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Mr. Bryan May

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1230)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone.

Pursuant to Standing Order—

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): I would like to raise a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Madame Sansoucy.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I welcome the ministers who are with us today, but I would like to raise a point of order with regard to the motion I moved on May 4, 2018. I have extra copies for the interpreters, Madam Clerk. So that everyone understands what I'm talking about, I am going to read the motion and explain...

[English]

The Chair: Excuse me, Madame Sansoucy, you cannot move a motion on a point of order.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I want to explain why I am not tabling it.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, I understand.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I am not tabling it, but I would like to explain my point of order. I have tabled this motion six times, I believe, over the past year, once with the ministers present. I would like to now read this motion so that everyone understands what I am talking about.

That the Committee undertake a study of a minimum of six meetings on the Employment Insurance sickness benefits program to examine especially, but not exclusively;

- a. if the program meets the real needs of the claimants;
- b. the impact of the length of benefits on the claimants and on their recovery;
- c. the program accessibility;
- d. the population affected by this program and their characteristics; and that it hear, not limited to this list, witnesses from the health sector, former claimants

or groups representing them, the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, and that it report on its conclusions to the House.

Why am I raising a point of order, Mr. Chair? Since last May, I have tried to move this motion before the committee on several occasions. That is how we have to do things. Each time, there is a request to adjourn and, each time, the government representatives have refused to vote on my motion.

Until now, I've told myself that this was their choice, but, last week, when, in the House calendar...

[English]

The Chair: You need to get to a point of order, Madame Sansoucy.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I am explaining.

[English]

The Chair: This is not a point of order as of yet.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Yes.

[English]

The Chair: Please get there quickly.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: The Government representatives refuse to vote on this motion in committee, but, last week, they put quite a similar motion on the House calendar. There was one hour of debate on a similar motion in the House. However, they refuse to vote on it in this committee. Yes, employment insurance must be reformed. It is absolutely essential, but the priority, an urgent one, is taking care of the most vulnerable...

[English]

The Chair: Madame Sansoucy, I'm sorry but I have to interrupt you.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Sickness benefits are...

[English]

The Chair: This is not a point of order.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Yes, it's a point of order.

[English]

The Chair: You should be citing a particular reference if there is a point of order there. If there is a particular reference to the point of order, please get to that because we do have a very short time with the ministers.

Can you please explain the standing order that's being contravened?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Mr. Chair, before I answer that, I would like to explain why it is a priority for us to vote on this...

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry, you have to get to a point of order or we have to move on. You've had plenty of time. Either there is a point of order here or there isn't. If there's a reference to a particular point of order, please immediately get to it.

● (1235)

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I do not have the number of the section at hand.

[English]

The Chair: Then I have to move on.

Mr. Barlow has the floor.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I don't want to take up too much time, but I did mention prior to our leaving in the previous portion of this meeting that I did want to ask for unanimous consent to waive the ministers' opening statements. All of us know their files quite well. I know we're going to cut them down to five minutes. I'm not really too sure what they're going to say in five minutes.

I would rather we had as much time for questions as possible, so I'm asking my colleagues around this table to give unanimous consent to waive the ministers' opening statements so we can get to questions. That's what we're all here for, to have our opportunities to ask questions of the ministers. No offence to the ministers, but I don't need to hear the PMO talking points for the next 20 minutes. I would rather we had the chance to ask questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barlow.

Do we have unanimous consent?

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): No.

The Chair: We do not.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is considering the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (B), 2018-19, votes 1b, 5b, and 10b under the Department of Employment and Social Development.

Appearing before the committee are the Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development; the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour; the Honourable Carla Qualtrough,

Minister of Accessibility; and the Honourable Filomena Tassi, Minister of Seniors.

Appearing as witnesses, we have officials alongside the ministers. For the sake of time, I'll introduce them as they are called upon.

Each minister will have no more than five minutes for their opening remarks. I will put up one finger at the one-minute mark and we'll go from there.

First, we have Minister Hajdu. The next five minutes are all yours.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thanks to the committee members for all the hard work you do, debating and talking about skills development, in the case of my file.

I'm here today to talk about how our government is working so hard to make sure that Canadians have a fair chance at success. A big part of that is making sure that people have access to skills training and supports to not only find good-quality jobs but keep them.

There are three key approaches that we've been taking to really accelerate skills training in this country.

First, we are making sure that workers who are currently employed have access to good-quality job training. We know there's a lot of potential for people if they can get access to increased job training, even if they're currently employed.

Second, we are certainly keeping our eye on youth unemployment and employment by making sure that young people have better job opportunities—again, not just a job, but a quality job.

Third, we are making post-secondary education more affordable, regardless of whether we're talking about colleges or universities. It's really important that people can afford to go to school, and it's a big part of that fair chance to succeed.

Our focus for the past three years has been on programs like the Canada summer jobs program, the youth employment strategy, the Canada service corps and the Canada student loans program. It's about making sure that everybody sees themselves as having a fair chance and opportunity to succeed.

The Canada summer jobs program is a big part of the youth employment strategy. Many of you around the table will know that our government doubled Canada summer jobs, because it was such a critical aspect of a young person's opportunity to gain new skills and valuable job experiences that could land them in possibly the next job, or help them to explore career potential. This program has always been about giving young people good-quality job opportunities and the experience they need to succeed in the job market.

Over the past year, we made some changes. We consulted with stakeholders and made several changes to the program, with a focus to make this program more accessible to more young people, easier to apply for employers, and with a focus on quality jobs. This is going to be a key change this year. You'll see young people from across the country, regardless of their studies or status, be able to apply for Canada summer jobs. This is fundamentally about fairness. I'm very excited about that. In fact, employers will be required to show demonstrably how they're going to mentor and support those young persons to develop those skills.

We know that the Harper Conservatives had the worst youth unemployment rate since the 1990s. It soared to 16% in July 2009. Yet, instead of helping young people succeed, they chose to cut \$20 million from the youth employment strategy. Instead, we chose to invest in young people. We chose to invest in skills training and to take a chance on people who often felt like they were left behind.

The plan is working. The youth unemployment rate is currently down to 11.2%. While we know that there is still more work to do, we're seeing positive change. Part of the success is our commitment to provide 70,000 young people with valuable work experience through the Canada summer jobs program.

Under the previous government, this program was constantly on the chopping block. In fact, in the last year of that government, this program created only 35,000 jobs.

So, as part of our significant expansion, we're requesting authority to include \$3.4 million in vote 1, to ensure that quality experiences for youth are available across the country, so that they gain the skills and work experience they need to succeed in our workforce.

The additional funding will support the processing of the high volume of applications we're receiving to deliver those quality work placements. I stressed that earlier. This is really about making sure that those jobs are quality jobs. I believe every young person in this country deserves to work in a safe place where they have mentorship, leadership and an opportunity to develop their skills.

Another important part of preparing young people for the workforce is ensuring that all Canadians have the skills and training they need to succeed. We know that finances can often be the make-or-break decision to get young people into their post-secondary education. That's why we've made important changes to student financial assistance. We've increased the Canada student grants by 50%. We've increased support for part-time students and students with children. We've increased support for adult learners. We've changed the repayment assistance program, so that student loan borrowers are not required to make payments until they're earning at least \$25,000.

As a result of our investments, most students are able to now repay their student loans. The write-off amount now represents less than 1% of the student loan portfolio. Our department is requesting a write-off for debts owed to the Crown for the unrecoverable Canada student loans in the amount of \$163 million. In those cases, we've exhausted options to recover the debt. Once six years elapse without payment or acknowledgement of the debt, it's very difficult to recover it. There are many reasons for these write-offs: bankruptcies,

small balances, extreme financial hardship and compromise settlements.

● (1240)

We're going to continue to work to make sure that education is affordable and that people have opportunities once they graduate, with either debt relief or opportunities for better placements through the student work placement program, so that we continue to see a downward tracking of debt that's not recoverable.

Lastly, these supplementary estimates (B) also include adjustments to current-year funding and to non-budgetary items. These items in the supplementary estimates demonstrate our clear commitment to Canadians to grow our economy, strengthen the middle class and help those working hard to join it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Up next, we have Minister Jean-Yves Duclos, for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to the committee members for being here today and for inviting ministers Hajdu, Qualtrough, Tassi and myself to join you. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of officials from Employment and Social Development Canada.

We are gathered on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Nation.

Let me begin by acknowledging the wonderful work your committee has done on private members' motion M-110. The motion asked you to undertake a study on the impact of infant death on parents. It is a highly sensitive subject, but you handled it with great respect and diligence.

I would also like to take a few moments to review the measures we have recently taken to help workers, parents and family caregivers access EI benefits in a more flexible, inclusive and easier way.

Firstly, let me point out that decreased premiums mean that workers will have paid up to \$70 less for premiums in 2019, compared to what they paid in 2015. In addition, by October 2019, nearly 5 million claimants will have benefited from the reduced waiting period, which has gone from two weeks to one week. The figure is correct: 5 million claimants.

Finally, families can now choose to receive parental benefits for 12 months, or 18 months at a lower benefit rate. New support measures are available to help care for a family member with a serious injury or illness.

As you can see, our government is working very hard to keep its word. We promised to implement measures that would help middle-class Canadians first and foremost. We want to help more people join the middle class and that is precisely what we are doing and will continue to do in the coming months.

By October 2019, an estimated 57,000 parents will choose the extended parental benefits option to better meet their family needs. Approximately 61,000 families will receive shared parental benefits, which will promote equality between men and women, among other things. About 24,000 caregivers will use the new caregiver benefits to provide support to a loved one.

In short, employment insurance now offers more choice, flexibility and generosity to families and caregivers. I am proud of these major improvements that we have implemented together. I am equally proud of the progress we are making to reduce poverty in Canada.

Once again, I would like to thank the committee for its valuable work during its study entitled “Breaking the Cycle: A Study on Poverty Reduction”, the report for which was tabled in the House of Commons in May 2017. Your report provided very useful and relevant recommendations to the government and was most helpful in our joint efforts to develop the first Canadian Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Last August, we launched “Opportunity for All: Canada’s First Poverty Reduction Strategy.” With this in mind, we also drafted and introduced Bill C-87, An Act Respecting the Reduction of Poverty. Our goal is to reduce poverty by 20% by the year 2020, and by 50% by the year 2030.

Allow me also to mention the Canada Child Benefit, the first ever National Housing Strategy in our country’s history, and the Reaching Home Program, which is a key component of our country’s new National Housing Strategy.

In closing, I would like to say how proud I am of the work we have done together to improve the social and economic well-being of all Canadians in the middle class, and those working hard to join it.

We have kept our promises so far, but much remains to be done. Our collective efforts will enable us to get there.

I look forward to continuing the excellent collaboration we have had with you to build on this momentum for the benefit of all Canadians.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

•(1245)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

Up next, we have the Honourable Filomena Tassi, Minister of Seniors.

Hon. Filomena Tassi (Minister of Seniors): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I’d like to begin by thanking all the committee members for the invitation to be with you here today. It’s really nice to be back at HUMA. It was the committee at which I first started after being

elected as a member of Parliament. I’m very aware of the great work that takes place at this committee. I thank you for that great work.

When the Prime Minister appointed me as Minister of Seniors last summer, he entrusted me with a mission full of exciting and positive challenges. My job as Minister of Seniors is to help the government better understand the needs of Canadian seniors and ensure that the programs and services respond to the needs of Canada’s aging population.

As we have stated before, by 2030 seniors will make up almost one quarter of the population. We need to get ready for this. The Government of Canada has the power and the duty to help seniors, especially those facing challenges. Compared to other places in the world, where growing older can be a struggle, Canada is fortunate. Caring for seniors truly is a whole-of-government effort. Around the cabinet table, all my colleagues have been proponents of initiatives supporting our seniors and their caregivers. Together, we design and deliver programs to help seniors live healthier, more active lives.

I’m especially proud of the significant progress our government has made in just three years to improve the quality of life of Canadian seniors. In particular, we look at the steps to increase the financial security of Canadian seniors, especially the most vulnerable seniors. Here, for example, I reference the increase in the guaranteed income supplement for the lowest-income seniors, which we increased by almost \$1,000 per year. This has resulted in assisting close to 900,000 seniors across Canada, 70% of whom have been women, who have benefited from this.

To ensure better protection for banking customers, particularly seniors, we amended the Bank Act to better regulate high-pressure sales tactics, overcharging, fraud and other potential risks when dealing with financial institutions and telecommunication companies.

We know that a secure and dignified retirement goes beyond financial stability, and that is why we’re helping seniors stay in their homes, in their communities. This is a top priority for our government. We have heard that most seniors wish to age in place. We want to support them in that. That’s why we invested \$6 billion in home care and palliative care.

The national housing strategy will reduce the number of seniors in housing need through the new \$13.2-billion national housing co-investment fund. This fund is expected to create at least 7,000 new affordable housing units for seniors and will support much-needed renovations, including improved accessibility, to allow seniors to age in place.

My cabinet colleagues and our dedicated team of public servants at Employment and Social Development Canada work hard each and every day to develop programs and services designed to secure a dignified and comfortable future for Canadian seniors. We encourage initiatives to promote healthy aging. For example, the new horizons for seniors program continues to provide funding and support to many communities and organizations dedicated to improving seniors’ well-being and reducing social isolation.

Health concerns have a direct correlation to the quality of life, and this is especially true for seniors. Too often, seniors experience mental health issues such as Alzheimer's or dementia. Our government has set up a joint federal-provincial-territorial initiative to support the development and implementation of a national dementia strategy that will aim to improve the quality of life of those living with dementia, as well as their caregivers.

In conclusion, know that I will continue to advance seniors issues, a cause that I care deeply about and a portfolio that I am truly honoured and humbled to have been asked to serve in.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Tassi.

Up next, we have the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Accessibility.

You have five minutes, please.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Accessibility): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hello to members of the committee.

It's a pleasure to be here today with my colleagues to speak to the 2018-19 supplementary estimates funding, specifically for disability programs, and to give you an update on the progress that's been made with respect to my mandate as minister responsible for accessibility.

[Translation]

I'm going to try to provide a brief presentation, because I would like to give you as much time as possible to ask questions, and for me to reply to them.

[English]

Through supplementary estimates (B), we're making the following statutory authorities adjustments to the Canada disability savings program, which includes the registered disability savings plan. The first is a decrease of \$44.2 million for the Canada disability savings grants. The second is an increase of \$49.2 million for the Canada disability savings bonds. When combined, these result in a net increase of \$5 million for the Canada disability savings program.

The Canada disability savings program is a long-term savings plan to help persons with disabilities and their families to save for the future. The increase of \$5 million is due to continued growth in the program. This critical program supports long-term financial security for persons with disabilities. We're happy to see an increase in participation in this program, and we continue to explore ways in which we can improve its impact on supporting Canadians with disabilities.

Also, as per my Accessibility portfolio, ESDC is requesting additional funding for the administration of the proposed accessible Canada act, and to enhance the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities. This represents an increase of \$6.2 million in the 2018-19 main estimates presented to this committee by Minister Duncan back in May.

[Translation]

As you know, one of my priorities over the past year has been to have Bill C-81, the Accessible Canada Act adopted as quickly as possible. To do so, we listened to comments from Canadians whom the bill directly affects, and we worked hard to respond to them.

[English]

Honourable members, thank you for your dedicated work in studying the proposed accessible Canada act last fall. I was very proud that this bill has passed the House with support from all parties. Thanks to your effort, the proposed accessible Canada act is now before the Senate, and I hope it will continue through the parliamentary process in a timely manner.

In addition, I'd like to acknowledge the difficult and emotional work you are doing on the private member's motion M-192 regarding the protection of the needs of people with episodic disabilities caused by multiple sclerosis, among other things. I'm looking forward to reading your report in the spring.

[Translation]

For Canada to become an even more accessible and inclusive country for everyone, we must continue to support people with disabilities. For decades, people with disabilities have worked hard to make Canada more inclusive and more accessible.

Bill C-81 is a catalyst for change and reflects their work, their commitment and their contributions. It further strengthens this important bill.

[English]

In terms of timelines and priorities for the application of Bill C-81, the government is committed to timely and meaningful progress on implementation. New entities, such as the proposed Canadian accessibility standards development organization, will be operational within six to 12 months of royal assent. Initial regulations will be based on recognized and established standards, and as now required by the proposed legislation, the first regulations under the act will be made by 2021. The establishment of these regulations ensures the legislation will be reviewed by Parliament by 2026.

Honourable members, as Minister of Accessibility, my objective is to establish a Canada where persons with disabilities can participate fully in our society and our economy, and where they have an equal chance to succeed.

Thank you for your help in making this happen.

We are happy to take your questions.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to all of you for staying within the time constraints.

Up first with questions, we have MP Barlow, please.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Before I get to my questions, I just want to say publicly how disappointed I am. I appreciate the fact that the ministers came, but although you talk about how important you feel the work of this committee is, the fact that all four of you appeared together, giving us one round of questions, just shows exactly how you feel about the importance of the work of this committee and our opportunity to ask you questions. It's unbelievable that four ministers had this one hour in their timeline to be together at this committee.

It's not only a disservice and disrespectful to us on this side, but it's also disrespectful to your own colleagues, who are not going to have an opportunity to ask you a question. They will get one round, the same as us, and I just don't think this is right.

Mr. Chair, we talked to you about how we felt about this.

For a government that keeps talking about "open and transparent" and "we're going to do things differently", it is really disappointing that you won't each give us an hour of your time to talk about the things that you keep saying are so important and we obviously feel are important as well, which is why we are here.

To give us five minutes, obviously it was an organized decision to make sure that we had extremely limited time to ask any questions. I just want to make sure that anybody who is watching this today understands that this is highly irregular, and that it is extremely disrespectful and disappointing that you won't give us the opportunity to talk about the number of motions, bills and legislation going through here. We can only touch on a few things and that's really quite disappointing.

I do want to get to some questions, as I have a limited amount of time. My first questions will be for Minister Qualtrough. These weren't questions I was planning on asking, but I watched your announcement on the weekend and again last night on television.

Your department is considering changes to the ethical procurement rules for federal contracts. Those who have criminal charges now get a 10-year ban from bidding on federal contracts, but you have said that your department is looking at making changes to that, that you could reduce the number of years on that.

Where did that decision come from? How many times have you been lobbied by SNC-Lavalin to make this decision?

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Barlow.

Mr. Ruimy.

Mr. Dan Ruimy (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, Lib.): On a point of order, I'm just trying to understand the relevance here to the supplementary estimates.

Mr. John Barlow: Well, to my colleague, many of the ministers talked about things that had nothing to do with the supplementary estimates, and I'm taking this very small opportunity that I have to ask questions to ask questions.

The Chair: I will have to agree with Mr. Ruimy. Minister Qualtrough is here in her role with regard to accessibility. She doesn't report to this committee—

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, it's my time.

The Chair: That's fair enough, but —

Mr. John Barlow: They've made the decision. Jobs are dependent on this decision.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. John Barlow: They have talked about this in question period every day, the jobs that are on the line. We are the committee that deals with labour.

The Chair: We are in HUMA. Minister Qualtrough is here as the Minister of Accessibility.

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, it's my time; I'm going to ask the question.

The Chair: Relevance is required on this. Get back to relevance.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): It's relevant. It goes to labour shortage.

Mr. John Barlow: You're giving us a limited amount of time to talk to the ministers—

The Chair: And you're burning up that time.

Mr. John Barlow: —and now you're going raise the question of what I can ask.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It's a point of order.

The Chair: No, I'm saying that it's a point of relevance, and I agree with that point of order.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: The clock is stopped on a point of order.

The Chair: The clock is stopped. I'm asking Mr. Barlow to get back to relevance.

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, it's our opportunity as members of Parliament to talk about the issues that our constituents want us to talk about. You've given us a ridiculously short amount of time to ask the ministers who are here; it's our one chance to ask questions of them, and now you're going to censure what questions I can ask.

They were bringing up issues that had nothing to do with the supplementary estimates—

The Chair: I'm asking you—

Mr. John Barlow: Therefore, I think I can ask questions that are outside the box here.

The Chair: No, you're being asked to be relevant to this committee.

Mr. John Barlow: This is relevant to this committee.

The Chair: This is not relevant to this committee.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It's about labour.

Mr. John Barlow: It's labour; you've talked about it every day—

The Chair: You're asking the accessibility minister about labour.

Mr. John Barlow: —that there are 9,000 jobs on the line here, so I'm asking the minister—

The Chair: No. Your time is running short, sir. Please continue.

Mr. John Barlow: No, we're still on a point of order.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: We're on a point of order.

Mr. John Barlow: This is Mr. Ruimy's point of order.

The Chair: I ruled on that point of order and I asked you to continue on about two minutes ago.

● (1300)

Mr. John Barlow: Well, Mr. Chair, it is extremely frustrating that you are now censuring the questions we can ask the minister.

The Chair: I'm not censuring the questions.

Mr. John Barlow: Yes, you are.

The Chair: I'm asking you to be relevant.

Mr. John Barlow: You are saying what I can and cannot ask.

The Chair: I'm asking that your questions be relevant.

Mr. John Barlow: You are saying what I can and cannot ask here in this committee.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It happens in every committee.

Mr. John Barlow: Minister, will you answer the question?

How often were you lobbied by SNC-Lavalin to make this change to your department's procurement rules?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, if it helps, I'm actually appearing tomorrow at OGGO on supplementary estimates. Perhaps I can answer that question tomorrow when I'm there in my capacity at OGGO.

The Chair: That's right, and that's the appropriate venue for that.

Mr. John Barlow: Minister, why won't you just answer it now?

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy has a point of order.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Again, we are here to talk about the supplementary estimates. I don't see the relevance of this question.

The Chair: I would agree with that.

Mr. Barlow, your time is continuing now. Please get to relevance.

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, Mr. Ruimy and Minister Hajdu, I'm trying not to be partisan, but the minister just brought up, in her five-minute speech, everything the Conservatives did wrong and everything she's doing right. That has nothing to do with supplementary estimates. I'm asking some of the questions about what I believe your Liberal government is doing wrong and is unethical. You don't want to answer it; you don't want to face it. That's your decision, but our decision as members of Parliament is to ask questions that our constituents want answered.

Minister Hajdu used all her time to slam Conservative policy. We didn't put an attestation on the Canada summer jobs program that 1,500 groups were denied. The Liberal government did that. I think I can ask the questions that I need to ask.

The Chair: With very little time, I'm going to refer the member to page 1016 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, third edition. Under "Estimates", "Consideration in Committee", it says, "The questions and discussions at these meetings are generally wide-ranging, although the rule of relevance does apply."

This is not an issue of censorship. This is an issue of relevance. You have very little time left.

Mr. John Barlow: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that, but still you are taking away my opportunity to ask questions.

Minister Qualtrough, with Bill C-81, we had more than 200 amendments put forward, and we heard from disability groups that are extremely upset that none of those amendments were accepted, because they want to see some teeth in that legislation. Are you working with the Senate to put some teeth into Bill C-81?

The Chair: Give a very short answer, please.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, we continue to work both with disability organizations and with senators to make Bill C-81 the best law it can be for Canadians with disabilities.

The Chair: Mr. Ruimy.

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you, everybody, for being here today.

We're here to discuss the supplementary estimates. I will focus my time with Minister Duclos.

There are some funds of \$7 million for the implementation of the agenda for sustainable development goals, SDG. Keeping in line with that, I want to talk about housing and homelessness. There's no question that this country has been facing a national housing crisis. It didn't happen overnight. This has happened with decades of poor thinking and vision. In fact, in my riding we see this every single day, and it's challenging. How do we move forward? It's not just the federal government. It has to be all orders of government working together to fix this crisis.

I was one of the first people to do a round table on the national housing strategy. I was glad to see what I saw come out in the national housing strategy. To point out a couple of things, the government doubled the funding for the homelessness partnering strategy. In my riding and the greater Vancouver area, that means about \$14 million per year to fight homelessness. Likewise on housing, according to the numbers I've seen in my riding alone, the government has invested more than \$1.3 million in new housing projects, in addition to subsidizing more than 2,200 housing units. These are real things that affect people in my riding, in my home. British Columbia is one of those epicentres where we have challenges that we need to work on.

My question is twofold. First, how is the government working to implement the national housing strategy so that the money that's already flowing continues for the next decade? Second, with the current homelessness partnering strategy funds ending this year and the new homelessness strategy funding starting April 1, what's the government doing to make sure there are no gaps in the funding?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Dan, for reminding us of the importance of affordable housing across Canada. Of course it impacts families, children, seniors, women living in circumstances of family violence and many others. It impacts their abilities to be well and live safely. It also has an impact on communities. If we want our vibrant communities and cities across Canada to keep prospering, we need to have middle-class workers housed safely and affordably. Otherwise, construction workers, clerks, teachers, nurses, police and other people will not be able to live in the cities in which they need to work.

That's a clear crisis, and you're very good at highlighting it. In B. C. and the Lower Mainland in particular, this crisis is terrible. That's why we needed a new era of housing leadership and partnership on the part of the federal government, something that was lacking for too many years.

That came through the launch of the first-ever national housing strategy a year and a few months ago, in November 2017. This is a historic step for the federal government to assume its responsibilities, to make sure that every Canadian has access to a safe and affordable home. It's a \$40-billion plan, a 10-year plan, a long-term plan, because this is what stakeholders want. It's also something that is going to decrease homelessness by at least 50%, take unacceptable housing conditions out of housing needs—more than half a million families—and as you said, lead to an era of partnership with municipalities, cities and provinces that we haven't seen for decades.

• (1305)

Mr. Dan Ruimy: Thank you very much.

In keeping with the sustainable development goals, one of those goals is SDG 4, “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

When I look at that, in the last two studies that we've done here in HUMA—on motion 110, about parents who've lost a child, and the last study that we're just wrapping up, about episodic disabilities—in both cases it points to an EI program that is trying to find the best ways to support people in the most difficult of times.

I know that your mandate letter called for an EI review. Is that review something that will take place? Will you be looking at cases such as what we've been exploring in these two studies that we've concluded?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Once again, there is a clear link with the ability of our families, children and workers to live well.

You will know that, when we were elected in 2015, there were five special benefits. All of these five special benefits—and I won't list them—have been improved, made more flexible and more generous.

We have also added two new benefits: a family caregiver benefit, for people to be able to look after adults who are either sick or injured, and a new parental sharing benefit, which will be launched just a few weeks from now in March. That is going to help 97,000 families across Canada achieve, for example, greater gender equality, the ability of men and women to have the opportunity and the responsibility of sharing more equally the joys and the challenges that come with having both a work and a family life. That is a historic step towards making more of our parents able to fully take

part in the labour force, towards reducing income poverty and towards enhancing gender equality.

In 2019, this is where we need to be.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Madam Sansoucy.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you.

My first question is for you, Minister Duclos, because I believe that you did not answer my colleague's question. He asked you when employment insurance will be reformed.

Today, representatives from the Mouvement autonome et solidaire des sans-emploi are on Parliament Hill. They have come to show us how the Employment Insurance Act is sexist. Indeed, officials have told this committee that, currently, six out of ten workers have no access to employment insurance. When these statistics are broken down by gender, you see that 30% of women and 50% of men have no access to employment insurance. So seven out of ten workers who pay into employment insurance every week from every paycheque have no access.

Before Christmas, people from the Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses came to speak to you about the issue they call the “black hole”. There were workers from the North Shore, from the Gaspé, and from New Brunswick who have seasonal jobs. They came to tell you that conducting pilot projects is not enough. A thorough reform of employment insurance is needed, of how benefits are calculated and how eligibility is determined. Real reform is needed.

Just before that, Marie-Hélène Dubé came to visit you. Six hundred thousand people signed her petition to say that 15 weeks of employment insurance benefits are not enough. The section in the Employment Insurance Act on sickness benefits has not been reformed since 1971.

After being elected, I participated in the first opposition day organized by the NDP. We wanted results and we decided to talk about the Liberals' employment insurance program. All day, I was told by the government that they were going to vote against our proposals because they wanted to do better. The same thing happened when I tabled my Bill C-245 on a strategy to fight against poverty. You told me that you were going to vote against it because you were going to do better. This led to a three-pronged strategy.

This is why I am using the time that I have today to once again table the motion that I tabled last May 4; I consider it a priority. Motion M-201, which was tabled in the House last week, says much the same as the motion that I tabled here about one year ago.

Between now and the election, we will not have the time to implement your employment insurance reform. Nor will we have the time to design a true strategy to fight against poverty. However, we could have the time to address the issue of the inadequate length of time for employment insurance benefits. The current maximum is 15 weeks, which affects the most vulnerable people.

There is a new reality: one out of two Canadians will have to deal with cancer at some point in their lives. The committee can and must begin quickly, as stipulated in my motion:

... a study of a minimum of six meetings on the Employment Insurance sickness benefits program to examine specifically, but not exclusively;

- a. if the program meets the real needs of its claimants;
- b. the impact of the length of benefits on the claimants and on their recovery;
- c. the program accessibility;
- d. the population affected by this program and their characteristics.

Mr. Minister, we want to hear from you, most specifically about the 15 weeks. I know that my government colleagues will once again adjourn the debate to prevent us from voting on this motion. In the meantime, we will go back to the House and debate motion M-201, which says much the same thing as mine, when we could do it here.

As a government, you have the opportunity to decide what we discuss. You are deciding to introduce motion M-201 in the House, about the 15 weeks of employment insurance, when we could have discussed it here one year ago. This is what I don't understand. I want to see results for people now and that's what I'm waiting for.

● (1310)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Wayne.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothsay, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I move that the debate be now adjourned.

(Motion agreed to)

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Of course.

[English]

The Chair: You have 48 seconds left.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: I would like to give the minister time to frame his comments.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you very much, Ms. Sansoucy. You know how much I like working and conversing with you. I find it very unfair that I only have 48 seconds. Fortunately, I may have the chance later today, or this week, to congratulate you once again for your work, but also for the kind of person you are. A little space separates us in the House, but we are very close in our hearts and our minds. I'm very pleased that we're discussing motion M-201 in the House. There may be many more MPs interested in this motion than the number of MPs who have a chance to sit on this committee.

This motion is part of a much broader context of improving the employment insurance program, which we implemented from the beginning. You were right to say that the employment insurance scheme must reflect the circumstances of families and workers in 2019.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Morrissey, please.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

It's disappointing that the Conservative opposition and NDP would filibuster rather than deal with questions.

One of the first motions this committee dealt with was an NDP motion to study EI reform. They could have put whatever scope they wanted in that motion. It wasn't dealt with. It was done by, I believe, MP Ashton.

I prefer to ask questions, specifically on young people—the youth of this country—who are the future of the country. You referenced \$163 million for Canada student loans to be written off. I believe you said the write-off was less than 1%.

Could you tell the committee, briefly, what you're doing to ensure that young people do not have to revert to defaulting on student loans?

● (1315)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, MP Morrissey.

Mr. Chair, I want to pick up on a point made by MP Barlow. I'm happy to come back to HUMA at any point, so I'll leave that in your capable hands. I certainly wouldn't want to leave the impression that any of us don't want to answer questions on the really important files that we manage every single day on behalf of Canadians all across this country.

In response to your question, the first thing is the increase of grants. You don't have to repay what you don't borrow. We know that, for vulnerable students.... I can actually speak from experience, as the first in my family to graduate with a post-secondary education. That was made possible by Canada student grants. For vulnerable students, it alleviates a lot of fear for families living in poverty because, obviously, they don't necessarily have money to pay for the tuition or whatever is left that's not funded. Also, the fear that paying back a loan down the line can prevent someone from attending school.

When we took office, we knew that one way to get more kids to go to school—more people to attend studies—was to increase non-repayable Canada student grants. We did that, by 50%. That's making post-secondary education more affordable for 43,000 more Canadians.

Also, we changed the repayment assistance program, so that no graduate who applies for loans has to repay their student loan until they're earning at least \$25,000 per year. That's another 54,000 students who are taking advantage of that repayment assistance program. That allows people to get their feet on the ground and get a little bit more stable in the workforce before they have to manage their Canada student loans.

As you point out, the write-off amount is less than 1%. That's because of these important changes we've made. In July 2011, the net default rate was 11.8%. In July 2017, after we took office, it dropped to 9%, an all-time low. That's really important, because it's beginning the evidence that actually supporting students, who are at the lower levels of earnings, to access education in a way that increases their confidence and allows them that breathing space actually results in less default.

This is not just fiscally smart; this is smart for employers, too.

This is my final statement, Mr. Chair. Thanks for giving me a few minutes. As I travel across the country, what employers are saying to me most is that they need more talent; they need more bodies. Those of you who come from Quebec will recognize that appeal, but certainly it's happening across the country. Obviously, some areas are experiencing it in deeper ways than others. This lack of labour means that we need to double down on our efforts to get more young people the skills training they need, in affordable ways.

We can't afford to leave anybody behind. When we make sure that everyone has an opportunity to succeed and to develop their skills, it's good for them, their families and communities, and it's also good for the economy.

Thank you.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Minister.

I have two more questions. In your supplementary estimates (B), you're asking for an increase of \$409 million for the Canada student grants. Could you elaborate on where you're going to target that? Please answer briefly, as I have one more question as well.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Yes, absolutely. As I mentioned in my first remarks, the grant piece is incredibly important. It's important for a few reasons. For low-income students, it helps really transcend that barrier that often is all about money. We see that conversation in the Conservatives run by Doug Ford in Ontario, who have dramatically reduced access to grants. There's an outcry from students, an outcry from employers, as a matter of fact, for this approach being wrong-headed—

Mr. John Barlow: We're talking about the federal government.

I have a point of order.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: This is not just good for students, by the way

The Chair: Excuse me for interrupting.

On a point of order, go ahead, John.

Mr. John Barlow: It's on relevancy.

We're supposed to be talking about federal government issues here. We're not talking about provincial government issues. I'm not really worried about what the Province of Ontario is doing. I'm concerned about what the Government of Canada is doing.

Could the minister bring her comments back to the issues, which are the supplementary estimates?

The Chair: Fair enough.

Mr. John Barlow: That's what we're talking about here. I'd appreciate it if she brought her—

An hon. member: That's debate, Chair.

Mr. John Barlow: I have the floor, Mr. Chair.

She should bring her issues back to what we're talking about.

The Chair: Fair enough.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thanks, MP and Mr. Chair.

I think I was really using that example as a contrast piece to our government. We're investing in increased grants, in making sure that

students have every opportunity to succeed, because we know that it's not just the right thing for that student and their family—this is, by the way, generational changing—it's also the right thing for our economy. If we don't have skilled, talented people in our communities, in our regions, in our provinces, in fact what we're going to see is economic decline. Employers will not be able to find the talent they need.

The changes that we've made to student financial assistance eligibility have made 46,000 more Canadians able to afford post-secondary education. The short-sighted politics of cutting education supports is just that: very short-sighted. One could argue that it's very unequal, but also, it's really bad economic policy.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We move on to MP Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon to my colleagues.

Good afternoon to the ministers here. We are very thankful you are here. We appreciate your presentations to us.

First and foremost, I just want to say to all the ministers here what a profound impact you're having on all Canadians, but in particular on my riding of Saint John—Rothesay.

There's Minister Hajdu with the skills link program, Canada summer jobs, youth training.

There's Minister Duclos, with the national housing strategy and the Canada child benefit. I want to congratulate you on meeting the government's poverty reduction target three years ahead of schedule. Congratulations.

And there's Minister Qualtrough, with the landmark accessibility legislation.

Last, but certainly not least, there's my friend Minister Tassi, with the increase to the GIS and the new horizons for seniors program.

My question is for Minister Tassi.

Minister Tassi, I know you've been travelling all over the country talking to Canadians. I was lucky enough to have you in my riding of Saint John—Rothesay. If you remember, we went to the town of Rothesay. We had a wonderful meeting with Mayor Nancy Grant. We talked about how Rothesay was designated an age-friendly community by the Government of New Brunswick, which our federal government helped make happen by providing funding for the Rothesay seniors' resource centre through the new horizons for seniors program.

We also had a great meeting with the Rothesay Age-Friendly Committee. They were instrumental in establishing the centre to discuss this and other seniors initiatives in Saint John—Rothesay. We had great discussions with the seniors. I remember in particular two seniors who are in a low-income situation, single seniors. They talked to us about just how profound the 10% increase in the GIS was to them, and what a game-changer and life-changer it was to them.

Minister Tassi, I just want you to express and talk about the impact of our government's investments in bolstering the GIS for low-income seniors and expanding the new horizons for seniors program. Could you just share with us how instrumental that is to changing lives for Canadians?

Hon. Filomena Tassi: Thanks, MP Long, for that question.

I have very fond memories of visiting your riding. I really appreciate the leadership that was shown there. I am very optimistic. It's reflected in a number of parts of the country as I travel and see groups coming together and taking proactive action in order to better serve the needs of seniors in their communities. In your particular case, you had the firefighters going in and checking the houses to ensure that the fire alarms were working—that opportunity to engage with seniors. That's happening across the country. It's fantastic, as the Minister of Seniors, to witness that first-hand.

With the two items you raised, the GIS is extremely important. What our government has done is focus on assisting those who are most vulnerable, most in need. The GIS increase was targeted at the most vulnerable single seniors. That increase was up to \$947 per year. That has had a positive impact on 900,000 seniors across the country and has lifted 57,000 seniors out of poverty.

As I travelled and engaged not only with seniors, but also with organizations that work with seniors and family members, income security was something that came up, so I think that initiative was a tremendous step for our government.

I could take the rest of the meeting's time to talk about the new horizons for seniors program. This program is second to none. It's absolutely fantastic. I think all members around this table have probably experienced first-hand the benefits of these investment dollars.

I see the chair has given you two minutes.

Let me be brief. To see these investment dollars in action, the difference that it's making in the lives of seniors, is absolutely tremendous. There are things like intergenerational connections being established and seeing the magic that happens when seniors and youth come together. There are gardens being created, maybe for immigrants who are living in apartments and don't have the ability to have their own garden, and then that food is distributed within the community.

Additionally, we have the pan-Canadian...but I would mention specifically the community-based projects. The difference they are making is so important, as is the supplemental help that comes as a result of that. It's not only those investment dollars. It's seeing volunteers and others come around and help enhance those programs. It's absolutely fantastic.

• (1325)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Minister.

If you remember, we also left Rothesay and went into Saint John and toured Loch Lomond Villa, a wonderful organization and complex led by Cindy Donovan in Saint John. Part of their mission is providing affordable housing for seniors in their riding. We had great conversations with her and with many seniors there about the need for more affordable housing units in Saint John—Rothesay.

Minister Duclos, could you touch on how the increased spending to implement the national housing strategy, which is outlined in the estimates, will help address the need for more affordable housing for seniors?

The Chair: Answer very briefly, please. You have about 15 seconds.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I'll cheat. I'll spread the breaking news that you mentioned, Wayne.

This morning, Statistics Canada released the results of the Canadian income survey. We have now reduced poverty between 2015 and 2017 by more than 20%. In two years, 825,000 Canadians have been lifted out of poverty, and that's only until 2017.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Wayne. I didn't know you were from Saint John—Rothesay.

MP Falk, please. We have approximately three to four minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Awesome.

Thank you for being here today.

I have a question for Minister Hajdu. I came in on a by-election in 2017, so last summer I specifically went on a Canada summer jobs tour. I met with every single organization that would meet with me and that received funding, or that contacted my office that they didn't receive funding because of the arbitrary values test that was placed by your government on the application for Canada summer jobs.

I've actually had people contact my office this year, and even last year, saying, "The government has doubled the money." In reality, what happened is we cut full-time jobs into part-time jobs of six weeks instead of 12 or 14 weeks, or whatever organizations were getting previously. I had organizations getting six weeks of funding.

Where does the six weeks come from? Most university...even high school students are off for eight weeks and looking for work. Organizations have a hard time finding students to apply for these jobs because six weeks isn't enough. That's not enough money for them to earn to go back to school in the fall. I heard this first-hand from employers, let alone the employers who just weren't able to qualify whatsoever because they couldn't check the box with good conscience.

Where does this six weeks come from? Why is there a cut in jobs?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Speaking through the chair, thank you very much, MP Falk.

I will say that we're extremely proud of doubling the Canada summer jobs, 70,000 good-quality jobs across the country—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: But you didn't, because they got six weeks.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —for young people who often are not going to have the opportunity—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: They got six-week jobs, though.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, should I continue?

The Chair: Rosemarie, do you want to follow up?

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes.

How are you doubling a job when you're cutting the weeks by six to eight weeks? How is that doubling jobs?

The Chair: Minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: As my colleagues pointed out—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: We could have changed it—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, the unique characteristic of the Canada summer jobs program is that members of Parliament have control over how the money is allocated in their ridings, starting from who will be funded. They can move them around, prioritize certain organizations, change the number of weeks, change the number of students. They can decrease the number of students from one organization and increase another—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It doesn't necessarily mean it's approved. The department has the final word on that—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: They can give an organization 12 weeks, or they can give an organization four weeks. It's really customizable by MPs.

Thank you, colleagues, for reminding me about that, because we're about to begin this process.

I will say, though, that the Harper Conservatives had the worst youth unemployment rate since the 1990s.

• (1330)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Okay, my next question—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Every year—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Minister, I'm just wondering—

The Chair: You have one minute, Rosemarie.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: We seek to double the number of work opportunities, which the Harper Conservatives—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Minister, I see that you're going back to the Harper Conservatives, and I'm just not interested in that. I'm interested in what's happening now, under this Trudeau—

The Chair: Okay, okay—

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: —Liberal government.

The Chair: Let's finish on a high note, please.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Last year, there were more than 1,500 organizations that were not allowed to have funding because of what their values were. We had more than 1,500 organizations that were denied, which could have meant two, three, four, five jobs per organization. It's interesting to see you justify or not even comment on that. You're going to comment on things from however many years ago, but not on what's relevant today.

Over 1,500 organizations didn't receive funding because of their conscience. It's so disappointing to see this government not respecting freedom of conscience, freedom of choice. It's your choice what you want to believe and what you don't want to believe.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: Speak through the chair, please.

You have time for a final word, Rosemarie.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: It's just very disappointing that we have ministers here—not all of them, but for sure Minister Hajdu—who want to focus on the last 10 years instead of on today and the failures of this government.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That, unfortunately, brings us to the end of our time.

I want to thank all the ministers for being here, as well as all the officials and everyone in attendance—my colleagues, all the folks in the booth and the technical people. Thank you very much for helping us put this on so that everyone across Canada can be witness to this.

We are adjourned.

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