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Chair

Mr. Bill Casey

Standing Committee on Health

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• (1550)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bill Casey (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

I want to welcome everybody to meeting number 97. Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, October 30, we are considering Bill C-326, An Act to amend the Department of Health Act (drinking water guidelines).

I want to apologize to our witnesses for being late. We had a Prime Minister's statement in the House, and all the parties responded to it.

Mr. Davies, do you have a point there?

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Chair, I'm happy to leave this to the end, if we can reserve some time then.

There have been some late changes in witnesses. Because of changes to the calendar, the New Democrats' first choice for witnesses, the Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians, is not able to testify today. They were originally scheduled for Wednesday. Then they were moved to today. I understand that at the last minute for logistical reasons, they could not appear today.

I just want to make sure they are invited to come on Wednesday. I'd be happy to leave this to the end of the meeting, but I just want to make sure that it is flagged at this point.

The Chair: We'll have to decide that, because we have a full schedule for Wednesday.

Does the committee want to add further witnesses for Wednesday?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Absolutely. They were one of the top witnesses that we had put forward as well. We would prefer to have them.

The Chair: I see consensus, so we'll invite them for Wednesday, if they can make it.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to my colleagues.

The Chair: All right.

Today as witnesses we have Mr. Clayton Leonard from the JFK Law Corporation. He's a lawyer in British Columbia who acts for numerous indigenous groups. We have Jason R. "Jay" Odjick, a writer and artist from the Anishinabeg First Nation, which is about

an hour north of Ottawa. We also have Mr. Graham Gagnon, a professor at the Centre for Water Resources Studies at Dalhousie.

We understand that Mr. Leonard is has another commitment as well, so we'll ask Mr. Leonard to go first. He joins us by video conference.

Each presenter will have 10 minutes to make a presentation. Then we'll go to questions.

Mr. Leonard, you have 10 minutes.

Mr. Clayton Leonard (Senior Counsel, JFK Law Corporation): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee. As I understand it, Bill C-326 at its core simply requires the Minister of Health to conduct a review of drinking water standards in OECD countries, and to make recommendations for amending national guidelines for drinking water in Canada.

As you know, my work has been exclusively with first nations on safe drinking water, so all of my comments to the committee will be in that context. My overall opinion of the bill, having taken time over the weekend to review it, is that at best it's a distraction and perhaps a waste of time, and at worst, it may place additional burdens on first nations that they are not prepared to meet.

As the committee probably knows, in 2011 there was a national engineering assessment of first nation drinking water and wastewater systems that recommended roughly \$5 billion in investment over 10 years. Although the former government and the current one have made additional investments, neither has come anywhere close to meeting that pressing and decades-long need in first nation communities.

It's been my experience that first nations across Alberta, British Columbia, and the rest of the country are already struggling to meet federal drinking water standards. Just to list off a few of these standards, first nations are already expected to comply with the protocol for centralized wastewater systems in first nation communities, the protocol for decentralized water and wastewater systems in first nation communities, design guidelines for first nation waterworks, guidelines for effluent quality and wastewater treatment at federal establishments, and Health Canada's guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality, as well as INAC's level of service standards for water and sewer systems.

As a practical point, when I read the bill, it's not clear to me how the recommendations from the minister's review would apply to, or impact, that long list of guidelines that first nations are already expected to meet.

Most first nations systems, as identified by the national engineering assessment, are struggling to meet those guidelines already. If additional reporting and monitoring requirements are placed on plant operators and those in the communities, they will just have to do more with less already.

There's also the question of what this means for the implementation of the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act. It's enabling legislation, and as I understand, the federal government has not yet taken significant steps across the country to develop regulations under the act. It's not clear to me how the review of drinking water guidelines that would happen under this bill would impact the development of those regulations.

There's also the question of whether the act is going to stay in place. I worked closely with first nations from Alberta, and former minister Bennett, when she was in opposition, actively coordinated and helped us oppose that piece of legislation, and committed to repealing it and replacing it with something developed in true collaboration with first nations across Canada. We haven't seen that yet. In fact, we really don't know what the fate of the legislation will be at all.

•(1555)

It's also unclear to me what all of the work put into this bill would really mean for the protection of drinking water. We have overlapping jurisdictions around the country with varying standards. In Ontario there's legislation that protects source water; in Alberta it's done by voluntary guidelines, as an example. Source water protection is really fundamental to protecting drinking water for first nations and non-first nations—it doesn't matter where you are in the country. It's probably the weakest component of the regulatory guidelines and legislation in this country. I think if any bill regarding drinking water is not sharply focused on the protection of source water, then it's not really worth the time.

Those are my comments.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Odjick for 10 minutes for his opening statement. Thank you very much.

Mr. Jason R. Odjick (As an Individual): *[Witness speaks in Algonquin]*

Hello. My name is Jay Odjick. I'm an artist, writer, and television producer from the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg community, about an hour and a half up the road.

I'd like to talk about a few different things. I'm here primarily to talk about the state of drinking water in first nations communities. I'd also like to talk about opportunity. I'd also like to talk about belief.

Belief is a very important thing. At times, for me as well as many other first nations people, I believe it can be hard for us to believe in government. I am looking around the room, though, and I'm seeing people. I believe in you, because I believe that if we were to reach out we could touch one another. Tangible things are things that I can believe in.

As it relates to opportunity, I'd like to thank you all for the opportunity to be here and to recognize that we are on unceded Algonquin territory. It's an opportunity for me to speak because I'm not an elected official of any first nations community, or group, or organization, but I am a community that has had a long-term no-consumption advisory.

The reason I'm a bit nervous to speak is that our community of Kitigan Zibi is not exactly representative of the problems many first nations communities face as related to their drinking water. Many communities are faced with a bacteria-based problem, whereas in Kitigan Zibi our problem has always been radiation—and I'll talk about that a bit more. I'll also talk a bit about the other first nations communities and the issues they face.

Insofar as the situation or state of first nations' drinking water goes, it's important to note that we have seen progress. We've seen progress due to diligent work, including the erection of facilities designed to handle these problems, the current government's commitment to eradicating drinking water advisories in first nations communities by 2021, and the hard work of people in first nations communities and the testing that's been done.

It can be hard to find accurate numbers, and I think for a lot of people that's a major thing because you really have to know where to look. In terms of progress, I know for us in Kitigan Zibi the uranium in our water was identified in approximately the mid-1990s—1994, I believe. Along with that, radon has been a major problem for us as well.

In terms of progress, in 2015 there were approximately 100 to 135 long-term drinking water advisories in first nations communities. Now, it's important to note that 135 number does not mean nations or communities; that's the total number of advisories. Some communities have more than one. I'm familiar with the few that even have two or three.

According to the INAC website, as of March this year the most contemporary numbers are that there are 78 long-term advisories, and that 57 of them have been lifted in the last couple of years. That's good. I think that's really encouraging. The thing we have to take into account is that while many of us are encouraged, many of us are still angry. I think what we have to understand is that anger is justifiable. It's hard to look at pictures, for example, of kids from Kashechewan with the skin conditions that been identified as being caused by exposure to their own water. If there's one thing we're supposed to be able to trust in this world, I think it's our water. They say water is life. That should be true, but it isn't always the case.

To be more encouraging, I believe that Bill C-326 could potentially play a role in meeting the 2021 goal. When I read the bill there were a few questions that came to mind. The bill is about meeting Canada's guidelines for drinking water and the standards of the other OECD member countries. My question question is primarily whether Canada can do that if we include first nations' drinking water and the state of it in our reports. I don't know the answer to that. I'm just some guy. The secondary question would be about it being a lofty thing to aspire to. It's a lofty aspiration, especially with the 2021 deadline of eradicating those DWAs, and there are people who are dubious about it. Speaking for myself and no one else, I'd rather have lofty aspirations than the opposite.

I think that with Bill C-326, it's important to look not only at the drinking water standards of nations outside of Canada but also at the status of drinking water of the nations within Canada, and by that I mean our first nations. I hope Bill C-326 can play some role in that.

• (1600)

The other thing that's important to note is that one of the major challenges facing first nations as far as drinking water goes is the jurisdictional quagmire, the same one we face in so many other regards, of what jurisdiction it falls under, whether it's provincial or federal. I think the message we'd all like to send is that the federal government must claim responsibility.

The other question as it relates to first nations drinking water, at least from what I've seen in my own community, is the most relevant thing: what are we testing for? As I said, our problem is not bacterial in Kitigan Zibi; our problem is based on radiation. I'd like to speak a little bit to the realities of that.

In the 1990s, when we found the uranium, we began working as diligently as we could. We had obtained funding from Health Canada to test for the uranium. Admittedly, I'm not the best person to speak to this, but this is what I know, what I've read, and what I've been told by people, my chief and people who've worked on this project. We've done a good job as well, with the aid of the federal government, in bringing this number down. Based on the information I have here, at the time, in the 1990s, radon was present in 43% of homes, with 8% of those homes being between three and ten times the safe levels. As of today, that number has gone down to around 17%, so we've seen success.

The way we treated the uranium in the water was to use a type of resin. The resin would basically take the uranium from the water. How does it do that? We began to be concerned that the resin was actually absorbing the uranium and thus becoming radioactive. At some point somebody asked, "What about septic tanks? What about

septic fields? What about leach beds?" At that point, two or three wells in Kitigan Zibi were tested for the presence of radium, and we found it. To what extent? That's where things get interesting.

We went back to Health Canada and said, "Look, we treated the uranium. There is also radium. We don't know how much, and we don't know at what level." Health Canada at that point said that the cheaper option would be bottled water. Since then, the majority of households in my community have consumed bottled water. The cost to the community is roughly, as far as I'm told, about \$1,800 a week. Again, I'm not an elected official, and also for sure not a mathematician, but I think at some point, when you look at these costs and at the population rising, that will stop being the cheaper option. We have to go with the better option, the human rights option.

In closing, I'd like to say that I believe in people above all else. I believe that we could reach out and we could touch one another. I believe in you. I believe you're listening, and I believe you care, or you wouldn't be here. You wouldn't have the jobs you have.

I'd like to take a small moment to engage you all in a suspension of disbelief exercise. I'd like you to believe that this is actually a glass of water from Kitigan Zibi. As I said, I believe in you. If you were really thirsty, my question is, would you drink it? You don't know about the levels of radium in it, but you don't need to drink it, because you have bottled water. So my question to you is this. I don't know how many of you here have children. If I were to bring in a small tub of this water—and when I say this I believe in you as people, and I believe you care about the well-being of other people—would you bathe your babies in water from Kitigan Zibi as we do every day?

Although I believe in you as people, what I'm asking today is to give us a government we can believe in. Give us a government we can reach out to and touch and feel every time we turn on our tap.

Thank you.

• (1605)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we go to Dr. Graham Gagnon for a 10-minute opening statement.

Professor Graham Gagnon (Professor, Centre for Water Resources Studies, Faculty of Engineering, Dalhousie University, As an Individual): Thank you, committee members and Mr. Casey, for providing me this opportunity today to talk about Canada and drinking water.

I'm presently the Director of the Centre for Water Resources Studies, a professor, and NSERC Industrial Research Chair at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

In our lab I supervise and engage with students and research projects that touch drinking water research across Canadian communities. In particular, our work focuses on some of our partners, such as Halifax Water and Cape Breton Regional Municipality, but I also have the opportunity to work with many municipalities across Canada. Last week I was dealing with a project in Regina, Saskatchewan, and an emerging issue that folks in Regina are addressing.

As the director for the centre, I've also had the opportunity to work with the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs, headquartered in Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia. The chiefs in my region are adamantly concerned about drinking water, and one of their approaches is to develop a first nation water authority, an innovative approach to address drinking water challenges they face in the region through aggregation, combined services, and management structures that are truly innovative within the paradigm of Indigenous Services Canada.

As the centre director, I've also had the opportunity to work with many of our provincial and federal agencies. I finished a project recently with Health Canada; I'm working on a project with the Government of Nunavut, a project with Nova Scotia Environment, and Ontario and Alberta as well. Throughout that work, and through the work with municipalities, there is clearly a need, particularly in the municipality group, to strive for best-in-class information. Many of our municipality units across Canada are members of an organization called the American Water Works Association. AWWA is headquartered in Denver, Colorado. As you might imagine, many of our large metropolitan cities reach out to AWWA to find best-in-class information. The proposed bill to look for best-in-class information for the federal government through the OECD annual review would be something that I could see would be welcomed by municipalities from the standpoint that many of the them are already doing this; and to push the envelope and think about new ways and new innovation to manage drinking water would only be welcomed by many municipalities.

In addition, I work with a number of clean tech companies. The clean tech economy in Canada and Atlantic Canada is robust for drinking water. One of the companies I work with regularly is a company called LuminUltra. It's based in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and it's a leading biotech company that is striving to develop new assays to measure bacteriological quality in drinking water. Much of its work is pushed by offshore needs, as many Canadian clients don't necessarily see the value of the business case. However, looking at other instruments for regulatory paradigms or regulatory regimes in Canada would strive to find new ways to measure bacteriological quality and engage biotech companies like LuminUltra.

However, within the context of Canada, developing policy on drinking water requires both a local and a regional perspective. In Canada, the Canadian government uses the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Committee on Drinking Water, or the FPT, as a collaborative approach by federal agencies and provincial partners to achieve drinking water safety. However, one voice is critically missing from this committee, and that is an indigenous voice. While I recognize that Indigenous Services Canada serves on the FPT, this is not the same as a technical expert or a community member from a

first nation community. Consistent with what my colleague Mr. Odjick said, I think the representation and views of a community member are critical for this type of federal agency or this type of federal committee. Many of our provincial partners live and breathe and raise families in the provinces they represent when they attend as a committee member. A first nation representative would provide that sense of place that doesn't exist right now on the FPT. It would provide an Inuit voice, a Métis voice, or a first nation voice that would be critical in understanding drinking water issues in communities.

I would strongly urge the present committee members to think about this as they reflect on the current policy and Bill C-326. Ask yourselves how this would affect first nation communities and whether an indigenous voice in particular would be welcome on the federal-provincial-territorial committee.

Thank you very much for providing me this opportunity. I welcome any questions today.

•(1610)

The Chair: Thank you all very much for your presentations.

Now we'll go to seven-minute questions. We'll start with Ms. Sidhu.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for the very touching comments.

My first question is for Mr. Odjick. What barriers are there to implementing Bill C-326? How can we address those barriers?

Could each of you give your views?

Mr. Jason R. Odjick: To my understanding, there are some issues that have always come up with first nations drinking water, especially as it relates to remote communities. Things can be costly. But as my colleague was saying, the important thing is to consult with first nation leaders and people who are familiar with workforces, with budgets, and with what's possible. They would be able to answer that better than I ever could. Having a spot at the table and having our voices included is always going to be the way to start.

The other thing, as I said, is that we need to get out from under the idea not being sure whether things are the responsibility of the provincial or federal governments. The federal government has to step up and claim responsibility for those things.

•(1615)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

Mr. Jason R. Odjick: You're welcome.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Can you recommend any amendments to this bill, Mr. Gagnon?

Prof. Graham Gagnon: Yes.

I think all three of us spoke quite clearly on the need for a first nations voice at some level. I would agree with Mr. Leonard that striving for new regulations shouldn't be just noise, but something that collectively all Canadians will be a part of, including indigenous people as part of that review, however that might be done. That would be a critical amendment to this bill.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Mr. Leonard, do you want to speak on that?

Mr. Clayton Leonard: Yes, the point I would like to stress to the committee is that this comes back to what's becoming the very tired, old question of resources versus regulation. In the national engineering assessment, the expert panel on first nations drinking water, and any number of reports by the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, the same theme emerges, namely that you need to have financial resources in place for the proper construction, operation, and maintenance of drinking water systems. You cannot regulate or guideline safe drinking water into existence.

That's the problem with the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act. I think it's the problem with the aspirations of this bill. You can set all the standards you want when it comes to first nations' situation, but those standards won't result in safe drinking water coming out of the tap. Money is needed, and there has not been a financial plan or a commitment by any government to address the need identified by the national engineering assessment.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Do you know of any new technologies or methods to improve the overall water quality?

Mr. Clayton Leonard: I'm not a water engineering expert, but I have toured first nation water plants and am currently working on several issues at Engage Canada.

My simple answer to the question would be that many of the water systems on first nations, the ones that service town and village sites, are simple chlorination systems that you would not see in other Canadian communities. There is no multi-barrier treatment, no use of ultraviolet light and other sorts of current membrane technology. Most first nations' systems are antiquated. That's in the town and village sites, but in a lot of communities, 60%, 70%, or 80% of the water used is in a rural context, so it comes from wells, cisterns, and trucking, all of which....

Take a look at the Kainai First Nation or Blood Tribe in southern Alberta. There are approximately 13,000 members there. It's one of the largest reserves in Canada. They have a small fleet of water trucks travels thousands of kilometres on unimproved roads to fill cisterns that are not adequately sized for the number of people who live in the homes.

That is a problem when it comes to regulation, funding, or guidelines—anything that touches on rural water use. The conversation nationally so far has been on anything that looks or feels like urban-based, centralized water treatment. And while that's a problem for first nations, the main challenge is servicing homes in rural settings.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gladu.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

As a preface to my questions, I'll give you some of my background. As a chemical engineer for Dow Chemical, I worked on developing membrane systems and ion exchange systems to treat water and remove contaminants. From there I went on to work with the bottled water industry. I then worked at Suncor as a director of engineering and construction to develop, design, and build all of the potable water systems, such as reverse osmosis systems for water quality. After that I went to WorleyParsons, where we had a significant water treatment technology, and I worked on different water systems, both municipal and industrial.

One of the difficulties I see with this regulation is that it's another update on top of all of the other updates. Every municipality has its own specifications, and every province has its own set of codes or specifications, and then there's the federal government on top of it all.

I'm wondering if any of you have ideas about how we could better streamline the provincial, municipal, and federal levels to come to a standard that we could resource to meet.

I'll start with you, Mr. Gagnon.

• (1620)

Prof. Graham Gagnon: Thank you. It's wonderful to know your background as a chemical engineer.

The idea of trying to streamline provincial, municipal, and federal usage of water is a true challenge. One of the things I like about looking at other countries is that Canada may find other ways of doing business. One of ways of doing business that I think is highly appropriate is the way that the U.K. goes about it.

Britain, as you may know from your engineering days, takes a risk-based approach. Most of the water companies are privatized—which is neither here nor there. Australia and New Zealand also take a risk-based approach, in much the same way as the airline industry and the banking industry. In fact, Canada and the U.S. are somewhat behind in that we take this paradigm that allows us to get into the trap we're in. What Mr. Leonard talked about the specific parameter that you have to meet. In Canada we have over 80 of those, which makes it very difficult for a resource-strapped small community.

A risk-based management approach says: make a management plan and we, as government, will evaluate that management plan, much like the banking sector evaluates individual spending behaviour and then makes risk decisions on individual spending behaviour. We don't evaluate every single item you buy, but we have a framework. This allows us to think much more flexibly.

About a month ago, I was in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, which is one of Canada's most northern communities. Water there is trucked in, as it is in the majority of Arctic communities. Most of our policy, however, considers the idea that we're going to pipe water from a plant to someone's home. This paradigm in Arctic communities is simply not there.

Most of the regulations we have begin to fall down like a house of cards because we view the world in that manner. A risk-based approach allows us to inherently have some flexibility, to ask questions about a truck, to ask questions about the cleanliness of the truck, which presently we don't.

An OECD approach or review would allow us to ask whether there is another way for us to regulate water, which I think would allow us to maybe look at the very hard question you're asking. Rather than having multiple levels, is there another way we can do business?

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Do you have anything to add to that, Mr. Leonard?

Mr. Clayton Leonard: I would agree that there's some value in looking at what's being done in other OECD countries, but I'm not sure it needs to be set out in a piece of legislation. The minister and the ministry can do that.

Working in a first nation context, if I'd had more time to prepare today, I could have brought you a stack of reports from the last 30 years, where we've studied the problem to death. We all know what needs to be done.

Speaking more broadly, I'll go back to source-water protection. If you're an Ontarian, there are legislated protections in place for your source water. If you're in rural Alberta, there are really none. You're responsible for your well and what uses you make on your land. There's nothing that compares to Ontario's system.

I think the role the federal government could play, if there's political will, which I'm skeptical of, is to create a national standard for provinces and territories and other levels of government. Under this standard, you'd be free to legislate source-water protection however you see fit, but it would have to meet minimum standards. This way, every Canadian—indigenous, non-indigenous, western, central Canada, Atlantic Canada—would know they are going to be living under the same standard for the protection of source water.

I think this is the only approach that's consistent with the international statements and commitments that Canada's made regarding safe drinking water being a human right. It also has relevance under the UN declaration on the right to clean water.

•(1625)

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: I took your point very well that if you come with more recommendations, but you don't resource them, then they're totally useless. We already have standards that we don't meet, and although the government pledged \$8.4 billion to get rid of the boiled water advisories when it was elected, and although there's been some progress, still.... As an engineering company, if you had given us \$8.4 billion years ago, you'd be done. I think there's a need to put some teeth into this bill, and coming up with more recommendations on top of what already exists won't necessarily fix it.

Do you have any comment on that, Mr. Odjick?

Mr. Jason R. Odjick: I agree strongly with what both of my fellow witnesses have said. I think the important thing is to remember that while work has to be done, we can't be putting the financial onus on first nation communities, due to the lack of financing and budget for this. It would require a different approach,

by having the federal government partnering with and dealing with first nations on these things, because simply put, in most communities, and I can especially speak for my own, resources and workforces are stretched really thin as is.

I think the idea of standards is fantastic. I agree with what Mr. Leonard said. As I said, if we can take a look at other countries and where they're at.... Primarily we have to thoroughly test the first nations drinking water, because in communities like mine, we can say, "Bacteria? No. Uranium? No. Radium? Maybe". That "maybe" is not good enough. It comes down to the first step, which is thorough testing, and then everything else follows.

I agree strongly with what you said about the \$8.4 billion.

The Chair: Time is up.

Mr. Davies, you're next.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

We are the health committee, and I can't think of any issue that is more critical to our health as humans than access to clean water. I don't want to be melodramatic about it, but water is the essence of life. I don't think we live three or four days if we don't have access to water, and so I think that of all the issues that come before this committee, this is one of the most important.

What's on my mind in studying this legislation is the gravity of the subject and its importance as a health issue. What does this bill propose to do? Is this the highest level of action we can take? This bill essentially just calls on the minister to conduct a review of drinking water standards in OECD member countries, and if appropriate, to make recommendations for amendments to national guidelines respecting drinking water.

Mr. Leonard, if I heard you correctly, you said that this bill is at best a distraction or waste of time, and at worst it may place burdens on first nations. Given that we all know that the state of clean drinking water in the indigenous communities across this country is deplorable—there are a massive number of boil water advisories—do we really need to be passing legislation to look at the OECD countries? Would we be better off putting resources into addressing the mechanical needs on the ground? Are we that confused about what those mechanical needs are?

Mr. Clayton Leonard: I don't think we're that confused about what those mechanical needs are. I would agree that our resources and attention would be better focused on solving what I see as a national embarrassment. I don't understand why someone in the province of Alberta, one of the biggest wealth generators in the country, needs to be worried about turning on the tap in their home just because they're living on a reserve. Until that problem gets our full attention and resources, I view anything else as a distraction. That's part of my view of the world as well.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

To Mr. Leonard again, in 2014 when you represented four Alberta first nations that filed a law suit against the federal government in an effort to resolve long-standing drinking water problems, you said the following: “How many times do you get to reannounce the same amount of money? If you spent \$2 billion, and then you find that 73 per cent of First Nations still face serious drinking water issues, it's a pretty clear indication it's not enough.”

Recently we found that two-thirds of all first nations communities in Canada have been under at least one drinking water advisory at some time in the last decade, and we know that in the last election Mr. Trudeau promised to end drinking water advisories in indigenous communities within five years. However, according to a recent report from the David Suzuki Foundation, the federal government is not on track to fulfill its promise and has no plan to get there.

I believe the PBO has also come to similar conclusions. According to a recent report from the PBO, the federal government is only spending 50% to 70% of what's needed to fulfill its promise to end boil water advisories on first nations reserves within five years.

This is my question for you. When you said the investments are not even close to meeting the needs, how much money would it take—if you know—to make sure that all first nations communities in this country have access to clean drinking water, and how much are we falling short of that now?

• (1630)

Mr. Clayton Leonard: I don't have those statistics on hand, but I know, for example, that a national engineering assessment done in 2011 was the most thorough look. There are problems with it, but that's the most thorough examination we have nationwide, and it said just shy of \$5 billion over 10 years is needed.

We had maybe \$330 million under the Harper government. I'm not sure what the amount has been under Prime Minister Trudeau's watch.

That need has not been filled. The other elephant in the room that nobody is talking about is that when you speak of boil water advisories, that's first nations water treatment plants. As I've said, in a lot of communities we have decentralized systems: trucking, cisterns, or water wells. Those are not monitored in the same fashion as drinking water treatment facilities, so we really don't know how many people turn on the tap in those homes and face risk to their health.

There is another looming problem that's not addressed by the current initiative even if it's being funded properly. The Neegan Burnside national assessment found—I'm basing this on memory

here—that about 60% to 65% of first nations drinking water systems across the country were classified as medium risk. That means they need an investment of funds for proper operation or maintenance and eventual replacement of them. So we have this bulge in the snake coming. We might be dealing with boil water communities right now, but we have this looming infrastructure bulge in the snake coming that really needs billions of dollars to address, and it's only going to get worse as it's neglected.

The Chair: We have a little problem here, folks. There's a vote being called in 28 minutes and 29 seconds, so I need unanimous consent to carry on until maybe 15 minutes before the vote.

Do we have unanimous consent?

An hon. member: No.

The Chair: We don't have unanimous consent.

Okay, we have to call a halt to our proceedings. It's 28 minutes before the vote. The vote takes about 10 minutes, and then 5 minutes for us to get back here. We have to go to vote. It will take us a little while—I'm going to say almost 45 minutes, because it's 28 minutes until the vote.

I hope our witnesses can hang on. We'll be back as soon as we can, but it's part of our obligation. We have to go vote.

I am going to suspend the meeting for now.

Mr. Leonard, do you want to make a comment?

Mr. Clayton Leonard: I have something else that has to be done today and then a flight to Calgary to catch, so I'm going to have to excuse myself.

The Chair: All right. Thank you very much for your contribution.

Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chair, I'm just wondering about the time. If the vote is in 28 minutes, that's 5 o'clock. The vote will take 15 minutes, and that's 5:15. By the time we get back we're talking of 5:20. I don't see how we can continue the meeting that is scheduled to end at 5:30. I just don't want to keep the witnesses around if we're not going to be able to come back.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: We should just adjourn.

The Chair: I see consensus that we end the meeting, then.

I'm very sorry. Your testimony so far has been really helpful, and we really appreciate it, but it's the will of the committee that we end, and we'll reconvene on Wednesday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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