities that are the reason they are coming to Canada, and that is what we want.

Our government's proposed changes would also expand the ages for citizenship applicants who are required to demonstrate this kind of language proficiency, as well as take the knowledge test. Currently, it is from ages 18 to 54. It would go from ages 14 to 64.

There are critics who will say that these moves to strengthen the residency and language requirements would make it harder to become a Canadian citizen. We believe that people who really wish to hold the coveted Canadian passport, to call Canada their home, will achieve these requirements. Something valued is something that really is worth working for.

In the past, it has not always been that way. I point to immigration lawyer Raj Sharma, who told my friend Doug Dirks, the host of CBC Calgary's *The Homestretch*, that “basically, an eight-year-old with a crayon could have passed the previous knowledge test to become a Canadian citizen...”. That is actually what he said. This is one very busy immigration lawyer.

This is something we do not take lightly. By strengthening the residency and knowledge requirements, we are making sure new citizens are both more committed and fully prepared to actually take up life here in Canada. This is balancing rights and responsibilities.

The Aga Khan was here in this House today, and he spoke about this very thing. He talked about a healthy civil society, and he said that Canada accepted a major wave of Ismailis in the 1970s during the brutal Idi Amin era. The Aga Khan placed Canada first among all in creating a pluralistic society. However, in building a healthy civil society, the Aga Khan said what that takes is balancing rights and responsibilities. That is exactly what the act would do for new citizens.

• (1720)

Author Nick Noorani expressed a similar sentiment on CBC Radio a while back when he said it is not becoming more difficult, it is putting in place checks and balances.

He also said he is a very proud Canadian and believes that anyone who wants to become a Canadian should follow certain rules and regulations. For instance, he said, for people who have misused the system, the government is now putting a premium on Canadian citizenship, as well it should be.

Private Members' Business

To come back to the residency requirement, it would only include time that the person spends in Canada as a permanent resident, which has not always been the case. In the past, the rules were a little fuzzy and often taken advantage of by unscrupulous people. We are making them crystal clear. Newcomers who are coming to build Canada expect and want to be contributors, and this would give them more time to establish themselves here.

My own son-in-law would be affected by these proposed changes. He would have to spend an extra year in Canada to get citizenship, and that is okay. Canadian citizenship is something worth working for.

This is what Canadians rightly expect. They welcome newcomers as citizens and full members of our Canadian family, but not people who want to hold a citizenship of convenience as a backup plan while they live and work somewhere else.

However, there will be exceptions. Applicants who are outside of Canada because they are accompanying either their Canadian spouse or parent who is employed in the Canadian Armed Forces, or as a servant of the Crown, could still qualify for citizenship. This is to prevent residents from being penalized for their family's service abroad for Canada. We are honouring those who serve Canada, and showing our gratitude for those who put their lives on hold in service to our country.

Canadian citizenship is an honour and a privilege. It comes not only with rights, but with responsibilities. Immigrants understand that. They are very proud to fulfill these responsibilities. In fact, over 85% of permanent residents who have gone on to become citizens support these initiatives.

In 2012, more than 110,000 people became proud Canadian citizens. This year alone, we held 1,722 citizenship ceremonies from coast to coast to coast.

One of my favourite things to do as a member Parliament is to preside over citizenship ceremonies. They are heartwarming and even tear-jerking. As a Canadian, I feel honoured that these people have chosen Canada and are taking a pledge to become part of the Canadian family. They have often undergone great hardship to come to Canada, but it has been worth it because of the value of Canadian citizenship that this act underscores.

These people want to come and contribute to our economy. Many have come to Canada for security for their home and family under the rule of law. They are overwhelmingly pleased with these changes because, again, they value Canadian citizenship. They believe that it should only be granted to people like them who live and play by the rules.

We have to continue to ensure that this is the Canada we are protecting and preserving for all of us into the future. The strengthening Canadian citizenship act would enhance the value and integrity of our Canadian citizenship and would ensure that it is going to be valued just as much by future generations.

We are accepting unprecedented numbers of immigrants, and earlier I mentioned it has been 1.4 million people since 2006. We are ranked as the top among our peer countries in this.

The strengthening Canadian citizenship act that we are very proud to be putting forward today is a necessary measure. It is supported by newcomers to Canada. It will ensure that we can continue to keep the doors to Canada open, create this pluralistic society that the Aga Khan talked about and that all of us are proud of, and ensure that newcomers are in the very best position to succeed when they come to Canada.

• (1725)

The Deputy Speaker: The member for Calgary Centre will have five minutes of questions and comments when we resume debate on this bill.

It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1730)

[*Translation*]

TAX EVASION

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should: (a) study and measure Canadian tax losses to international tax havens and tax evasion, in order to determine the Canadian federal "tax gap"; (b) order the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) to provide the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) with the information necessary to provide an independent estimate of the Canadian federal tax gap arising from tax evasion and tax avoidance through the use of tax havens; (c) mandate the Auditor General or the PBO to provide estimates of the marginal revenue of additional CRA resources (i.e. auditors) in the areas of tax evasion and tax avoidance; and (d) mandate the Auditor General to evaluate, on a regular basis, the success of the CRA in prosecuting and settling cases of tax evasion.

He said: Mr. Speaker, today I am pleased to move in the House Motion No. 485 on combating the use of tax havens.

At a time when wealthy countries are desperately looking for revenue to reduce their deficits, tax evasion results in annual losses of 100 billion Euro in Europe, and, according to some estimates, up to \$30,000 billion worldwide.

We often think of tax havens as pertaining strictly to taxes. Let us not forget, however, that they also play an essential role in business investment strategies. According to data from the United Nations conference on trade and development, a third of offshore direct investments by multinational companies are made in tax havens, a trend that has been on the rise since the 1990s.

According to a 2005 study by Statistics Canada, Canadian assets in offshore financial centres increased eight-fold between 1990 and 2003, increasing from \$11 billion to \$88 billion. Today, they represent more than double that, at \$170 billion. The strongest growth in direct Canadian investment during that period was observed in Barbados, Ireland, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, and the Bahamas. That 2005 study on offshore financial centres was the last of its kind conducted by Statistics Canada.

Private Members' Business

In 2009, Statistics Canada suggested that Canadian entities had invested up to \$146 billion in tax havens. We learned that this represented 25% of direct investments by Canadians abroad. Among the tax havens blessed by Canadian investors we have the Cayman Islands, Ireland, Luxembourg, Bermuda, Hungary and Barbados. In 2012, Canadian business people injected \$60 billion in Barbados, an 80% increase since 2007.

The first time I heard of Barbados being used as a tax haven was when we found out that former prime minister Paul Martin registered his ships there to avoid paying taxes in Canada. What a prime minister.

His example led the way for other Canadian business leaders who, like him, wanted to evade taxes. Former prime minister Paul Martin's decision in 1995 kicked off a veritable race offshore for wealthy taxpayers and Canadian businesses.

After that date, the increase in Canadian investment in Barbados was somewhere in the order of 3,600% in a few years. Nothing else can explain this interest in a small island where this is no oil or gold mines to be found. Barbados seems to have become the bridehead that gives Canadians access to other tax havens.

How much tax revenue is Canada losing because our businesses and wealthy individuals are using tax havens? Unfortunately, there are currently no reliable studies that assess that tax gap. While Canadian families are struggling and trying to make ends meet, while small and medium-sized businesses are dealing with increased global competition, while the government is gutting social programs to bring down the deficit, rich Canadians and major Canadian companies are investing billions of dollars in tax havens, tax-free, and the government is not even making a serious attempt to determine how much tax revenue it is losing out on. According to some independent estimates, the Canadian tax system is losing between \$5.3 billion and \$7.8 billion in revenue per year to tax evasion.

The NDP strongly believes that the federal government has an obligation to determine, as best it possibly can, how much tax revenue Canada is losing to international tax havens and tax evasion. We need to determine how big the tax gap is. Without that kind of estimate, it is impossible to determine how serious the issue of tax erosion is or how effective the adopted corrective measures are.

Accordingly, the motion that I am moving today urges the federal government to take serious measures to determine the federal tax gap arising from the use of tax havens. In order to obtain reliable numbers on the tax gap, the motion also calls on the Canada Revenue Agency to provide the Parliamentary Budget Officer with the information necessary to provide an independent estimate.

My motion also calls on the Auditor General or the Parliamentary Budget Officer to provide estimates of the marginal revenue of additional CRA resources in the area of tax evasion.

According to an OECD report, providing additional resources is remarkably cost effective. The United Kingdom invested £4 million in the fight against tax evasion and ended up recouping £7 billion.

●(1735)

Lastly, my motion asks that the Auditor General be given a mandate to evaluate, on a regular basis, the success of the CRA in prosecuting and settling cases of tax evasion. Canadians are entitled to wonder whether the Conservative government really wants to pull out all the stops to combat tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance.

Let us take a look at some numbers. First, since 2011, the Conservatives have cut \$220 million from the Canada Revenue Agency's budget, and they will cut the equivalent of 3,000 full-time positions by 2015. The government's actions do not indicate that it is taking this issue seriously.

According to *Le Devoir*, in May 2003, 422 employees were responsible for the international audit program. Even though that number has risen slightly over the past three or four years, it is still lower than the 512 employees in the program in 2008. Since then, the use of offshore accounts has skyrocketed. In 2012, the Canada Revenue Agency estimated, conservatively, that it failed to collect \$4 billion worth of tax on funds hidden in tax havens.

The 2010 audit conducted by the agency's own management confirmed that the agency is unable to track complex files involving multi-million-dollar bank accounts in tax havens. According to a leaked internal document, it would rather take aim at easy targets, such as small businesses, self-employed workers, the corner hairdresser and the small restaurant owner. When it comes to billions of dollars, the agency is afraid to take on the big guys.

The Conservative government tried to convince people of its supposed intent to combat tax havens. The government likes to talk about how it has implemented 75 measures to combat tax evasion since 2006, yet only 44 people were convicted of tax evasion between 2006 and 2012.

These numbers are truly fascinating. Thanks to the Access to Information Act, CBC recently obtained the names of 25 people who were convicted. Of those 25, only eight were found guilty of hiding income or assets in a tax haven. Of those eight, two were found not by the Canada Revenue Agency, but by Project Colisée, which identified Rizzuto as one of the people who had an account in a tax haven.

From 2006 to 2012, CRA managed to lay charges in six cases. That number seems rather low to me. That means one case per year. However, since 2007, CRA has received a lot of information thanks to major leaks of offshore financial data. That is how it was able to get the names of many Canadians who hold foreign accounts.

In 2007, Canada Revenue Agency got its hands on a list of 106 Canadians who had accounts with the LGT bank in Liechtenstein, and another list of 1,785 Canadians who had accounts with HSBC in Switzerland. In 2010, an international leak revealed the names of 2,000 Canadians once again associated with HSBC. Lastly, in April 2013, recently, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists identified 450 Canadians linked to firms or trusts established in countries known for their low tax rates and lack of transparency.

Private Members' Business

Many countries, such as Germany and the United States, have agreed in recent years to pay compensation to informants who allow them to recover money. It seems that this government is now willing to pay for information. As someone else said, "it is about time".

If I do the math, by adding up the 106 names from 2007, the 1,785 names from 2000, the 2,000 names from 2010 and the 450 names obtained recently, in April 2013, that adds up to 4,341 names of people who have accounts in tax havens.

• (1740)

The Canada Revenue Agency has the names of 4,341 people. How many have been charged and found guilty? Six. I would say that more effort is required.

I will go back to Barbados, which is a textbook case. The Government of Canada, during Joe Clark's short Conservative reign, signed a controversial agreement to prevent double taxation. This made it possible for Canadians to register their assets in Barbados and pay virtually no taxes, and then transfer the assets to Canada without being taxed.

Repealing the agreement between this Caribbean island and Canada would put an end to this problem. Today, the opposite is happening. As of 2012, business people had invested \$60 billion in Barbados.

Instead of repealing this agreement, the Conservatives are looking to sign similar agreements, called tax information exchange agreements, with other tax havens, which is even more hypocritical. In June 2010, Canada signed this type of agreement with eight other countries: Bahamas, Bermuda, Dominica, the Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The government then presented them as agreements to obtain information about Canadian taxpayers who are hiding their money from the tax man.

Today, there are 19 countries or tax havens on this list. Aruba, Antigua, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Guernsey and others were added to the list.

I will quote Professor Alain Deneault:

...The agreements exist in principle to allow tax authorities of the countries involved to investigate potential fraudsters in the countries that have signed the agreements, under certain conditions. However, compared to other international agreements in effect, the Canadian TIEA has a distinct feature. The [Conservative] government's 2007 budget inserted a clause to the effect that Canadian investors who place their assets in one of the tax havens signatory to an agreement with Canada can repatriate their assets as dividends without having to pay taxes....

At the same time that it was signing tax information exchange agreements with tax havens, the Conservative government made legislative changes that watered down these agreements. They no longer cover just the exchange of information; they also exempt subsidiaries located in the countries concerned from paying income tax.

This is what accounting firm Deloitte had to say:

...the Income Tax Regulations were amended in 2008 to extend to countries with which Canada has a TIEA certain favourable corporate tax provisions that had previously only been available to countries with which Canada has concluded a tax treaty. These incentives provide that if a jurisdiction enters into a TIEA with Canada, active business income earned by a foreign affiliate of a Canadian

corporation that is resident in that jurisdiction and carrying on business there will be included in "exempt surplus" and, consequently, dividends paid to the Canadian corporation from the affiliate will not be subject to Canadian tax.

We need to do away with duplicity in Canada. Other measures could be put in place to put an end to this. The Canada Revenue Agency could require Canadian corporations, including their subsidiaries, to disclose all taxes paid abroad, broken down by country, to provide increased transparency of the activities of Canadian companies that use tax havens. It could require that the government create an effective system to identify the people who facilitate tax evasion, including accountants, lawyers and other professionals. It could require that the government conduct a quantitative re-assessment of whether the bilateral model of those famous information exchange agreements is effective. It could require that the federal government focus more on multilateral co-operation. It could require that the Standing Committee on Finance study the issue of transfer pricing by multinationals, including a study of the international best practices in this field.

I am prepared to answer questions.

• (1745)

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish to thank my hon. colleague from Rivière-du-Nord for his excellent speech and for his passionate commitment to exposing this tax injustice that exists in Canada and the huge burden it puts on our economy. I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate him on his motion.

I would like to ask my colleague what economic impact this use of tax havens has on Canada. I wonder if he could also talk about the Conservatives' lax approach to developing effective measures to combat tax havens.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague.

At this time, internationally, within the International Monetary Fund, the G20 and the OECD, Canada has committed to fighting tax havens. It has signed agreements and supported final declarations. For instance, at the summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, Canada signed the final declaration pledging to fight hard against tax havens.

My greatest fear, in light of the cuts that have been made and what we are seeing now, is that those commitments become the new Kyoto. Canada promises to do all kinds of things, which makes it look good on the international stage, but in reality, it amends Canadian legislation to promote tax corridors between Canada and the Caribbean. I am quite afraid that, without concrete measures and without the vigilance of both parliamentarians and the civil society groups that watch these people in action, this system will continue. We need to take meaningful action against tax havens. That is not the case right now.

Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague on his motion. I also want to congratulate him for tackling tax havens.

I used to be the national revenue critic for the official opposition, and I can say that this issue was a priority for the NDP. We keep lagging further and further behind under successive governments, including the Liberals. All of sudden, we are talking about it because the NDP has brought it to the forefront.

Private Members' Business

My colleague mentioned the fact that Paul Martin, back then, and the Conservative government, now, both said that they would propose numerous measures to address tax havens.

Can he tell us what is actually being done? Why are they saying that they will work on this and where do things stand now?

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his question.

In my speech, I gave an overview of all the data that the Canada Revenue Agency has at its disposal to undertake legal action and the meagre results it has gotten. We are being lax. The information is not being used systematically. There are no reports on what is happening. The Auditor General will eventually have to look at how the Canada Revenue Agency is managing and using the data and what is being done with the information gathered.

Other information will come to light. International leaks seem to happen every six or seven years, and we can expect more. However, we have no idea what the Canada Revenue Agency will do with that information. It received 450 names in 2013. Where is the legal action? Where are those people? What are they doing? How much money are we losing? We have to resort to the Access to Information Act just to get tidbits of information. When we do get something, it is not what we had hoped. We want convictions. There have only been six convictions since 2006. What a joke.

• (1750)

[English]

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I welcome this opportunity to clarify the actions being taken by our Conservative government on multiple fronts to combat international tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance. It is a track record of which we are very proud.

I would also like to debunk the unfounded assumptions and misconceptions on which Motion No. 485 is based. This is a very complex issue.

[Translation]

I would like to explain exactly why I am against the motion.

[English]

This problem is universal. It is certainly not confined to our borders.

[Translation]

The globalization of trade, the free international movement of people and funds and the rapid growth of online business have made international tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance a priority for tax administrations worldwide.

We are not sitting on our hands, and we are not letting tax cheats get away with it. From complex corporate schemes to individuals using sketchy foreign administrations, tax havens or tax shelter strategies to avoid or evade taxes, we will do what needs to be done to protect the integrity and fairness of Canada's tax system.

[English]

Anyone looking at the facts can conclude that our government has been very steadfast in its efforts to identify those who attempt to hide

their money offshore, people who think it is okay to cheat their neighbours and have them pay their way.

This is fundamentally unfair to the vast majority of honest, hard-working Canadians, who pay their fair share of taxes. They understand that this is how government pays for the important programs all Canadians depend on for our children, for our seniors, and for our health care.

[Translation]

It is illegal not to declare income from Canadian and foreign sources. Failing to declare can result in taxes, penalties and hefty interest charges. Tax evasion can also be punished by fines and prison sentences.

Our government takes tax evasion and deliberate tax avoidance very seriously. Over the past few years, we have instituted significant measures to protect the integrity of the Canadian tax system to ensure that cheats get the message.

[English]

For evidence, we need look no further than Canada's economic action plan 2013, which introduced new tools and legislative measures that are strengthening CRA's ability to combat international tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance.

[Translation]

Economic action plan 2013 also established requirements for banks and other financial intermediaries to report electronic transfers.

[English]

Commencing in January 2015, they must report international electronic fund transfers of \$10,000 or more to the CRA, as they currently must do to the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada.

[Translation]

Another measure our government introduced was extending the normal reassessment period with respect to foreign income and property.

• (1755)

[English]

We can go back an additional three years for taxpayers who have failed to report income from a specified foreign property on their annual income tax return and failed to properly file their foreign income tax verification statement, form T1135.

[Translation]

That is not all. The CRA is revising form T1135 to require taxpayers to report more detailed information. They now have to indicate the name of the foreign institutions and countries that are holding their assets and the income they earned on those assets.

Another measure that is just as essential to our work is that we are streamlining the legal process whereby the CRA obtains information concerning unnamed persons from third parties, such as banks.

Private Members' Business

[English]

Economic action plan 2013 set aside \$30 million in additional funding to equip the CRA with the tools it needs to put these new measures to work. Half of this amount, \$15 million, is earmarked to develop and implement the electronic systems the CRA will require to receive reports from banks and other financial intermediaries on international fund transfers. The remaining \$15 million is being allocated over the next five years to establish dedicated audit and compliance resources to address offshore non-compliance.

These resources are intended to enhance the CRA's existing internationally focused programs, such as those for international audit, aggressive international tax planning, and offshore tax evasion.

[Translation]

Thanks to these resources, the CRA was able to establish the Offshore Compliance Division. This will guarantee a targeted approach when action plan 2013 measures are implemented to combat international tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance.

The division will require strategic information to detect, select and coordinate high-risk offshore non-compliance cases for auditing. Audits are among the main methods the CRA uses to detect and deter non-compliance.

The division will also implement a framework.

[English]

It is actually putting in place a robust accountability framework to report on the progress in identifying and addressing offshore non-compliance.

[Translation]

Although the division is still relatively new, I can assure the House that the CRA continues to make significant inroads in its measures against taxpayers who try to hide their money offshore.

[English]

Since 2006, the CRA has audited over 7,700 cases of offshore aggressive tax planning, worth some \$4.6 billion in unpaid taxes.

The CRA has also completed compliance actions on roughly 340 audits of high-net-worth groups using sophisticated business structures and offshore arrangements to avoid taxes. This resulted in the identification of more than \$195 million in unpaid federal taxes.

What is especially encouraging is that this tough approach has made converts of many people who previously failed to declare their income. Canadians are now taking it upon themselves to come forward, reporting previously undeclared income and paying up what they owe. In fact, the number of voluntary disclosures has increased more than threefold in the past number of years.

[Translation]

Those are the facts, and the facts speak for themselves. Clearly, our efforts are paying off, and we anticipate even better results in the years to come once the Offshore Compliance Division is fully operational.

Just as clearly, we do not need this opposition motion. I urge all the parties in the House to reject it and focus on more urgent matters. I am against the motion.

• (1800)

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise to take part in this debate on Motion No. 485. First of all, even though I do not agree with all of the arguments made by the NDP member, we in the Liberal Party plan to vote in favour of the motion.

I just listened to the Conservative government member, who is asking us to do the opposite. She said that we would see better results in the future and asked us to focus on more urgent matters.

How can we focus on more urgent matters when the CRA cannot go and collect billions of dollars that many Canadian taxpayers are hiding through international tax evasion and tax avoidance?

This motion has a number of parts. First of all, it calls on the government to study and measure the shortfall resulting from international fraud. I think it is entirely reasonable and normal to want to know exactly how much the shortfall is.

Not too long ago, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists obtained several files revealing that over 550 Canadian taxpayers were investing money in tax havens. Those taxpayers are therefore hiding literally billions of dollars.

What did the CRA do with that? In light of the few bits of information we are given, the CRA's results are really disappointing.

A CBC article stated that there were only eight convictions for offshore tax evasion between 2006 and 2012. Those results are disappointing, to say the least, given that Statistics Canada says that \$148 billion worth of assets are sitting in the top six tax havens.

We need to understand how urgent it is to take action on this issue. The government could be investing that money in social programs, health care or education. Instead, it is cutting resources, including those we want to see put in place for veterans. That is what the Conservative government is doing. Why not use the necessary resources to recoup that money?

This motion also proposes that the government order the Canada Revenue Agency to provide the Parliamentary Budget Officer with the information necessary to provide an independent estimate. Why not be transparent and give him the information so he can do his job? Other countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have done it, yet Canada is the exception. That is not right.

Private Members' Business

There is a third element to this motion. It calls on the government to mandate the Auditor General or the Parliamentary Budget Officer to provide estimates of the marginal revenue of additional CRA resources. It is clear that that would pay off. The Liberal budget in 2005 invested \$30 million a year for five years, which equals \$150 million to tackle tax evasion. A total of \$2.7 billion, or 18 times that investment, was recouped in 2009.

In Quebec, for example, I know that each dollar invested in resources brings in \$10. Why does the government not want to allow the Auditor General to make that assessment? We are not saying that it needs to happen right away, but why not took a look at it and determine if we should provide additional resources in this area? The Conservative government is doing something else.

• (1805)

What else did it do? It chose to cut \$300 million from two programs: the international audit program and the aggressive tax planning program. I know those people at the Canada Revenue Agency. I worked there myself. They are competent, but have limited resources. How do we expect the auditors to do their job?

What is more, to correct its mistakes, the government announced bare-bones funding of \$3 million a year for five years. The time it takes to hire these auditors is one thing; the time it takes to train them is another. They will be dealing with experts, people who put their money in other countries to avoid paying taxes. It can take three or four years, or even longer, to train these auditors until they are skilled enough to go after this money.

The Conservatives prefer to make cuts and to tell us that there are more important things to work on. In the meantime, there are billions of dollars in taxes that we should be looking for.

I hope that our comments will give pause to government members when they vote. For once, they could agree to move forward and allow the auditors to simply do an analysis. This would show whether we should increase the number of auditors and the resources provided so that the Canada Revenue Agency can move forward.

We know that it is easier to go after small taxpayers, whether they are restaurant owners or taxi drivers, and to have iron-clad measures to chase them down, rather than working to ferret out these billions of dollars.

I am asking the government once again to change its position and to support this motion moved by our colleague, which would allow the Auditor General or the Parliamentary Budget Officer to obtain the information required to conduct this study, because billions of dollars are hidden in tax havens.

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, I address my colleagues and all Canadians with the intent of expressing my support for Motion No. 485 on tax havens moved by my colleague, the hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord.

This motion calls on the government to take all the necessary measures to ensure that certain Canadians and Canadian businesses stop using tax havens to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. I reaffirm my support for this important initiative, which, once again, shows the NDP's interest in working on developing measures to protect Canada's finances and economy.

The motion calls on the government to address the problem of tax evasion. This motion proposes five measures. I would like to talk about three of those measures. The motion calls on the government to accurately measure the Canadian tax losses to international tax havens and tax evasion, in order to determine the Canadian federal tax gap.

Then it calls on the government to take measures to allow federal agencies to study the federal tax gap arising from tax evasion and tax avoidance through the use of tax havens.

Also, under one of the five measures that the motion proposes, the Auditor General would evaluate, on a regular basis, the success of the Canada Revenue Agency in prosecuting and settling cases of tax evasion.

This motion targets various aspects of tax evasion while enhancing the government's ability to act efficiently. The government must get tougher on tax evasion.

That is why the estimate of the Canadian federal tax gap arising from tax evasion, as proposed in this motion, is so important to fighting tax erosion and measuring how effective potential corrective measures will be. Public policy must reflect a needs analysis that identifies the best solutions. We have to be aware of how important it is to pass the measures in this motion without delay.

Estimates released on behalf of Oxfam International in 2013 illustrate the extent of the problem. According to the organization, individuals have hidden at least \$18,500 billion in tax havens worldwide, which represents a tax gap of over \$156 billion for governments. In Canada, independent estimates have indicated that tax revenues lost to foreign tax havens could add up to between \$5 billion and \$7.8 billion per year.

A *Globe and Mail* article published in May 2013 discussed this problem. It also provided information about the locations of these tax havens and the money Canadians had parked there. The article said:

• (1810)

[*English*]

The amount of money Canadians have parked in three top offshore tax havens has more than doubled since 2005, showing the scale of tax avoidance in Canada is "getting larger every year," says lobby group Canadians for Tax Fairness.

The advocacy group, which is pressuring the government to do more to crack down on the flow of money to tax havens, says Canadians now have \$59-billion invested in Barbados, \$30-billion in the Cayman Islands and \$20-billion in Luxembourg — the three biggest offshore tax haven destinations for Canadian funds.

Private Members' Business

[Translation]

If the government really wanted to tackle tax havens, it would be better off not cutting the CRA's budget but making sure that the Agency has the resources it needs to prevent tax evasion and conduct investigations when necessary. Unfortunately, if measures are not taken, tax cheats will go unpunished while thousands of honest Canadians will continue to bear more than their share of the tax burden.

Taxpayers in LaSalle—Émard contribute to Canada's tax revenues and will continue to do so by completing their tax returns. This is the time of the year when people do that, and they can do so until April. They make honest contributions, as do small and medium businesses. Canadian taxpayers, mostly those in the middle class, and small and medium businesses bear the bulk of the tax burden in Canada. They are the ones who pay most of the tax to federal, provincial and municipal governments. These Canadian taxpayers, the taxpayers in my riding, LaSalle—Émard, are demanding tax fairness.

However, it is clear that some individuals do not do their duty to pay taxes in Canada. In light of this fact, my constituents have two questions: why does Canada not introduce measures to identify the fraudsters, and why is the government deliberately walking away from billions of dollars in revenue that could help finance all kinds of programs and services for Canadians?

A very shocking article in *Le Devoir* quoted the latest book by Alain Deneault of the Université de Montréal's political science department, entitled *Paradis fiscaux : la filière canadienne*. Mr. Deneault points out that the link between Canada and some tax havens goes back to the 19th century. The article said:

As a result, when Caribbean countries started to become tax havens about 60 years ago, "Canadian banks were already there". One after another, they gradually moved into the Caribbean: Scotiabank (Jamaica, 1889); Royal Bank (Bahamas, 1909); CIBC (Jamaica, 1920); and so on.

Later in the article, the author mentions a report that a panel presented to Industry Canada in 2009:

"For example, Canadians invest more than four times as much in Barbados (7.3 percent) as they do in Brazil (1.6 percent). Indeed, Canadian investment in the relatively small Caribbean economies of Barbados, Bermuda and the Cayman Islands represents 12 percent of the total."

The motion before us today suggests concrete measures to address the problem of tax havens. These measures will finally create tax fairness for my constituents and also for all Canadian taxpayers, meaning that each and every person will contribute to the well-being and advancement of our country.

•(1815)

I urge the government members and all of my colleagues to unanimously support and vote in favour of Motion No. 485 on tax havens.

[English]

Mr. Gerald Keddy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue and for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise this evening to oppose private member's Motion No. 485 and to take this opportunity to highlight some of the most significant steps our government has taken to tackle the growing problem of international tax evasion and

aggressive international tax avoidance, a problem that the previous Liberal government completely ignored.

If my hon. colleagues had only taken a moment to listen to the member for Winnipeg South Centre, they would have heard a number of their questions answered.

This is an extremely complex issue. Therefore, let me begin by stating the obvious, that Canada's tax system is based on the premise of self-assessment and voluntary compliance. Canadian taxpayers, individuals, corporations, and trusts, are required by law to file their tax returns on time and to pay whatever taxes they owe in full. To comply with Canada's tax laws, Canadians who invest abroad must report their worldwide income and pay the correct amount of tax on those earnings. The majority of them do.

It does a disservice, quite frankly, for opposition members to state that somehow everyone with a foreign bank account is not paying tax or is deliberately trying to hide tax. Indeed, the vast majority of Canadian taxpayers are honest, law-abiding citizens. They file their tax returns, report their income, and pay whatever taxes they owe as required by law. When these honest Canadians hear about those who attempt to evade or avoid their tax obligations, particularly where the potential loss of revenue is significant, they are justly outraged. They want to know, and indeed deserve to know, what their government is doing about it.

Let me assure members of the House that our government takes the abuse of Canada's tax laws very seriously. Tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance, whether domestic or international, places an unfair burden on law-abiding taxpayers and businesses. They erode public trust in the tax system and jeopardize the integrity of Canada's tax base. I believe everyone in the House would agree with those words.

I understand the intentions of the member of Parliament for Rivière-du-Nord in proposing a motion to study Canadian tax losses due to international tax evasion and the use of tax havens. However, I would argue that attempting to measure the so-called tax gap is not the most effective solution to this complex global problem. I think the member opposite knows this as well.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, has reported that "Given the widely varying types of non-compliance behaviours that comprise the overall tax gap, it will be apparent that measuring its overall size is a difficult, costly and (some would say) inevitably quite an imprecise undertaking."

Those are not the government's words. Those are the OECD's words.

For the sake of clarity, let me explain that the tax gap is the difference between the tax revenues the government actually receives in a year and the tax revenues it would receive if all taxpayers respected their tax obligations under the various acts and regulations administered by the Canada Revenue Agency.

Here comes the rub. Estimating the income that is deliberately hidden in secret offshore investments is virtually impossible with even a minimal degree of accuracy or reliability. By their very nature, tax evasion and tax avoidance are difficult to quantify since they involve people or entities deliberately and aggressively hiding money from the government.

Therefore, like the vast majority of OECD countries around the world, Canada does not estimate the amount of revenue lost to international tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance. However, to that point, I must stress that our government takes the issue of international tax non-compliance extremely seriously and it is by no means turning a blind eye to the problem. One of my colleagues has already summarized the important measures that our government introduced in economic action plan 2013 to tackle international tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance.

● (1820)

These new measures and tools will strengthen the Canada Revenue Agency's ability to identify and audit abusive tax schemes and arrangements that use offshore jurisdictions to hide assets and income.

On January 15, the hon. Minister of National Revenue announced the launch of the new offshore tax informant program, which is one of the economic action plan measures I just mentioned.

For the first time, the Canada Revenue Agency is in a position to financially reward individuals when they provide information that leads to the assessment and collection of additional federal taxes in cases of major international tax non-compliance. Informants are now able to contact the Canada Revenue Agency through a toll-free number that is accessible throughout North America and a local number that can be reached from anywhere in the world.

After considering the information provided, and there is a very clear protocol, the Canada Revenue Agency may enter into a contract with the informant if the federal tax owing, excluding interest and penalties, is more than \$100,000 and all other program requirements are met.

Of course, no payment would be made to anyone already convicted of tax evasion in relation to the information provided. Our government will not reward tax cheats from turning on one another.

Regardless of whether the information ultimately results in a payment under the program, the Canada Revenue Agency can use the information provided to carry out its mandate to ensure compliance with Canada's tax laws. Offering a reward for information about major cases of international tax non-compliance would both encourage those with information to come forward and discourage Canadians from breaking the law in the first place.

The new offshore tax informant program is not the only way the Canada Revenue Agency obtains information about tax non-compliance. The agency already has an informant leads program in place that accepts information about all forms of tax non-compliance, although it does not pay informants for such information. The informant leads program can be used to report cases of international tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance that fall below the \$100,000 threshold that is set for the offshore tax informant program.

Routine Proceedings

Taxpayers with previously undisclosed income may also avail themselves of the Canada Revenue Agency's voluntary disclosures program. Should Canadians choose to rectify their tax affairs through voluntary disclosure, they may be able to avoid penalties and prosecution for tax evasion and only have to pay the taxes they owe, plus interest.

Taxpayers file many different types of disclosures in relation to income and property located outside of Canada. For example, CRA has received a significant number of disclosures in relation to foreign asset reporting information and investment income located offshore. To be eligible for the voluntary disclosures program, taxpayers must come forward and file a valid disclosure before they become aware of any compliance action that CRA begins against them.

We encourage all Canadians with unreported or underreported income to avail themselves of the voluntary disclosures program, pay their taxes upfront, or otherwise the financial penalties for being caught cheating on their taxes could be dire.

While our government will not support Motion No. 485, Canadians can rest assured that we are taking strong action to protect the integrity and fairness of Canada's tax system. We believe that following up on information and intelligence provided by informants is one of many effective solutions to addressing the complex issue of international tax non-compliance.

This is more effective than attempting to substantiate some elusive "tax gap" that only exists because someone is deliberately and very aggressively, and usually with a fair amount of finesse, hiding income offshore. That so-called "tax gap" is almost impossible to quantify. The OECD says that it is impossible to quantify, and we believe it. However, that does not take the burden off government to aggressively follow up on international tax evasion and international tax cheats. It actually increases the burden on government to aggressively seek out people who are not paying their income tax or who are hiding their money offshore.

● (1825)

As my hon. colleague from Winnipeg South Centre said earlier, there are a number of tools in the government's toolbox. We are using every single one of them to aggressively search out these tax cheats and make sure they are in compliance. If not, we will use the force of the law to force them into compliance.

The Deputy Speaker: The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order precedence on the order paper.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

The House resumed from February 6 consideration of the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: Pursuant to an order made on Wednesday, February 26, 2014, the question is deemed put and a recorded division is deemed requested.

Adjournment Proceedings

Pursuant to Standing Order 66, the recorded division is deferred until Wednesday, March 5, 2014, at the end of the period provided for government orders.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

● (1830)

[English]

HEALTH

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is a dangerous grey area in the regulation of medical drugs in Canada, namely with respect to drug compounds prepared by mixing together two or more ingredients, of which at least one is a drug, to create a final product in an appropriate form or dosing for administration in a patient-health care professional relationship, typically in a hospital.

The emergence of this new form of drug delivery—through pre-filled syringes and bags, for example—has become problematic because companies in this sector fall between the definition of a drug manufacturer and that of a pharmacy. The latter is regulated by the provinces and the former by the federal government.

The absence of sufficient and appropriate regulatory oversight of drug compounders has led to mistakes and human tragedy both in Canada and the U.S. In Canada, the Marchese fiasco resulted in patients receiving diluted doses of a chemotherapy drug. In the U.S., in late 2012, there was an outbreak of viral meningitis associated with a compounded steroid injectable, known as MPA, which was contaminated when it was administered—64 people died and 750 others became sick.

The U.S. compounding industry was operating in the same kind of balkanized regulatory environment as drug compounders in Canada today. The tragedy prompted the U.S. to adopt the Drug Quality and Security Act. Under the act, compounders register as outsourcing facilities, which brings the same type of regulatory oversight by the FDA as is reserved for drug manufacturers, with the same standards of compliance, risk-based inspections, record retention, and adverse event reporting.

The question is this. Why does the federal government in Canada not step in and deploy its expertise in the regulation of drug manufacturers to drug compounders? It would seem a logical extension of federal authority and a wise application of existing federal know-how, all in the interests of the general health welfare of Canadians from coast to coast to coast, who as citizens of this great country, deserve to benefit from common standards of health protection.

Why do the Conservatives fail to show initiative? Are they afraid of the costs? Is it because doing so would require discussion with provincial health ministers, who are not pleased with Ottawa's growing neglect of co-operative federalism in health care?

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, from the moment our government was

told about the reported under-dosing of certain chemotherapy drugs in Ontario and in New Brunswick, we took the situation very seriously. We supported the provincial government's investigation into this incident and we accept the findings of the Thiessen report.

We agree that compounding-like activities conducted by third parties, such as Marchese Hospital Solutions, require more effective regulatory oversight, and we are determined that Canadians will have tough, effective regulations for drug safety.

While this work is ongoing, Health Canada has given direction to companies providing these types of services to ensure that they have oversight in place to protect patients' safety.

This direction states that admixing and compounding activities are done within a hospital, meeting provincial regulatory requirements; are done outside of a hospital, as a service under the supervision of a provincially licensed pharmacist; or, in the third instance, are done in a manner that meets the licensing and manufacturing requirements of the Food and Drugs Act and the Food and Drug Regulations.

Canadians can be assured that organizations following these directions have the appropriate oversight in place to help ensure the safety and effectiveness of health products prepared in this way.

The facts that emerged surrounding the under-dosing incident in Ontario highlighted how the practice of pharmacy has changed and evolved to include new drug preparation and purchasing models.

The regulation of traditional drug compounding is premised on the issuance of a prescription by a health care practitioner for a single drug to a single patient as part of the practice of pharmacy, and as such, it is in the realm of provincial and territorial jurisdiction. The regulation of drug manufacturing requirements and processes most often undertaken by pharmaceutical companies is in the realm of the federal government.

Under new drug preparation models, compounding-like activities are being conducted in dedicated facilities by third parties outside a health care setting for many patients at once and often without a specific prescription. This type of activity can be described as a hybrid of compounding and manufacturing.

As I said, Health Canada has taken on a leadership role in addressing this issue and is developing a proposal for a federal approach for these compounding-like activities. Our objective is to enhance the oversight of these practices for the safety of all Canadians: for my family, for members' families, for families across Canada. Federal oversight would focus on the quality of products and would include additional requirements such as labelling and reporting and enhancing patient safety.

Moving forward, it is important that we continue our collaborative, thoughtful approach with provinces, territories, and other partners to avoid unintended consequences in developing the new approach.

We also want to create an approach that respects both the federal role in drug safety and the provincial and territorial role in the safe use of drugs, particularly because of the diversity of approaches in the oversight of these activities across Canada.

• (1835)

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Mr. Speaker, I thank the parliamentary secretary for the information she has provided on this issue.

I would say that hospitals would welcome the peace of mind that standardized federal regulatory oversight of compounders would bring when it comes to purchasing large quantities of drug preparations for patients in hospitals. This kind of national regulatory oversight would also bring economic benefits; specifically, compounders would be able to demonstrate to potential buyers that their processes and products respect the most stringent national regulatory standards associated with drug manufacturing. In addition, they would be able to operate more efficiently inside the internal Canadian marketplace, as they would be able to avoid having to deal with a costly patchwork of different provincial regulations.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, having an appropriate level of regulatory oversight for compounding-like activities is a priority for our government.

Health Canada acted quickly following the reported under-dosing of certain chemotherapy drugs in Ontario and has taken on a leadership role in facilitating the development of a long-term solution for all of Canada.

Health Canada issued an interim directive to facilities undertaking admixing and compounding activities and outlined the conditions under which they could be allowed to continue providing those services.

The department continues to work with provinces, territories, and other stakeholders to develop a collaborative approach to increase patient safety and to ensure that an appropriate level of regulatory oversight is in place for compounding-like activities.

[Translation]

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, two weeks ago, I asked a number of questions about VIA Rail.

CN decided that the railway tracks between Moncton and Campbellton needed repairs. New Brunswick's provincial government negotiated with CN. I am not proud to say it, but New Brunswick is one of Canada's poorest provinces because of all the infrastructure and the fact that only 750,000 people live there. The provincial government invested \$25 million to repair the tracks between Moncton and Miramichi, and Bathurst and Campbellton. CN invested \$35 million. These are tracks for freight trains.

Consequently, freight will leave Miramichi and travel through Moncton and Rivière-du-Loup to get to Quebec City, Montreal, Toronto and the rest of the country. To make things clear, from Bathurst, the train will go through Campbellton, Rimouski, Rivière-du-Loup and then on to Montreal and the rest of the country. A piece of the puzzle is missing between Miramichi and Bathurst. That is the

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part they do not want to repair, because freight trains do not use that section of track. VIA Rail would have to foot the bill.

We have had a train since Canada was founded. We built a national railway, from sea to sea, as they say. People can take the train from Vancouver to Halifax. Without the link from Miramichi to Bathurst, VIA Rail trains will no longer go through Moncton, Rogersville, Miramichi and Bathurst and on to Beresford, Nigadoo and Petit-Rocher to get to Dalhousie, Campbellton and the Acadian peninsula, where they get on the VIA Rail line to the Gaspé.

That means VIA Rail will lose 50% of its passengers. That means we will also automatically lose VIA Rail service from Quebec City to Halifax. We will no longer be able to talk about a train from sea to sea. We will have to talk about a train that goes to the St. Lawrence, that stops at Quebec City. This is part of our heritage. It is important for our seniors who use the train to get to Montreal. They go to hospitals, they go to see specialists, or they go to Halifax. Our students go to Halifax, Moncton, Montreal and everywhere. There are also people who are travelling as tourists.

I have asked the question a number of times in the House of Commons. Will the Conservative government at least invest \$10 million? That is how much is needed to repair the railway. The government says that VIA Rail is a crown corporation. We are asking the government to save the railway. It is important to Canadians.

Finally, we learned that the hon. member for Miramichi said that she was working behind the scenes and on the ground with the government to make it aware of the needs. The hon. member for Madawaska—Restigouche said the same thing. He said he is not like the member for Acadie—Bathurst and he does not do this out in public. That is what he told the journalists, on the radio. He said he was working on this.

My question for the government is simple. Does the Conservative government today want to be the government that will go down in history as having lost VIA Rail from sea to sea? Will it be the government that takes away VIA Rail from the Atlantic, from Quebec City to Halifax? Will it be this government? I ask the question very respectfully.

• (1840)

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question.

[English]

VIA Rail's objective is to operate a national rail system that is safe and efficient. To help VIA Rail accomplish this, our government provides it with significant funding to deliver passenger rail services to Canadians.

In 2012-13, our government provided \$275 million to VIA Rail for operation and maintenance of its network. In addition to providing annual funding, our government has provided nearly \$1 billion in capital funding since 2007 for VIA Rail to upgrade track and signalling infrastructure, modernize stations, and refurbish rail cars.

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As the minister has indicated on previous occasions, VIA Rail is a crown corporation that operates independent of our government. Our government does not operate the railway or get involved in its day-to-day operations. It is VIA Rail that is responsible for determining how best to provide passenger rail services, what routes or tracks those services will operate over, and how frequently its various services will be offered to consumers.

VIA Rail also determines the price that it charges for these services. VIA Rail is ultimately responsible for making business decisions on its operations, including making decisions about its passenger rail services in New Brunswick. Our government has made it clear that it does not intend to purchase the rail line in New Brunswick that CN has listed for sale. Our government is not in the business of buying rail lines and believes this is best left to those who are in the business of operating railways.

Instead, our federal government's approach and role is to provide a legislative framework under the Canada Transportation Act that encourages stakeholders to seek commercial solutions to issues such as the discontinuance of rail service. The line transfer and discontinuance provisions in the Canada Transportation Act are aimed at encouraging the retention of rail lines, by giving railway operators and other interested parties the opportunity to buy rail lines for continued operation where it makes economic sense for them to do so.

In the meantime, CN will continue to be responsible for maintaining the rail line during the discontinuance process to ensure that service is not disrupted. It is also important to note that there are public transportation options available in this region. In addition to the service that is provided three times weekly by VIA Rail, there is a bus service between Moncton and Campbellton that provides daily service.

• (1845)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, with all respect to the parliamentary secretary for her help, we are talking about shutting down VIA Rail from Quebec City to Halifax.

The government is saying that it does not invest in rail. That is not true. The government has invested in part of the rail between Ottawa

and Montreal because CN did not want to get involved with VIA Rail.

VIA Rail has invested in other places where the government has invested. In the riding of the member for Peterborough, it bought a piece of rail. Now it is saying it did not do that. The member of Parliament for Peterborough was the parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister. Now the government is saying here in the House that it does not do that.

It is the current Conservative government that will be on record as closing down VIA Rail from Quebec City to Halifax. It is taking away our passenger train that goes from coast to coast in this country, something that our people, our grandfathers and great grandfathers, have worked so hard on. Is that what the government is going to do? I hope that it studies it and that is not its final answer on the issue.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, CN is following the service discontinuance process that is outlined in section 146 of the Canada Transportation Act. This section of the act is in place to encourage the retention of rail lines by providing interested parties with the opportunity to continue railway operations.

If the member opposite wishes to strike a committee and perhaps purchase the line, he is most welcome to do so.

CN must maintain the rail line as this process unfolds so that the service is not disrupted. VIA Rail, a crown corporation that makes its own operational decisions independent of our government, will decide on the routing and schedule of the *Ocean* service in the region based on the outcome of this discontinuance process.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:48 p.m.)

APPENDIX

ADDRESS

of

His Highness the Aga Khan

49th Hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims

to both Houses of Parliament

in the

House of Commons Chamber,

Ottawa,

on Thursday, February 27, 2014

APPENDIX

ADDRESS

of
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49th Hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims
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in the
House of Commons Chamber,
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His Highness the Aga Khan was welcomed by the Right Honourable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada; the Honourable Noël A. Kinsella, Speaker of the Senate; and the Honourable Andrew Scheer, Speaker of the House of Commons.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Speaker of the House of Commons): I would like to invite the right hon. Prime Minister to now address both Houses of Parliament and our distinguished invited guest.

[Translation]

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister): Mr. Speaker of the Senate, Mr. Speaker of the House of Commons, parliamentarians, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is my great honour to welcome His Highness the Aga Khan to the Parliament of Canada.

[English]

I am also pleased to recognize his family members and Ismaili leaders, who have come from across the country and around the world to hear His Highness address the Canadian people. Please, colleagues, welcome them all.

As we all know, Canada is home to a well-established and fast-growing Ismaili community. His Highness has therefore become an increasingly frequent visitor, and always a welcome one.

[Translation]

In fact, Your Highness, you are no longer simply a visitor. You are now an honorary Canadian citizen.

[English]

I remember well, Your Highness, the day you accepted honorary Canadian citizenship, something agreed to by all parties of this House.

It was during the foundation ceremony of Toronto's Ismaili Centre and Aga Khan Museum and Park. I am told construction there has gone well and that the centre will soon portray Islamic contributions to the enlightened pursuit of knowledge.

[Translation]

Soon, everyone will be able to access this carefully catalogued history.

[English]

In any case, Your Highness, know this: when you are in Canada, you are home.

[Translation]

In a few moments, His Highness will share some thoughts with us.

[English]

Our decision to extend Canadian citizenship to His Highness recognizes the reality of values shared and values acted upon.

His Highness' life-long advocacy for humanitarianism, pluralism, and tolerance has gone far beyond words.

[Translation]

For example, the Global Centre for Pluralism, here in Ottawa, was established in partnership with our government at the very beginning of our mandate.

[English]

His Highness' Global Centre for Pluralism here in Ottawa advances good governance and engages with societies on the precipice of crisis.

Similarly, through the Aga Khan Development Network, His Highness has been tireless in humanitarian and development initiatives in Africa, in Asia, including in Afghanistan, where the network continues to be a brave partner in Canada's efforts to secure and improve the lives of Afghan citizens.

Over the years, then, we have built together a solid record of genuine assistance to some of the world's neediest people. Today that work goes on. In particular, our government and the network cooperate in the development priority that Canada assumed at the Muskoka G8, the promotion of maternal, newborn, and child health.

[Translation]

The fact that so many women, infants and children in developing countries are dying needlessly is an unspeakable tragedy—I would even call it disgraceful—when medical knowledge is so widespread.

[English]

In this work, Your Highness, we are delighted to have your personal support and the capable assistance of the Aga Khan Foundation of Canada and the Aga Khan Development Network.

[Translation]

Canadians have the utmost respect for the work they do, and your leadership inspires us to hope for a better world.

[English]

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, colleagues, Canadians are strongest when we have the support of those who share our values.

[Translation]

Although revered in the western world, deeply rooted values are not restricted to a single culture.

[English]

Those who love freedom and democracy, those who desire peace, those who will uphold the basic rights of every man and woman, and those who, such as His Highness, share our belief that pluralism, diversity within a united country, is the basis of all of these things—these are our friends.

Your Highness, we have met on several occasions and, like our country as a whole, I value your counsel and your friendship.

[Translation]

It has become clear that there is an exquisite symmetry, as I once described it, between your values and Canadian values.

[English]

You once said that we cannot make the world safe for democracy without first making the world safe for diversity. This is a most Canadian way of seeing things.

[Translation]

It is in that spirit that our government created Canada's Office of Religious Freedom last year, because we believe that freedom of religion and freedom of conscience form the basis of our freedoms.

[English]

Your Highness, the depth of our relationship suggests that more frequent and deliberate dialogue between the Imamate and the Government of Canada would be beneficial.

[Translation]

I am therefore pleased to announce that at the conclusion of these proceedings, the Imamate and the Government of Canada will sign a protocol of understanding that builds upon our broad, historic relationship.

[English]

I am, therefore, pleased to announce that at the conclusion of these proceedings, the Imamate and the Government of Canada will sign a protocol of understanding that builds upon our broad, historic relationship.

Let me conclude, Your Highness, by returning to the subject of Canada's Ismaili community, which began its life here more than 40 years ago as penniless refugees from Uganda. Yet, from that moment on, Canada's Ismailis have become one of Canada's most successful immigration stories.

[Translation]

Your Highness, the prosperity of your followers, their harmonious integration into Canadian society and the respect they have inspired could be considered a tribute to pluralism in Canada. That is very much the case.

[English]

The Ismaili combination of self-reliance and willingness to give for the betterment of others and of Canada itself is a reflection of your teachings and, Your Highness, it was a good day, a good day for all of us, when you told your followers to "make Canada your home". You must be very proud of them. Certainly, we all are.

[Translation]

Now, Mr. Speaker, parliamentarians, please join me in welcoming a great friend and partner of Canada, His Highness the Aga Khan.

[English]

H.H. Aga Khan (49th Hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims): *Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem.*

Prime Minister, Speaker Kinsella, Speaker Scheer, hon. members of the Senate and the House of Commons, Chief Justice of the

Supreme Court, hon. members of the diplomatic community, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, the Prime Minister's generous introduction has been very kind. I am grateful for this invitation, for our association, and for so thoughtfully enabling leading representatives of our community and institutions around the world to join us on this occasion. Thank you, Prime Minister.

I am thankful that these leaders of the Ismaili community will have this opportunity to see for themselves why Canada is a leader in the community of nations. I must also thank you, Prime Minister, for inviting me to become an honorary citizen.

May I congratulate you on the gold medals of your remarkable hockey teams in Sochi. As an ex-player myself, I was hoping you would require your honorary citizens to join your team. I am convinced that the Dalai Lama and I would have been a formidable defence.

[Translation]

Thank you again for the invitation, Mr. Prime Minister.

It is an unprecedented honour for me to be here today. This is both a personal feeling and an objective observation, since I was told that this is the first time in 75 years that a spiritual leader has addressed a joint session of the Senate and the House of Commons during an official visit.

It is therefore with humility and a feeling of great responsibility that I speak to you, the elected representatives of the Canadian federal Parliament, in the presence of the highest authorities of the federal government.

I have the great privilege of representing the Ismaili Imamate, an institution that reaches across borders and, for over 1,400 years, has identified itself and been recognized by a growing number of states as the succession of the Shia Imami Ismaili imams.

As the 49th Imam in that long history, for over 50 years, I have carried two inseparable responsibilities: overseeing the spiritual journey of Ismailis and, at the same time, improving their quality of life and the quality of life of the communities in which they live.

Although there was a time where the Ismaili imams were also caliphs, which means heads of state—for example, in Egypt in the Fatimid period—today, my role is not a political one, since all Ismailis are first and foremost citizens of their native or adopted country.

The purview of the Ismaili Imamate is much greater now than it was in those days, since today, it is active in many areas of the world. With that in mind, I would like to share some thoughts with you that I think are important.

[English]

I propose today to give you some background about myself and my role and then to reflect upon what we call the *umma*, the entirety of Muslim communities around the world.

I will comment as a faith leader on the crisis of governance in so much of the world today, before concluding with some thoughts about the values that can assist countries of crises to develop into countries of opportunity and how Canada can help shape that process.

First then, a few personal words.

I was born into a Muslim family, linked by heredity to the Prophet Muhammad. May peace be upon him and his family.

My education is blended in Islamic and western traditions. I was studying at Harvard some 50 years ago—actually, 56 years ago—when I became the hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims. The Ismaili Imamate is a separate national entity, representing the succession of imams since the time of the Prophet. Let me clarify something more about the history of that role, in both the Sunni and the Shia interpretations of the Muslim faith.

The Sunni position is that the Prophet nominated no successor and that spiritual moral authority belongs to those who are learned in matters of religious law. As a result, there are many Sunni imams in a given time and a given place. Others believe that the Prophet had designated his cousin and son-in-law Ali as his successor. From that early division a host of further distinctions grew up, but the question of rightful leadership remains central. In time the Shia were also subdivided over those questions, so that today the Ismailis are the only Shia community who throughout history have been led by a living hereditary imam in direct descent from the Prophet.

The role of the Ismaili imam is a spiritual one. His authority is that of religious interpretation. It is not a political role. I do not govern any land. At the same time, Islam believes fundamentally that the spiritual and material worlds are inextricably connected. Faith does not remove Muslims or their imams from daily practical matters in family life, in business, and in community affairs. Faith, rather, is a force that should deepen our concern for our worldly habitat, for embracing its challenges, and for improving the quality of human life. The belief in this fusion of faith and world is why much of my attention has been committed to the work of the Aga Khan Development Network.

In 1957, when I succeeded my grandfather as Imam, the Ismaili community lived for the most part in the colonies and ex-colonies of France, Belgium, and the British Empire, or behind the Iron Curtain. This is still a highly diverse community in terms of ethnicity, language, culture, and geography. They continue to live mostly in the developing world, though increasing numbers now live in Europe and North America.

Before 1957, individual Ismaili communities had their own social and economic institutions where that was allowed. There was no intent for them to grow to national prominence, and even less vision to coordinate their activities across frontiers.

Today, however, that situation has changed, and the Aga Khan Development Network has a strong presence in several dozen countries where appropriate regional coordination is also useful. The AKDN, as we call it, is composed of a variety of private non-governmental, non-denominational agencies, implementing many of the Imamate's responsibilities. We are active in the fields of

economic development, job creation, education, health care, as well as important cultural initiatives.

Most of our AKDN activities have been borne from the grassroots of developing countries, reflecting their aspirations and fragilities. Through the years, of course, this landscape has changed fundamentally, with the creation of new states, like Bangladesh; the horrors of ethnic cleansing, in Uganda; the collapse of the Soviet empire; and the emergence of new countries with large Ismaili populations, such as Tajikistan. More recently, of course, we have faced the conflicts in Afghanistan and in Syria, but through all of these experiences, the Ismaili peoples have demonstrated an impressive capacity to persevere and to progress.

Our work has always been people driven. It grows out of the age-old Islamic ethic that is committed to goals with universal relevance: the elimination of poverty, access to education, and social peace in a pluralist environment. The AKDN's fundamental objective is to improve the quality of human life.

Among the great common denominators of the human race is a third aspiration, a common hope for a better quality of life. I was struck a few years ago to read about the UNDP survey of 18 South American states, where the majority of the people were less interested in their forms of government than in the quality of their lives. Even autocratic governments that improve their quality of life would be more acceptable for most of those polled than ineffective democratic governments. I cite that study, of course, with due respect to governmental institutions that have had a more successful story, including certain very distinguished parliaments.

The sad fact behind so much instability in our world today is that governments seem to be inadequate to these challenges. A much happier fact is that in the global effort to change this picture, Canada is an exemplary leader.

Let me now describe a few examples of a quarter century of close collaboration between AKDN and Canada. One of our earliest collaborations was to establish the first private nursing school in Pakistan, in co-operation with McMaster University and the CIDA of that time. It was the first component of the Aga Khan University, the first private university in that country. The nursing school's impact has been enormous. Many of those who now head other nursing programs in hospitals in the whole of the region, not just Pakistan, are graduates of our school.

Canada was also one of the first donors to the Aga Khan rural support program in northern Pakistan, tripling incomes in this remote marginalized area. The approaches developed there have shaped our further collaborations in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, and in Mozambique.

Canada has also helped to establish the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development, in Karachi and East Africa, along with other educational initiatives in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, including pioneering work in the field of early childhood development.

I could also speak about our close ties with Canadian universities, such as McMaster, McGill, the University of Toronto, and the University of Alberta, enhancing our own institutions of tertiary education, the Aga Khan University, and the University of Central Asia. The latter institution has resulted from the Imamate's unique tripartite treaty with the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It serves some 22 million people who live in central Asia on hillside and high mountain environments, areas of acute seismic and economic vulnerability.

I could list many more examples in cultural development and in scientific research. We are especially proud of the Global Centre for Pluralism here in Ottawa, a joint project of the Imamate and the Canadian government.

In just three years, Canada will mark its 150th anniversary, and the whole world will be ready to celebrate with you. Sharing Canada's robust pluralistic history is the core mission of our global centre, and 2017 will be a major opportunity for doing so. Operating from its headquarters in the former war museum on Sussex Drive, perhaps 2017, and the celebrations, can be a catalyst with our neighbours to improve the entire riverfront area around that building.

Our partnership in Canada has been immensely strengthened, of course, by the presence, for more than four decades, of a significant Ismaili community. Like most historical global communities, the Ismaili peoples have a variegated history, but surely our experience in Canada has been a particularly positive chapter. I happily recall the establishment of the delegation of the Ismaili Imamate here in 2008, and the Prime Minister's description that day of our collaborative efforts to make Canada "the headquarters of the global effort to foster peace, prosperity and equality through pluralism". We are deeply pleased that we can today sign a new protocol with your government, further strengthening our ongoing platform for co-operation.

As we look to the next 25 years of the AKDN, we believe that our permanent presence in the developing world will make us a dependable partner, especially in meeting the difficult challenges of predictability. Against this background, let me move on to the broad international sphere, including the role of relations between the countries and cultures of Islam, what we call the *umma*, and non-Islamic societies. It is central to the shape of global affairs in our time.

I would begin by emphasizing a central point about the *umma* that is often unseen elsewhere: the fundamental fact of its immense diversity. Muslim demography has expanded dramatically in recent years, and Muslims today have highly differing views on many questions. Essential among them is that they do not share some common overarching impression of the west. It has become commonplace for some to talk about an inevitable clash of the industrial west and Islamic civilizations. However, Muslims do not see things in this way.

Those whose words and deeds feed into that point of view are a small and extreme minority. For most of us, it is simply not true. We find singularly little in our theological interpretations that would clash with other Abrahamic faiths, with Christianity and Judaism. Indeed, there is much that is in profound harmony.

When the clashes of modern times have come, they have most often grown out of particular political circumstances, the twists and turns of our relationships and economic ambitions rather than deep theological divides, yet, sadly, what is highly abnormal in the Islamic world gets mistaken for what is normal.

Of course, media perceptions of our world in recent years have often been conveyed through a lens of war, but that is all the more reason to shape global conversation in a more informed direction. I am personally aware of the efforts the Prime Minister has made to achieve this. Thank you, Prime Minister.

The complexity of the *umma* has a long history. Some of the most glorious chapters in Islamic history were purposefully built on the principles of inclusiveness. It was a matter of state policy to pursue excellence through pluralism. This was true from the time of the Abbasids in Baghdad and the Fatimids in Cairo over 1,000 years ago. It was true in Afghanistan and in Timbuktu in Mali, and later with the Sufavids in Iran, the Mughals in India, the Uzbeks in Bukhara, the Ottomans in Turkey. From the 6th to the 18th century, Al-Andalus thrived on the Iberian Peninsula under the Muslim aegis, but was also deeply welcoming to Christian and Jewish peoples.

Today, these Islamic traditions have been obscured in many places, from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The work of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, including the Aga Khan Award for Architecture and our historic cities program, is to revive the memory of this inclusive inheritance. Another immediate initiative is the Aga Khan museum, which will open this year in Toronto, an important testimonial in a Canadian setting to the immense diversity of Islamic cultures.

Perhaps the most important area of incomprehension outside the *umma* is the conflict between the Sunni and Shia interpretations of Islam and the consequences for the Sunni and Shia peoples. This powerful tension is sometimes even more profound than conflicts between Muslims and other faiths. It has increased massively in scope and intensity recently and has been further exacerbated by external interventions. In Pakistan and Malaysia, in Iraq and Syria, in Lebanon and Bahrain, in Yemen and Somalia and Afghanistan, it is becoming a disaster.

It is important, therefore, for non-Muslims who are dealing with the *umma* to communicate with both Sunni and Shia voices. To be oblivious to this reality would be like ignoring, over many centuries, that there were differences between Catholics and Protestants or trying to resolve the civil war in Northern Ireland without engaging both Christian communities.

What would have been the consequences if the Protestant and Catholic struggle in Ireland had spread throughout the Christian world, as is happening today between Shia and Sunni Muslims in more than nine countries? It is of the highest priority that these dangerous trends be well understood and resisted, and that the fundamental legitimacy of pluralistic outlooks be honoured in all aspects of our lives together, including matters of faith.

[Translation]

I would now like to address you in your other official language.

I just spoke about the misunderstandings between the industrialized world and the Muslim world and the conflict that is unduly affecting relations between the major traditions of Islam. Nevertheless, our hearts, minds and faith—for those who have it—tell us that it is possible to live in greater harmony.

In fact, recent changes have opened a door for us. Among these changes, I would like to point out how important the constitutional approach is in correcting existing constitutions that are proving to be inadequate as societies change, particularly in developing countries. This is a crucial issue that the duties of my position do not allow me to ignore.

You may be surprised to learn that 37 countries throughout the world have adopted a new constitution in the past 10 years and that 12 countries are in the later stages of modernizing their constitutions, which gives us a total of 49 countries. In other words, this movement affects a quarter of the member states of the United Nations. Of these 49 countries, 25% have a Muslim majority. This shows that, today, civil societies' demand for new constitutional structures has become inevitable.

At this point, I would like to take a moment to mention a particular difficulty the Muslim world is grappling with. Because of the way religious parties are structured, they support the principle that religion and state are inseparable. Consequently, when those parties are negotiating the terms of a constitution with stakeholders who demand the separation of religion and state, it is difficult to reach a consensus on the supreme law.

However, one country, the Republic of Tunisia, has recently demonstrated that it is possible. This is not the time or the place to delve into the details of the country's new constitution. However, it is the result of a truly pluralistic debate, and it appears to contain the rules needed to ensure mutual respect among the various segments of civil society. In particular, the country is embracing the concept of coalition, be it at the electoral or governmental level. That is a great leap forward for the expression of pluralism, which both Canada and the Ismaili Imamate are calling for.

This change gives rise to hope. The debate and conflict that are inherent in any pluralistic society are no longer taking place in the streets or public squares; they are taking place in the constitutional court, where the rule of law prevails. Over and above the contributions of the Tunisian constitutional experts, the preparatory work was an opportunity to hold consultations on comparative constitutional law.

In particular, I would like to commend the role played by legal experts from Portugal, a country that I hold in high regard. It, like Canada, has developed a civilization of mutual respect between communities and religious tolerance.

I am referring here to the law that has governed relations between the Portuguese Republic and the Ismaili Imamate since 2010. I am pleased to inform this esteemed assembly that this law, passed unanimously, recognizes the Ismaili Imamate as a supranational entity.

To conclude my remarks on the Tunisian constitution, I would like to quote François Hollande, President of the French Republic, who said this in Tunis:

...what sets your revolution—and your constitution—apart is the role played by civil society.

[English]

Clearly, the voices playing a major role in Tunisia are the voices of civil society. By civil society, I mean an array of institutions that operate on a private, voluntary basis, but are motivated by high public purposes. They include institutions devoted to education and culture, to science and research, and to commercial, labour, ethnic, and religious concerns. They include as well professional societies in law, accounting, banking, engineering, and medicine. Civil society encompasses groups that work on health and safety and environmental matters and organizations that are engaged in humanitarian service or in the arts or the media.

There is sometimes a tendency in the search for progress to focus solely on politics and government or on the private profit-making sector. Surely they both have roles to play, but in my view the world needs to pay more attention—much, much more attention—to the potential role of civil society. We see it expanding in many places, from sub-Saharan Africa to Tunisia and Egypt, from Iran to Bangladesh.

At a time of extreme danger in Kenya a few years ago, at the beginnings of a civil war, the former secretary-general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, led the way to a peaceful solution, which rested heavily on the strength of Kenya's civil society.

Increasingly, I believe the voices of civil society are voices for change where change has been overdue. They have been voices of hope for people living in fear. They are voices that can help transform countries of crisis into countries of opportunity. There are too many societies where too many people live in a culture of fear, condemned to a life of poverty. Addressing that fear and replacing it with hope will be a major step toward the elimination of poverty, and often the call for hope to replace fear will come from the voices of civil society. An active civil society can open the door for an enormous variety of energies and talents from a broad spectrum of organizations and individuals. It means opening the way for diversity. It means welcoming plurality.

I believe that Canada is uniquely able to articulate and exemplify three critical underpinnings of a quality civil society: a commitment to pluralism, to meritocracy, and to a cosmopolitan ethic.

A cosmopolitan ethic is one that welcomes the complexity of human society. It balances rights and duties, freedom and responsibility. It is an ethic for all peoples, the familiar and the other, whether they live across the street or across the planet.

The Aga Khan Development Network has worked over five decades to assist in the enhancement of civil society, and as we look to its future, we are honoured that Canada views us as a valued partner. Thank you, Prime Minister.

One key to Canada's success in building a meritocratic civil society is your recognition that democratic societies require more than democratic governments. I have been impressed by recent studies showing the activity of voluntary institutions and not-for-profit organizations in Canada to be among the highest in the world. This Canadian spirit resonates with a cherished principle in Shia Ismaili culture: the importance of contributing one's individual energies, on a voluntary basis, to improving the lives of others. This is not a matter of philanthropy but rather of self-fulfilment, enlightened self-fulfilment.

During my golden jubilee six years ago, and this is important, Ismailis from around the world volunteered their gifts not only of wealth but, most notably, of time and knowledge in support of our work. We established a time and knowledge framework, a structured process, for engaging an immense pool of expertise involving tens of thousands of volunteers. Many of them travelled to the developing countries as part of this outpouring of service. One-third of those were Canadians. Their impact has been enormous in helping us achieve best practice standards in our institutions and programs, making us, we hope, an even better partner for Canada.

Such efforts thrive when multiple inputs can be matched to multiple needs, which is why Canada's immense economic diversity is such a valuable global resource.

One of the foundational qualities of Canada's civil society is its educational emphasis. Studies show that Canadian students, whether native or foreign born, perform in the very top tier of students internationally and that, indeed, more than 45% of the foreign-born population in Canada have a tertiary degree. This record of educational opportunity resonates strongly with the Shia Ismaili belief in the transformative power of the human intellect, a conviction that underscores AKDN's massive commitment to education wherever we are present, not only education for our faith but also education for our world. To do this, we are engaged in all levels of education.

The Aga Khan University in Karachi and in East Africa is expanding to create a new liberal arts faculty and to establish eight new post-graduate schools, in collaboration with several Canadian universities.

We share with Canada a deep appreciation of the potential of early childhood education. Congratulations, Prime Minister, for your initiative on this. It is the period of the greatest development of the brain. This education is one of the most cost-effective ways to improve the quality of life for rural as well as urban populations. In this regard, let me take a moment to salute the late Dr. Fraser Mustard, whose work in early childhood development will impact millions of people around the world. The AKDN has been fortunate to have been inspired and counselled by this great Canadian scientist and humanist.

Quality education is fundamental to the development of a meritocratic civil society and thus to the development of pluralistic attitudes. The history of Canada has a great deal to teach us in this regard, including the long incremental processes through which quality civil societies and committed cultures of pluralism are built. One of the watchwords of our new Global Centre for Pluralism is that pluralism is a process and not a product. I know that many

Canadians would describe their own pluralism as a work in progress, but it is also an asset of enormous global quality.

Finally, what will a quality civil society require from us?

Sadly, the world is becoming more pluralist in fact but not necessarily in spirit. Cosmopolitan social patterns have not yet been matched by a cosmopolitan ethic. In fact, one harsh reality is that religious hostility and intolerance seem to be on the rise in many places, from the Central African Republic to the South Sudan to Nigeria to Myanmar, the Philippines, and other countries, between major religious groups and within them.

Again, Canada has responded in notable ways, including the establishment just one year ago of the Office of Religious Freedom. Its challenges, like those facing the Centre for Global Pluralism, are enormous, and its contributions will be warmly welcomed. Surely it will also serve as a worthy model for other countries.

In summary, I believe that civil society is one of the most powerful forces in our time, one that will become an increasingly universal influence, engulfing more countries, influencing, reshaping, and sometimes even replacing ineffective regimes. I also believe that civil society around the world should be vigorously encouraged and wisely nurtured by those who have made it work most successfully, Canada first among all.

I am most grateful to the Prime Minister, and to you, who have given me this opportunity to share, from a faith perspective, some of the issues that preoccupy me when looking ahead. I hope I have explained why I am convinced of the global validity of our partnership for human development.

Let me end with a personal thought. As you build your lives for yourselves and others, you will come to rest upon certain principles. Central to my life has been a verse in the Holy Quran, which addresses itself to the whole of humanity.

It says, "O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women". I know of no more beautiful expression about the unity of our human race, born indeed from a single soul.

Thank you.

[Applause]

Hon. Noël A. Kinsella (Speaker of the Senate): Your Highness, Monsieur le premier ministre, Monsieur le Président Scheer, hon. senators and members of the House of Commons, distinguished guests, mesdames et messieurs.

On behalf of all present at this joint session of the Parliament of Canada, I wish to thank Your Highness for your thoughtful address to Parliament this morning.

Your Highness, your insight and leadership inspires us all to continue our work of humanitarian intervention throughout the global village. Your words today have underscored for Canadians the importance of humanitarian work as part of our national Canadian vocation as a caring and generous society. The lifelong commitment to the service of humanity exemplified by Your Highness is a beacon to all of us and is greatly admired.

During a 2006 inaugural ceremony to establish the delegation of the Ismaili Imamate here in Ottawa, Your Highness said:

Even against the most daunting challenges, social and economic progress can and must be a shared experience, based on a cosmopolitan ethic and nurtured by a spirit of genuine partnership.

Your Highness, these words convey the essence of our joint efforts.

[*Translation*]

We share many priorities in promoting social and economic progress, including maternal and child health, micro-finance and private-sector enterprise, particularly in regions in Asia and Africa. We also share a belief in the vital role that education plays, as you mentioned this morning, in eliminating the world's knowledge deficit, in preparing the next generation to succeed and meet the world's future challenges, and in matching economic development with human development.

[*English*]

Ours is a natural partnership in this area, based on Canada's reputation as a global leader in education and the long-standing tradition of the Ismaili Imamate in education development. Through collaborative projects involving several Canadian universities, we are undertaking important work to strengthen jointly the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in such areas as health and medicine, business and the humanities.

[*Translation*]

We are also working together to harness the potential of computers and high technology in the classroom and to strengthen primary education, especially for girls. Your ongoing efforts in promoting education for the benefit of the developing world are widely admired.

Canadians draw strength from your enduring commitment to these and other international development needs, even in the face of the most daunting challenges.

[*English*]

Your Highness, Prime Minister, the esteem with which we regard His Highness' commitment not only to educational development but to global progress more generally is reflected in the unanimous adoption of a motion in both Houses of our Parliament in June 2009 to bestow honorary Canadian citizenship on His Highness.

Permit me to share another of His Highness' visionary statements, drawn from his address, in 2009, to a graduating class of the University of Alberta. He stated:

In today's community of nations, a country's standing is no longer recognized simply by what it can achieve for itself, but just as much by what it can do for others.

These words, hon. colleagues, are a powerful idea emanating from one of the rare, true, global, and most highly respected statesmen of our time. They set a high standard that we strive to achieve.

On behalf of the hon. members of the House of Commons and the Senate of Canada, we thank Your Highness for your visit, for your inspiring message this morning, and for your continuing efforts to make this world of ours a better place.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Speaker of the House of Commons): Your Highness, Prime Minister, Mr. Speaker of the Senate, hon. senators, members of the House of Commons, right hon. friends, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of all members of the House of Commons, it is a personal honour to be able to add my thanks for your presence here today and for your kind and inspirational words, Your Highness.

During the nearly 57 years in which you have been Imam, much has changed around the world and for Ismailis. One constant throughout, however, has been your unwavering dedication to improving the lives of the world's most vulnerable. Your leadership in these bold initiatives has garnered support from countries, organizations, and agencies the world over, and Canada, and indeed Canadians from across our country, are proud to count themselves among your most ardent supporters.

[*Translation*]

Of equal importance for parliamentarians, you have also worked to underline the key roles of dialogue and respect for diversity in strengthening democracy around the world.

This perspective—your perspective—helped to educate many here in Canada and in other countries where your agencies have worked for years as trusted partners with the Government of Canada.

[*English*]

As we all know, an important element of true dialogue is respect for different positions, and for diversity. Fundamentally, it is about respecting and honouring the dignity of all people.

In this you are, and have always been, a clear beacon and an example to follow. Your unabating tolerance and hope in the face of challenging circumstances and seemingly insurmountable odds is an inspiration for us all.

[*Translation*]

The commitment that you and the Government of Canada share to these ideals has also led to the establishment, in Ottawa, of the Global Centre for Pluralism.

As with all of your work, this centre emphasizes research, education and dialogue with partners here and around the globe.

[*English*]

Through your knowledge, your vision, your commitment, and your dedication, you are changing the world and making it a better place for those who are most in need of our assistance.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

On behalf of all hon. members, thank you again for all that you have done and all that you will do.

[*Applause*]

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