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Chair: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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• (1205)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to the seventh meeting of the Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic.

[English]

Please note that today's proceedings will be televised in the same way as a typical sitting of the House.

[Translation]

We will proceed to ministerial announcements.

[English]

I understand that there are no ministerial announcements. That's confirmed.

[Translation]

We will now proceed to presenting petitions for a period not exceeding 15 minutes. I would like to remind members that any petition presented during a meeting of the special committee must have already been certified by the clerk of petitions. Once the petition is presented, the member is asked to bring it here to the Table.

Mr. Manly is the first one to be allowed to present a petition.

[English]

Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I rise today to present a petition that has many signatures from constituents in Nanaimo—Ladysmith. They're calling for a ban on cosmetic testing using animals. They want us to follow the European Union model, under which the use of animals in cosmetic testing has been banned. Moving forward, they're calling for a ban on the sale and manufacture of animal-tested cosmetics and their ingredients in Canada.

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre is next.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I rise today to table e-petition 2466, initiated by a constituent of mine in Stittsville, a beautiful west Ottawa community. The petition has collected 827 signatures from every province and territory.

It was collected by Cara, a mother from my riding who suffered an unthinkable tragedy. Her 11-year-old son Joshua drowned in a boating accident on the St. Lawrence River at Rockport, Ontario. Joshua was not wearing a life jacket. Worse, Cara's family had to wait 48 days to recover Joshua's body.

Cara is now working tirelessly to amend the small vessel regulations to make it mandatory for children under the age of 14 to wear a life jacket or PFD while they are passengers in or drivers of small vessels covered under parts 2, 3, and 4 of the regulations.

I support Cara's efforts, and I'm honoured to table this petition on her behalf.

The Chair: Seeing no further petitions to be presented, we'll continue, and we will now proceed to the questioning of ministers.

[Translation]

Please note that we will suspend the proceedings every 45 minutes to allow employees who provide support for the sitting to replace each other safely.

[English]

Go ahead, Mr. Scheer.

[Translation]

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Leader of the Opposition): It was revealed yesterday that this government's policy was to ignore fraud. The Prime Minister's reaction was to act as if everything was normal. In fact, we've learned that over 200,000 cases of suspected fraud have been identified in the benefit applications.

The Prime Minister is failing our future generations. Our children and grandchildren are going to pay back billions of dollars that he's borrowing to pay tax cheats.

Will the Prime Minister protect taxpayers and immediately begin a review of these 200,000 cases of suspected fraud?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister): Our priority was to get money out quickly to all Canadians who needed it, and that's exactly what we've done. Millions of Canadians have received the money they so desperately needed.

Having said that, I want to make it very clear, Mr. Chair: Fraud is unacceptable. We have measures in place to detect fraud. All fraudsters will be required to pay back the money they fraudulently received from the government. We're going to make sure that this is done in the coming months.

[English]

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, Conservatives agree that those who need help should get it, and no one is arguing that they shouldn't, but reports indicate that the Liberals have ordered public servants to turn a blind eye to 200,000 cases of suspected fraud.

It's a simple question: Yes or no, did the government instruct any government department to ignore red flags or warnings of fraudulent cases?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, the priority in this situation was getting money out to the millions of Canadians who needed it as quickly as possible, but of course fraud is unacceptable. That's why we have put safeguards in place to ensure that anyone who received that money fraudulently will have to repay it.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: It's a yes-or-no question, Mr. Chair. Did the government give any kind of instruction to public servants in any department to ignore red flags or warnings of fraudulent cases, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The instruction to government officials was to get money out to those who needed it as quickly as possible. We have put measures in place to detect fraud. People who got this money fraudulently will have to repay.

● (1210)

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, it is clear that he can't answer a yes-or-no question, so we can all assume what the answer must be.

In other situations, the government is saying “no” to people. It's letting so many Canadians down. Small business owners who don't happen to have a CRA payroll number or a business account are ineligible for the government supports. Individuals, owner-operators, and those who are earning \$1 more than \$1,000 are being told that they don't qualify for the emergency response benefits. Meanwhile, fraudsters are getting them.

Does the Prime Minister think it's fair to tell people who are following all the rules “no”, while telling government officials to allow fraudulent cases to be processed?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, Canadians well know that this is an unprecedented situation, one in which we had to get help to as many Canadians as possible as quickly as possible. That is exactly what we did.

We continue to work very hard to fill gaps for people who should get money but haven't been able to, and, as I said, we have strong measures to counter fraud. Anyone who got this money fraudulently will have to repay it.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, when these programs were first designed, the Prime Minister said that he acknowledged that there were problems and that they would be fixed later. Well, here we are in May, and hundreds of thousands of Canadians are being told “no” for purely technical and bureaucratic reasons.

Will the Prime Minister make the simple changes to allow business owners who don't happen to have a business bank account, who don't happen to have a CRA payroll number and individuals who are ineligible for the emergency response benefit because they've been paid by family members through dividends to qualify, or is he going to continue to let hundreds of thousands of Canadians down during this pandemic?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, from the beginning of this pandemic, we moved extremely rapidly to get help and support to millions of Canadians. That was the priority, and that's what we've been doing for the past two months. As we've said, we will continue to tweak and improve the programs to make sure that more people who need help will get it. We are working the best we can, as fast as we can, to help those millions of Canadians who need support.

The Chair: You have time for about a 15-second question, Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, the Prime Minister indicated that he would support Taiwan's inclusion in the WHO only as a non-state observer. Of course, that designation does not exist. Participants of the WHO are either states or NGOs.

Will the Prime Minister support Taiwan's participation as a state observer?

The Chair: The Right Honourable Prime Minister has 15 seconds or less, please.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we will continue with our one China policy, but we have always advocated Taiwan's meaningful inclusion in international bodies where it makes sense to do so, and that includes at the WHO.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Blanchet now has the floor.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil—Chambly, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

On Friday, students in Quebec and Canada will be able to apply for the Canada emergency student benefit, which is a good thing. This program was necessary, particularly because the number of students who won't be able to get back their jobs from last year is much higher than the number of jobs that might be available to these young people. There are also issues of duration. We don't know how long these jobs will remain unavailable.

People talked about a risk to being in the labour market and meeting the needs of the labour market. On April 29, the Deputy Prime Minister made a formal commitment to ensure that these programs are accompanied by work incentives for youth and all CESB recipients.

So that everyone knows what they're getting into, I'd like to know whether the employment incentives that will accompany the Canada emergency response benefit will be known by Friday.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I thank the hon. member for understanding the importance of supporting students who, for the most part, won't be able to get the summer jobs they were counting on. Young people don't just want to earn money; they also want to gain work experience. That's why we're setting up programs, including Canada summer jobs, but also another program with 76,000 new jobs for young people in important sectors, so that young people can also get jobs.

We will continue to work with youth and employers to ensure that gaps in the labour market are addressed, while ensuring that youth are well-supported.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: That's very interesting, but it doesn't answer my question at all.

People in the fishing, tourism and agricultural sectors, as well as municipalities and, from the very beginning, of course, the Government of Quebec, more generally, have expressed fears that job gains will cause people to lose their benefits and discourage them from going to work. The only way to avoid that is to ensure that people keep more money as they work more. That is the principle.

In fact, we propose that over the \$1,000 no-penalty limit, half of the earnings be exempt from penalty. Is this something that could be considered?

Since it's been two weeks since the commitment was made and it's urgent, can we act now? The emergency shouldn't last eight months.

• (1215)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, young people need money, but they also need work experience.

This is an unprecedented situation, which is why we're working with seasonal industries and the different regions to make sure they have a sufficient workforce in their situation.

Students can be part of it, but at the same time we must provide the necessary support for those who can't find a job. That's why we continue to work with the industries involved to ensure that they have a sufficient workforce while we support students.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Unfortunately, the spirit of it doesn't seem to have been understood.

I doubt that, even in the best-case scenario, the government will be able to get all the jobs needed in a timely manner for all these young people to decide to go ahead. So, first of all, there will be a shortage of jobs.

Second, people aren't crazy. If they earn less by working than they earn by not working, all the good faith in the world won't solve the problem.

Can we make sure that people keep more money in their pockets as they work more? I think we can have a clear answer, given the timeframe. People are going to start registering for the program on Friday. The principles are good, but a clear answer would be good too.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Beginning Friday, students will be able to apply for the Canada emergency student benefit. When they apply, they'll all be directed to a job bank that we've set up to make sure they know what jobs are available to get not only the money they need, but also the experience they need for their future, while helping our society in this crisis.

I know we're going to be able to count on young people.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Singh.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh (Burnaby South, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, one of the most devastating outcomes of this COVID-19 crisis has been the impact on seniors. Eighty per cent or more of the deaths during COVID-19 have been seniors living in long-term care homes. The military had to be called in. Out of 14 countries, Canada has been deemed the worst in its care of seniors.

Despite all this, the Prime Minister has said recently that he doesn't feel it's the federal government's responsibility to find a solution. How can he say to families reeling with loss that it's not the federal government's responsibility to play a role in solving this problem?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, perhaps the fact that the NDP no longer has many seats in Quebec has caused it to forget the importance of respecting the Constitution and the areas of jurisdiction of provincial versus federal governments. We will be there to work with the provinces as they deal with challenges in their long-term care facilities. We are there as a partner, but we, on this side of the House, will always respect the jurisdiction of the provinces and be there to support them in fulfilling those responsibilities.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Everyone across Canada has just heard this Prime Minister double down on the idea that he doesn't feel it's his responsibility, despite the fact that the Canadian military had to go into long-term care homes. There is a role that the federal government can play. Both Liberal and Conservative federal governments have been consistently, for decades, cutting transfers to health care. They can increase those transfers to ensure long-term care is adequately funded.

We could also ensure that there's a national care guarantee, working with provinces to ensure that we are meeting the best standards. We could increase workers' pay. We could ensure that there's no more profiting off the backs of seniors when it comes to long-term care.

Will the Prime Minister commit to some of these care guarantees?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: It will come as exactly no surprise to the vast majority of Canadians that the Liberal Party will always stand up for the Constitution of Canada. We respect the Constitution. We respect areas of provincial jurisdiction.

As I have said from the very beginning of this crisis, we will be there to help the provinces as they manage the challenges they're facing. The federal government does have a role to play, and it is a role to support the provinces in doing the things they need to do during this unprecedented time. We will continue to be there.

• (1220)

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: I am glad to hear the Prime Minister is no longer trying to hide behind jurisdiction.

We know that in long-term care homes, the for-profit long-term care homes have been the site of the worst conditions, where the greatest number of seniors have died. Will the Prime Minister join us in committing to remove profit from the long-term care system? Vulnerable seniors should not be subject to the profits of a company willing to cut services, staffing and quality of care instead of ensuring that seniors get the best care possible.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I think it has become clear for all Canadians that we need to improve the care offered to our seniors right across the country. We cannot look at these numbers we are seeing and these tragedies hitting so many families and not want to see us as a country do better.

That is why we of course recognize that we will work with other orders of government, particularly the provinces in whose jurisdiction this area rests primarily, to support answering these questions for the long term on how we improve the way Canada supports our elders. This is something really important that we will be there for.

[Translation]

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: At the CHSLD Herron in Dorval, 31 seniors died in one month. The residents were left without food, dehydrated and without care, and those with COVID-19 symptoms were not isolated from the others. Families pay between \$3,000 and \$10,000 a month for their loved ones to be at the centre.

How can the Prime Minister think that he doesn't have a role to play in finding a solution to this devastating problem?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, all Quebecers and even all Canadians were stunned to learn of the tragedy at the Dorval CHSLD. We were very happy, as citizens, when the Government of Quebec reacted firmly and asked many questions in connection with this situation.

We will support the Government of Quebec in its efforts to find answers and, most importantly, to ensure that, in the long term, the country will better support seniors in all regions.

The Chair: We'll continue with Mr. Poilievre.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Chair, how many emergency response benefit cheques have been sent to people whose applications have been flagged as fraudulent?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by quickly saying that a total of 7.7 million Canadians have received the Canada emergency response benefit, which is absolutely essential for—

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many emergency response benefits have been sent out to people whose applications have been flagged as fraudulent?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, I see that the pace will allow me to give a little bit of information for each question. As we said at the outset, there will be mechanisms—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: We're working very hard.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: We're working very hard to ensure the integrity of the mechanism while at the same time taking important steps to help Canadians.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many emergency response benefit cheques have been sent to people whose applications have been flagged as fraudulent?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: A total of 7.7 million Canadians have received the Canada emergency response benefit, and the agency is ensuring the integrity of the system.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: He's now claiming that it's all 7.7 million? That's crazy. The department is reported to have given out 200,000. Is 200,000 the correct number of cheques that have been sent out to people whose applications have been red-flagged as fraudulent, yes or no?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to use the opportunity given to me by the hon. member to make the following clarifications. I thank him for it.

First, approximately 7.7 million Canadians have received at least one payment. Second, almost 11 million payments have been made.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: How many prisoners have received a Canada emergency response benefit cheque?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: This allows me to go even further and thank the hon. member again. Some 7.7 million Canadians have received emergency assistance in an emergency situation—

• (1225)

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: So now he's claiming that 7 million Canadians are in jail?

The question was this: How many prisoners have received a benefit cheque?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, jokes can be made about the plight of Canadians who are suffering tremendously in this crisis, but I'm not here to make—

The Chair: Mr. Poilievre has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Even the CBC is saying that prisoners are receiving the cheque. They can't have lost their jobs. They were already in prison.

It's a simple question: How many prisoners have received the cheques?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I'd like to remind hon. members that we're talking about an extremely serious situation, a situation that has called into question people's ability to make ends meet, a situation that required emergency measures. We're going to continue to do the job that Canadians expect.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The question was, how many prisoners have received the cheques?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I've already explained to the hon. member—and I'm pleased to remind him—that this benefit is an emergency measure.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The Auditor General says that he's dropping half of his audits because the government refuses to provide him with funding. If the government has enough money to send 200,000 fraudulent applicants emergency cheques, why won't the government give the Auditor General the funding he requested?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I thank the hon. member. It gives me the opportunity, in this emergency situation, to talk about the role of institutions, including that of the Auditor General, which we will continue to support because it helps us do things right.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Then what does the Auditor General have to do to get the money to do his audits? Does he have to file a bunch of fraudulent applications for an emergency response benefit?

[Translation]

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, because I know the hon. member well enough, I'm sure that he isn't giving—and doesn't want to give—the impression that the Auditor General wants to commit fraud to do his job properly.

[English]

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I agree, and that's why he should get the money he needs to do his job. He did twice as many audits under the previous government as he is doing now, but he doesn't have the money to do the audits he needs to do to keep an eye on this government's extraordinary spending.

Yes or no, will the government give the Auditor General the funding he has requested so he can get back to doing the same number of audits he did under the much more robust funding of the previous Harper government?

[Translation]

The Chair: The hon. Prime Minister.

[English]

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, the previous government cut funding to the Auditor General and caused the office to lay off dozens of employees. We increased the funding for the Auditor General. We recognize the important work the Auditor General needs to do, and that's why we increased the funding for the Auditor General. The party of the member opposite cut this funding.

The Chair: I appreciate the help from some of the members in keeping time. I do have my own chronograph here, so I'll take care of it from this end, but I appreciate the help. Thank you.

[Translation]

I now give the floor to Mr. Deltell.

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Chair, I fully agree with the Treasury Board President that we aren't here to make jokes, but to set the record straight for Canadians. Yesterday, the *National Post* reported on the front page that 200,000 people had fraudulently used emergency assistance. Is that statement accurate, yes or no?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, I thank the hon. member from my region. A few minutes ago, I was reminding people in my region that, in the greater Quebec City area, about 200,000 people had received this emergency benefit and that it was not for fraudulent reasons, but because they really needed it.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: The question is about fraudsters, and I know that there aren't many of them in Quebec City. That said, my question is very simple. I want to know whether or not 200,000 people fraudulently used emergency assistance.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I know my colleague already knows this, but we announced at the outset that strong and rigorous mechanisms would be put in place quickly to ensure that this delivery would respect the importance of integrity in government.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: The integrity of the government must be upheld, and this must be done by telling the truth. Yesterday, the *National Post* reported on the front page about 200,000 fraudsters. Is that correct, yes or no?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: To set the record straight, the Minister of National Revenue, Ms. Lebouthillier, made it very clear that there was no tolerance for fraud in this system, that all mechanisms would be put in place to ensure that integrity would be respected.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: The Treasury Board President is one of the few Canadians to find that Ms. Lebouthillier was very clear yesterday. With respect to the Minister of National Revenue, I would point out that the member for Richmond—Arthabaska asked her a very clear question yesterday, which she was unable to answer.

What does a person who has received the full CERB, \$2,000, and returns to work this week have to do? Do they have to pay back the amount they aren't entitled to? Do they keep the \$2,000? Do they have to wait and include it on their next year's tax return? Which of these three options should the person choose?

• (1230)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I thank the hon. member for his question, which is very relevant.

In fact, that person must contact Service Canada or the Canada Revenue Agency, depending on the system under which he or she received this benefit, and ensure that, in the circumstances that apply to him or her, the decisions and actions taken are appropriate.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: It's too bad, Mr. Chair, because it's the boss who is in front of me, here in committee. It's good that the citizen calls the public servant, but the public servant's boss is the Treasury Board President. Can he give a clear indication to citizens?

What should they do now with the emergency assistance they received with this month's benefit? Should they keep it in full or pay it back now?

I'd like a clear answer, please.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Again, I recognize the importance of insisting on clarity. What's clear here is that each person must make decisions based on his or her own circumstances, and the responsible way to act is to interact with public servants at Service Canada or the Canada Revenue Agency.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Service Canada employees must have clear instructions from their boss. The boss is here. This is the President of the Treasury Board.

Could the President of the Treasury Board, in very clear terms, tell the employees answering questions from Canadians what they have to say to those currently receiving the Canada emergency response benefit, but who are actually at work?

These are honest people. They are not fraudsters. They want to comply with the law. Can the President of the Treasury Board give them clear instructions?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: That is extraordinary, because my colleague focused on two key terms: honesty and hard work. In terms of the honesty of Canadians, in all cases, I am convinced that they will contact the appropriate officials. As for the hard work of those officials, they know what they have to do and they have been doing it in an exemplary way since the crisis began.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: And yet those good officials, whom I frequently commend on social media for their excellent work, have no clear instructions from their boss.

Mr. President, let me go back to the basic question. The *National Post* said that 200,000 Canadians have used the emergency assistance fraudulently, to the tune of \$1.6 billion.

Is that the case, yes or no?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I am sure that the honourable member is not questioning the ability of Canada Revenue Agency officers to follow the very clear directive of ensuring that the mechanisms reflect the importance of maintaining the integrity of the Government of Canada during the exceptional circumstances we are experiencing.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now go on to Ms. Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Chair, last week British Columbia unveiled its plan to begin reopening its economy. I've been speaking with many business owners and business associations in my riding, and I'm hearing that they're not getting their orders for cleaning supplies. Some businesses have said their back orders go back to March. They do not know how they can possibly reopen if they are not meeting health cleaning standards or accessing PPE for their employees and customers. They are well aware of the issues arising from this government's reliance on Chinese manufacturing rather than building capacity here.

What is the government doing to address these issues and ensure wholesale supply companies get products now so that they can distribute them to the businesses that need them?

Hon. Anita Anand (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Chair, our government is rapidly and aggressively buying life-saving equipment that Canada needs from a diverse range of suppliers. We are building up domestic capacity as well as procuring internationally. Our priority is to make sure front-line health care workers have the support they need.

In terms of other areas of the economy, we are working with our federal and provincial counterparts to make sure that we can do so in collaboration with them.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, an ongoing concern I've heard from small business owners is that they are ineligible for CEBA because they don't have a business account. When I brought up this point to small business minister Ng at committee, she said it was the first time that she had heard of this issue and that she would follow up.

I asked this question on April 23, and it's now been almost three weeks. Small business has been let down. Can the government confirm that they're going to fix this issue?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Malton, Lib.): Chair, I'd like to thank the honourable member for her question. It is really important that this program that we've established help small businesses. We have shown in the past that we're very flexible and nimble in accommodating the needs of businesses.

I assure the member opposite that we are looking into this matter and will come forward with a resolution in a timely manner.

• (1235)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Chair, I just read another email from a small business owner this morning who has been let down by the government. He chose to pay off debts instead of paying himself a wage; therefore, he's ineligible for CEBA, for that loan. Owner-operators have been eliminated from participating in government programs because they did not put themselves on the payroll. This shows a true lack of understanding of small businesses and especially of owner-operators.

Will the government commit to fixing this issue?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you very much. Again, I want to thank the honourable member for her question. We have focused particularly on small businesses to make sure they have the appropriate support they need.

With regard to the program that she highlighted, we have shown flexibility in the eligibility criteria by decreasing the payroll threshold for individual companies that want to apply for this loan to \$20,000 versus \$50,000, and the upper limit has gone to \$1.5 million versus \$1 million. We will continue to bring forward the changes necessary to have more businesses—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: This government has left Canadian craft breweries out to dry, like the hops in their beer. On April 24, the Canadian Craft Brewers Association released a report on the effects of COVID-19 on the Canadian craft brewing industry. The report states that 38% of craft brewers did not qualify for the Canadian emergency wage subsidy in March, and 53% were either not sure or predicted that they would not qualify in April. Many a brew pub, like BNA in my riding, due to higher payrolls are also not eligible for the CEBA loan. They have been left out and let down. Five per cent of these breweries have already closed permanently, and others are on the verge of doing so. A portion have stepped up and are making PPE.

Will this government take the initiative to support this industry by amending program requirements?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: When it comes to the Canada emergency wage subsidy, we have demonstrated flexibility and nimbleness. The program requirement changed in terms of revenue threshold. We originally had 30% for the month of March. We changed that to

15%. The eligibility criteria to compare to the first two months of this year now also compare to the previous year as well. We're going to continue to make changes to make sure more businesses can access this program.

The Chair: Ms. Gray, you have 33 seconds.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: In my constituency, Okanagan fruit production is a huge industry, and many apple orchardists have brought concerns to me regarding high costs, apples from last season selling below cost, the CUSMA agreement not helping the industry, and low-priced Washington apples flooding our market. COVID-19 has exacerbated their dire financial situation. The BC Fruit Growers' Association has called the government announcements of measures for agriculture "underwhelming".

I questioned Minister Bibeau in the House a couple of months ago, and at the time she did not have an answer. What is the plan to help our orchardists?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Compton—Stanstead, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Since this crisis began, we have been helping entrepreneurs in all sectors. We began with measures to assist small, medium and large companies, and we are now going progressively sector by sector.

Last week, we announced additional funding for agriculture—

[English]

The Chair: We'll now go on to Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Mr. Chair, in my riding of Foothills, we've established a Foothills business recovery task force. We surveyed hundreds of small business owners about the effectiveness of the emergency programs put forward by the government. The results of that survey were quite alarming. More than half of the respondents have not qualified for any of the programs, and the vast majority of them have said their businesses will not last more than another month.

Will the government expand the eligibility for some of these programs to include sole proprietorships, or is the government still looking at refunding the GST paid by some of the businesses over the last year?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I want to highlight the fact that we have issued 590,000 loans through the CEBA account. This demonstrates that this particular program is working and that businesses are taking advantage of it. We recognize that we want to be more generous and more thoughtful about these programs. We've demonstrated flexibility in the past and we will continue to be nimble going forward.

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, to the Minister of Agriculture, Dr. Charlebois said that we are on the precipice of losing 15% of our farms and that 30,000 farm families are at risk of bankruptcy. This will have a devastating effect on our rural economies.

Does the minister know the impact that losing 30,000 family farms will have on our food security and the price of groceries on the store shelves?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, the agriculture and agri-food sector is extremely important. We have clearly stated that it is an essential service. That is why we have risk management programs that are already well established.

I understand that producers would like the programs to be more generous, and we are ready to do more, but they first need to use those programs. They have \$1.6 billion available—

• (1240)

[English]

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, business risk management programs don't apply to every single stakeholder and the programs are not working for the producers. There is a bottleneck right now in our processing capacity. When the minister renounced the AgriRecovery program, funds were set aside for cattle and pork producers. When is that money going to be available, and how long will it last?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We are talking about two different programs here. We added \$77.5 million to the program helping the processing sector and \$50 million on two occasions for our pork and beef producers under the AgriRecovery program.

Once again, that is additional money. In recent years, an average of \$15 million have gone out of this program, whereas this year...

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Barlow.

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, it is not new money; it has been budgeted year after year and it's budgeted again for next year. The cattlemen said that the set-aside funds that the minister is talking about are already gone and did not last even two weeks.

If this government isn't assisting Canadian farmers, is the government's food policy to rely on food imported from foreign countries to feed Canadian families?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, the fund to assist our beef producers cannot have already disappeared because the criteria will be unveiled in the coming days.

I can assure you that we are working as efficiently as possible so that the program can be rolled out and the money can be channelled to our beef and pork producers.

[English]

Mr. John Barlow: Mr. Chair, producers across this country have said that an exemption from the carbon tax would help them greatly during this pandemic. When I asked the minister about any data

that was available for the impact the carbon tax had on agriculture, the answer I got was that this information was secret.

Yesterday at committee, the minister said that this was a mistake and that this information has been public. My staff and I looked everywhere last night, as did journalists, and that information could not be found.

Is that information actually available?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes, Mr. Chair, that information is available and public. I will happily pass the information on to my colleague.

[English]

Mr. John Barlow: If that data is available, then the minister must know the financial impacts that the carbon tax has on Canadian farmers.

With the information that the minister apparently has, does she agree with the Prime Minister that Canadian farmers are much better off financially by paying the carbon tax?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Each organization analyzes different assumptions, methodologies and geographic areas, so the results give a broad range of estimated impacts.

According to the organization that has provided information, in 2019, the estimated impacts of a \$20-per-tonne price on pollution due to grain drying ranged—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Barlow.

You have 30 seconds, please.

Mr. John Barlow: Does the minister agree with the Prime Minister that farmers are financially better off paying the carbon tax?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, the price on pollution is an extremely important measure for our economy in general and for our transition to a greener economy. We have already provided various exemptions to the agriculture sector: for gasoline, for the access card and for the greenhouse sector.

[English]

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): Will the government fully fund the Office of the Auditor General?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The answer is that we have done that in 2018 and 2019, and the Prime Minister—

Mr. Pat Kelly: Mr. Chair, I hope the minister would not want to mislead the House.

The office is certainly not fully funded, as per the testimony we heard yesterday at the finance committee. This government has expanded the Auditor General's responsibilities without adequate resources.

When will the government fully fund the Auditor General?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: To continue my answer, and as the Prime Minister said just a moment ago, that has led to the hiring of 38 new staff members. That's great to hear, because they are doing even better than they used to before we came into power.

Mr. Pat Kelly: No previous auditor general in Canadian history has ever had to tell a parliamentary committee that they had insufficient funds to do their job. That is what in fact this Auditor General has done.

When will the government fully fund the Office of the Auditor General?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: I'm glad again to be given the ability to say how important the work of the Auditor General is. We believe very much in that role. That's why we increased the funding that is necessary for that office to do its important job. We will keep working hard with the Auditor General.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Sadly, Michael Ferguson passed away in 2019, yet the government has refused to name a permanent replacement. Why?

• (1245)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, this is another wonderful opportunity to remind all members of this House of the importance of these institutions. When we face these tragic deaths, we of course are very sad of the passing of the people, and we work—

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Yesterday the Parliamentary Budget Officer said that Canada's debt could reach \$1 trillion this year.

What will it cost to service a \$1-trillion debt?

Hon. Bill Morneau (Minister of Finance): Mr. Speaker, we remain committed to doing, as we've said, whatever it takes to support Canadians through this challenging time. We think this is extremely important, and we will continue to focus on the well-being of all Canadians.

Mr. Pat Kelly: What is the estimated annual debt servicing cost of the aid measures announced so far?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, there will be an opportunity for us to give a full outline of the costs and benefits of our measures, and we will do that when we have the ability to have—

The Chair: Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: [*Inaudible—Editor*] is Canada's AAA credit rating.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Speaker, Canada came into this crisis with a very strong fiscal position, and of course we will experience challenges as we move forward, but we believe that we should experience those challenges as we support Canadians.

Mr. Pat Kelly: What would the effect of a downgrade be on Canada's debt servicing costs?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we will continue to focus on how we can support Canadians and Canadian businesses as we get through this challenge.

Mr. Pat Kelly: How many private sector bank loans have been funded for small and medium-sized businesses under the business credit availability program?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, as the information on the business credit availability program becomes available, we are being fully transparent with the finance committee and with this House.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Does the minister know how many loans have been funded under that program?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I'm not in the habit of memorizing every single number available to us, but what I can confirm is that we will be transparent with this House on the numbers as they become available.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Does the minister know the dollar amount or the approximate dollar amount so far lent and guaranteed by Export Development Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, one number that would probably be helpful for people to understand is that we've now had over 550,000 approved loans under the CEBA program, representing over 20 billion dollars' worth of money that's actually—

The Chair: Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Will the government fix the CEBA program to include businesses that pay owner-operators through dividends?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I think the language “fix” is incorrect, for more than 500,000 businesses have received this loan. Of course, we are always endeavouring to make sure it works for as many businesses as possible.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Will the government fix CEBA to cover small businesses that hire day labourers or subcontractors?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, again we've demonstrated flexibility and nimbleness when it comes to this program. We changed the eligibility criteria to make sure that more businesses can apply and be eligible for this program. We will endeavour to make sure that more Canadians have access to this program, particularly small businesses in rural and remote communities.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Will the government fix CEBA to cover business owners who use personal instead of business chequing accounts to operate their business?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Again, Mr. Chair, I want to highlight the fact that this has been a very positive program and well received by many small businesses. Over 590,000 small business loans have been issued, and that's a testament to the design of the program. We're going to make sure we continue to engage with small businesses.

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Last week, on Friday, Statistics Canada was to release labour force survey data at 8:30 a.m. eastern time, one of the most important and market-moving indicators of the month, but someone in the government leaked that information ahead of time, almost 45 minutes ahead of time, and exclusively to Bloomberg terminal users on Wall Street and on Bay Street, who pay thousands of dollars a month for those terminals.

Moving markets, the Canadian dollar moved eight basis points in that short period of time and billions were made or lost on the market. Section 34 of the Statistics Act makes it a criminal offence for someone to leak information that might influence stock, bond or currency markets.

Has the government notified the RCMP about what appears to be a criminal breach of the Statistics Act?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the honourable member for his question.

I, too, share the same concerns that he's highlighted with regard to this leak. This is completely unacceptable. That is why we're going to make sure that a proper and thorough examination is done, and going forward we want to make sure that no such breach or leak occurs.

• (1250)

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Chair, Statistics Canada said that staffers and ministers' offices, including the Prime Minister's office, the finance minister's office, the employment minister's office and the industry minister's office, would have received this secret information no earlier than 2 p.m. the previous day.

Statistics Canada has also indicated that it has begun an internal investigation. Will the minister commit to fully co-operating with this investigation?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I'd like to remind the honourable colleague that our government has supported Statistics Canada. We're the ones who reintroduced the mandatory long-form census. We're the ones who funded more money for Statistics Canada. The member opposite knows that we'll be fully co-operative in any such investigation into any leak.

Hon. Michael Chong: Will the minister commit to making the results of this investigation public?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, the member opposite knows full well that there are proper processes and protocols in place when it comes to such sensitive matters, and we will ensure that those processes and protocols—

The Chair: Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Chair, I hope there is no double standard for ministers' offices and the public service, because it was only about 13 years ago that a public servant was criminally charged and convicted for using top secret information in the markets.

I hope that in this investigation, and in the release of the information concerning this investigation, ministers' staffers aren't held to a different standard than the public service has been held to.

This leak speaks to the integrity of the government. Intelligence at the Five Eyes.... Our four allies have been telling us for years that one of the top two or three threats that democracies are facing is declining public confidence in our key institutions. Democracies have been blindsided by misinformation, disinformation and cyberattacks, and now we are being blindsided by the misuse of information by this very government.

That doesn't even.... The government's own national statistics-gathering agency doesn't trust this cabinet or this government, and that's why they announced several days ago that they would suspend the pre-release of information to the cabinet.

What is the government going to do to restore public confidence in our institutions?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, our government has remained steadfast in its support for Statistics Canada. I'd like to remind my honourable colleague that we are the government that brought forward legislation to strengthen the independence of Statistics Canada. We're the government that brought forward measures to make sure they have additional monies for conducting the proper mandatory long-form census as well.

When it comes to the leak that the member opposite is talking about, we're not going to prejudge the outcome. We have been very clear that the proper processes and protocols that are in place will be followed.

The Chair: You have time for a very brief question, Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Chair, I hope the government will call the RCMP and notify them about what appears to be a criminal breach of the Statistics Act, because it was a previous Liberal minister who himself was subject to a lot of misinformation and was a target of improper allegations about his office's use of information that leaked about the income trust changes that the previous Liberal government had brought in. The RCMP began an investigation and, in the course of the investigation, they charged a public servant who was ultimately convicted of breaching that secret information.

I hope the minister holds his office and the offices of his cabinet colleagues to the same standard, calls in the RCMP and makes them aware of what appears to be a criminal breach of the Statistics Act.

The Chair: The honourable minister, in 30 seconds or less, please.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I'm sorry. How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: We're over the time, but I'm allowing 30 seconds so we can get a full—

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I appreciate that very much.

Again, I want to take this opportunity to say that leaks of this nature are completely unacceptable. We've been very clear that we are going to take the appropriate steps. Statistics Canada is taking the appropriate steps.

I want to remind the member opposite that we're not going to prejudice any outcome at this stage. Again, it is our government that has been consistently supporting Statistics Canada in its work through the previous years.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll take a short break to allow our console operators to switch in a healthy way.

While we're doing that, I'm going to mention something. It happens at the end of a question. When there's less than a minute left and the question goes over half the time left over, I'll just indicate to the person asking the question that we've reached the limit so that the other side can answer with the same amount of time and we have a fair playing field.

We're ready to go again.

[*Translation*]

The Honourable Member for Beloeil—Chambly has the floor.

• (1255)

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are making progress, but unfortunately, I'd like to hear it in French as well.

I will address my question to the Prime Minister.

First, let me remind you that, on March 12, the government announced a first series of measures of about \$1 billion to adapt to what was at the time the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, including \$500 million in transfers to the provinces, with about \$100 million going to Quebec. Since that time, the commitments from the government have reached very probably around \$300 billion, making those first \$500 million pale by comparison. Of course, the crisis became longer and it is not over yet.

In that context, and given what I heard the Prime Minister say a little earlier about respecting the areas of jurisdiction of the provinces, and of Quebec, can we expect a speedy increase in health transfers to Quebec and the provinces, an increase that would be permanent, and, of course, without conditions?

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

We've increased health transfers to provinces and territories significantly since we first came into government in 2015. We continue to work with provinces and territories on a regular basis to make sure they're supported not just in the outbreak of this pandemic, but in the increased cost overall to health care across the country.

Our investments have included investments for mental health, for home care and for the additional expenses that provinces and territories face as a result of an aging population.

We'll continue to work with provinces and territories to ensure those health care needs are met.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: With all respect, Mr. Chair, that is a little disappointing.

While the leader of the NDP wants the federal government to interfere massively in provincial jurisdiction over health, the Prime Minister replies in English. That is perfectly legitimate in this Parliament, but his reply in English is, no, the government absolutely respects provincial jurisdiction. That made me happy for a brief moment, and I am asking the Prime Minister, without wanting to interrupt his precious reading, to please repeat in French what he said just now in English, that he absolutely respects provincial jurisdiction over health, which is exclusive.

So could you please provide that music to my ears?

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, just as I respect the member opposite's right to speak in his first language, I hope that he understands that I am trying to learn our second official language in a high-pressure situation, and it often creates anxiety.

I will tell him, though, that we fully respect the jurisdiction of provinces and territories to address the needs of their constituents and their members, and we work very closely with Quebec and with all provinces and territories to make sure that the funds we transfer from the federal government can be utilized in a way that best meets the needs of their constituents.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Let's not get into that. It says to me that French is the second official language. Well, it's my first official language and it's the first one in Quebec. I would like to have heard that in French. I would like to have heard it from the Prime Minister, because it's a constitutional issue. Basically, you could say that it's our heritage. So that is what I would like to have heard.

Let me proceed with a short and simple question: is health in the exclusive jurisdiction of the provinces in the current crisis management situation?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Chair, I would like to tell my colleague that we have no first or second official language. We have two official languages. They have the same value and the same importance. They deserve the same respect in the House and in the institutions of the government.

We are always happy to collaborate with the provinces and to respect their jurisdictions.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: Hearing that we have no first or second official language is better already. Between friends, let's say that they are equal.

Let us take it one step further: is health in the jurisdiction of Quebec and the provinces?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, we live in a federation where we work closely together with provinces and territories so that we can reach our mutually important goals, one of which is that all citizens of Canada, all members of Canada, have access to a public health care system that meets their needs.

We continue to work within the constitutional framework—

[Translation]

The Chair: Excuse me, but I have to interrupt you.

Mr. Blanchet, you have 21 seconds left.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: The answer could be even shorter than the question.

Is health in provincial jurisdiction?

Will there be an increase in the health transfers and will they come without conditions?

• (1300)

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I am sure the member would argue that it is important to work together. The federal government transfers money to the provinces, as he is well aware, to deliver health care, which is within each province's and territory's jurisdiction.

[Translation]

The Chair: We now move to Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the member for Manicouagan, I would like to address the House today on a matter that is very important in my constituency. At 350,000 square kilometres, it borders the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Regionally, I am also in eastern Quebec, which includes the Gaspé, the Magdalen Islands, and the Lower St. Lawrence.

These are regions whose economy rests basically on two very important seasonal industries: tourism and fishing. Make no mistake, it is not the workers who are seasonal, it is the industry itself, as our former leader Gilles Duceppe so rightly used to say.

Those industries are very important for that region of Quebec, but I see no measures to support them that accommodate all their uniqueness. These are cyclical industries, meaning that they operate at a very specific period during the year.

A few minutes ago, I heard the Prime Minister say that he had intervened to help the companies and the workers in those seasonal industries.

I would like to know what the specific assistance is and how it is tailored to the companies and the workers in the seasonal industries he mentions.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank my colleague for her question.

We know that the current situation is causing upheaval in the lives of Canadians from one end of the country to the other and that it is having a major impact on our small and medium businesses. Since this crisis began, we have not hesitated to implement strong and speedy measures to support more Canadians. That is what we will continue to do.

We know that the tourism sector is key to a number of communities in the country. We must help them to get through this crisis as best we can. We are continuing to have discussions and to tailor our measures so that as many Canadians as possible can take advantage of them.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Chair, with all respect, I am hearing that nothing has been done. Measures have been proposed, but, as I understand it, they are not specific to the seasonal sectors.

Let us take the seasonal fishing industry. The fishers are currently going out, but right in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis. One fishing season has been pushed back. The same thing applies to tourism. The season will be pushed back, and it is possible that there may even not be one.

The people and the companies in this sector have no second chances. They cannot start again in the fall. It's a bit like agriculture. They can't start a fishing season or a tourist season in the fall. So they need assistance.

We have some proposals. For example, would the government be prepared to let the Canada emergency response benefit provide workers with eligibility to employment insurance benefits? They could then get through the coming year and make it to next season.

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for speaking about the situation in all regions of Canada, particularly in Quebec.

From the start, we've been implementing significant measures to support the millions of workers who are currently struggling. We've taken significant measures with respect to tourism, agriculture and regional development. We're providing broader investments, such as the wage subsidy and emergency loans for small businesses, of which there are many in my colleague's constituency.

We'll continue to work very hard so that the workers and businesses in her constituency can get through this crisis and emerge stronger and more united.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Chair, that's strike two. This is the second time that I've asked a question about targeted assistance for the seasonal industry.

My honourable colleague's response doesn't make me feel any better. The workers in the industry also don't feel any better when they see that, at the end of the summer, they'll have no job and no money to put food on the table. Will these workers receive assistance adapted to their needs?

It's the same thing for businesses. We're currently talking about the businesses in my constituency, but there are also businesses in the East. Quebec and Canada as a whole, both in terms of fishing and tourism—

The Chair: The honourable President of the Treasury Board has the floor.

• (1305)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My colleague probably knows the information that I'll be giving. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit is available to all individuals who haven't been receiving employment insurance benefits since December 2019. A number of stakeholders in Canada and Quebec called for this, particularly in the places—

[*English*]

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Singh.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Prime Minister announced the business bailout, and in that proposal, he said that there would be limits on CEO bonuses and share buybacks.

By saying “limits”, the Prime Minister is suggesting that there would be some amount of bonuses or share buybacks that could be paid for with public dollars. If that's the case, how much?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we believe that it's very important that we support jobs. In that regard, we're trying to make sure that businesses can get through this time.

As we provide that support, we've been very clear for large enterprises that share buybacks will not be allowed, period, and that there will, of course, be limitations on total compensation for senior executives in order to give Canadians confidence that we're doing the things we need to do to support them, but that we're not supporting executives.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, Germany has actually taken the lead and said that if a company wants public money, then its executives must commit to reducing their pay.

Will Canada follow Germany to ensure that public dollars go to workers and not to enrich the executive suite, and commit that no public money will go to bonuses or increasing salaries for executives?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we are looking forward to releasing the complete details of the large employer emergency financing facility, and I think the member opposite will be quite pleased to see that we will be leading on behalf of Canada in advance of what Germany is doing.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, we know the PBO has said that \$25 billion, at least, is being lost to our revenues because corporations are avoiding paying their fair share.

Will the Prime Minister commit today very clearly that if a company is hiding its money by putting it in an offshore tax haven, that company will not receive public help, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, again with regard to this program, we want to be very clear that the support that goes to large businesses actually supports their Canadian enterprises and their Canadian employees. In that regard, we will not allow any company that has been convicted of tax evasion to have access to these funds, and we will carefully evaluate on an ongoing basis to make sure that companies remain eligible for this support based on their continuing investment in Canada.

The Chair: Mr. Singh.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, how many companies can the Minister of Finance name that have been convicted of tax evasion that would be denied help under this program?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I think what's most important is that we focus on Canadians. We're trying to support Canadians, whether they're working for small or large businesses, so they can get through this, can support their families during this time, and come out with a job at the end of it. That is exactly where our focus lies in this regard.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, not a single company. We are four years past the Panama papers and there hasn't been a single conviction.

Those are simply fancy Liberal words saying that a company that has been convicted of tax evasion.... There are simply no companies that this government can give as an example.

Why don't we follow what France has done and commit very clearly, not in Liberal fancy words but straight up, if a company is hiding its money by using offshore tax havens, it will not get public help. Will the minister commit to that right now?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we've been working with France and other countries to make these rules stricter for businesses. The process around the common reporting standard and the base erosion profit shifting has made it more difficult for firms to move money into tax havens, and it has ensured that we have transparency in seeing when they do so.

We'll continue to do that hard work to make sure that businesses abide by the rules and pay their appropriate part of taxes in our country.

Mr. Jagmeet Singh: Mr. Chair, let's talk about hard work. If a company is not convicted of tax evasion, but is putting its money in Barbados or Bermuda, for example, specifically to avoid paying taxes—and we have a similar example of Loblaw's doing something like this—will that company, despite not having a conviction, but clearly having avoided paying their fair share by putting their money in an offshore tax haven, receive help, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I'd suggest that the member be very careful in accusing companies of wrongdoing. We have a country that respects international rules. We allow our companies to trade and do business around the world. That continues to be important, and that supports Canadian jobs.

At the same time, we're trying to make sure those international rules work and get tighter. That's what we've been working on. We'll continue to do that because we know it's important that we can work internationally. It's important that companies pay their fair share here in Canada.

• (1310)

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Hoback.

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Liberals hand-picked ambassador to China, Dominic Barton, stated that China's conduct during the pandemic is damaging to its own soft power. However, when asked if there should be an investigation into China's behaviour during the crisis, the health minister stated that's not for her to say because she doesn't have "all the evidence about what China did or didn't do."

Why is Canada's ambassador to China criticizing China's actions during the pandemic while this Liberal government is defending it?

The Chair: The honourable Deputy Prime Minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (University—Rosedale, Lib.): Mr. Chair, Ambassador Barton is an excellent representative of Canada in China, and he is a member of our government and very much shares and helps to formulate our government's policy when it comes to China. Ambassador Barton, of course, shares our government's view that a post-crisis review is absolutely necessary.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Chair, the government's March 27 duty deferral announcement has caused tension within the trade community. Customs brokers are being asked to shoulder tremendous liability as importers are not required to make duty payments until the end of June, when there is a real possibility that some of them may find themselves insolvent.

Will the government commit to a liability exemption for customs brokers whose clients are unable to pay the duties at the end of June?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we have worked hard to determine programs that we think can be supportive of individuals and businesses, including allowing for deferral of taxes through this period. That we believe is important with respect to the GST, which we've allowed to be deferred until July 1, and in terms of taxes for businesses, until the end of August.

We think this helps businesses to get through this challenging time, and we'll continue to support businesses and individuals so we can have a strong economy when we get through this crisis.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Chair, the following three questions are from constituents in my riding, so hopefully, I'll get some good answers for them.

The first one I'll talk about is Rick. He owns a small business, a local bowling alley, in Melfort. It's a family-owned operation, so he doesn't meet the payroll threshold for the wage subsidy benefit, nor does he qualify for any other announced loans or grants.

There are businesses right across Canada that are in similar situations. Is the minister suggesting that they lie to get the funds, or will they make some changes so they qualify?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I want to highlight some of the initiatives we have put forward to assist small businesses.

The Canada emergency wage subsidy covers 75% of the wages of employees, and that way they can maintain their jobs.

We've also put forward the enhanced work-sharing program. It's an option for businesses to pay their employees.

On top of that, I want to highlight the Canada emergency business account, which has issued 590,000 loans.

As the Minister of Finance recently mentioned, we've deferred GST and HST and customs duty payments for businesses for the next three months.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Chair, Robert owns a cleaning products company in Prince Albert. He tells me that Canadian custodial and building service contractors are not purchasing Canadian-made disinfectants because very few are included in the federal approval list for COVID-19, even though Canada produces many products that Health Canada has certified as disinfectants.

Why is the Liberal government not prioritizing the approval of Canadian-made products?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, that assertion is not correct. In fact, we have been working very closely with producers of Canadian products as well as with our colleagues at Innovation, Science and Economic Development to make sure that Canadian companies have what they need to very quickly move through the approval process.

Health Canada has accelerated this process, and most companies can get approved in one to seven days. Of course, there is an iterative process that requires companies to ensure that a product is safe for use in Canada.

Mr. Randy Hoback: Mr. Chair, last week the government announced \$252 million in assistance for Canadian farmers, which was largely seen as an insult, especially given that a good amount of this money was already budgeted.

A constituent of mine, Tracy, from Melfort, wrote to me asking me to advocate for farmers and ranchers so they can get the support they need to continue to produce our food.

When will the government start to prioritize farmers and ranchers? Will they continue to reform the business risk management program?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Absolutely, Mr. Chair. We're working very hard with our provincial colleagues to improve the risk management programs.

We did announce programs last week, and some of these new programs are designed specifically for the meat sector. A total of \$77.5 million is earmarked for processors and \$50 million for beef producers.

• (1315)

[*English*]

The Chair: The next question goes to Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Mr. Chair, provinces are reopening at different speeds, and that includes opening their provincial parks before the May long weekend. It no longer makes sense for fully staffed national parks across the country to be uniformly closed.

Will the Minister of Environment commit to opening national parks in harmony with provincial and territorial parks across Canada?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, we are working very closely with our provincial partners on the reopening.

I am pleased that we were able to publish, on Tuesday, April 28, shared guidelines on the reopening, which were supported by the Prime Minister and all of the premiers of the provinces and territories—

The Chair: Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Chair, boating is a safe way to enjoy the outdoors while maintaining physical distancing. Why is Parks Canada postponing the opening of lock operations and similar functions along our heritage waterways?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, as I was saying in my answer to the first question, the question of coordinating national and provincial parks is a very good one. That is something we are definitely working on.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Chair, since the beginning of this pandemic, the minority Liberal government has been actively trying to push our democracy aside. It severely limited parliamentary sittings, attempted to take executive control of tax rates and used an order in council to ban lawfully acquired and responsibly owned firearms.

When will the government stop using this pandemic as an excuse to run roughshod over our cherished democratic values?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I don't understand this question at all, since we're meeting here to ask questions for two hours and

15 minutes. That's the equivalent of three question periods. Yesterday, there was the equivalent of two question periods, and tomorrow there will be the equivalent of two more question periods. We're talking about seven question periods. That's more than normal.

[*English*]

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Chair, the inconsistency in support for various sectors in our economy is baffling. There is more money made available to forcibly confiscate lawfully owned property than in emergency support for our hard-working farmers or our prosperity-creating oil and gas sector.

The only consistent theme appears to be that sectors that do not traditionally vote Liberal are finding themselves left out in the cold. If that is not the case, why is there such an obvious discrepancy?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, those comments are completely unjustified. We're fully committed to our sectors, including the energy sector and the agriculture and agrifood sector. This is particularly important. These sectors are critical.

That's why we're working to improve our risk management programs. We want to ensure that the criteria are broader and that more producers can benefit from these programs.

[*English*]

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Chair, during the misinformation briefing, the public safety minister used Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom as examples for firearms policy. Does the public safety minister realize that these countries are islands and none share a border with anyone, least of which with the United States of America?

Is my bringing this new-found evidence to the minister's attention going to change his focus to smugglers, gangs and criminals, instead of wrongfully blaming lawful gun owners?

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Mr. Chair, I would like to assure the member that I have actually seen an atlas.

I want to be very clear that those countries have recognized, like Canada has, that these weapons have no place in a civil society. They were designed for soldiers to engage in combat with other soldiers. They were not designed for hunting and sporting purposes, which are the lawful uses of a firearm in Canada, but rather for individuals to kill other individuals.

Tragically, in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, that is precisely what they have been used for, and we have prohibited—

The Chair: Mr. Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Chair, the nine o'clock gun is an iconic 12-pound cannon that has been fired daily in Vancouver in Stanley Park since the 1800s. It's now a prohibited firearm as of May 1, 2020.

Can the minister advise the public of the safety risks that this cannon, which was manufactured in 1816, poses to the public?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I assume the member opposite is referring to the prohibition of grenade launchers. There are about 34 in Canada and we have brought in regulations that now prohibit grenade launchers. It does not apply to some of the other things that have been suggested by the member opposite.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Chair, I was referring to the iconic, heritage 12-pound cannon that is mounted on a pedestal in Stanley Park. It was manufactured in 1816. Any cannon that can be fired can be loaded with a projectile, so it meets the definition of a firearm, which means that every cannon in Canada, every heritage piece that might be in a museum, every heritage piece that might be in a collection, is now a prohibited firearm.

Was the minister not aware of this when he announced this policy?

• (1320)

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, just to help the member opposite, let us be very clear. We have prohibited weapons that were unfortunately widely available in Canada and were being used for purposes other than sporting activities, which is the only use of a firearm in Canada, for either hunting or target shooting sporting activities. Rather, they were being used to harm individual Canadians and, in some tragic cases, many individual Canadians.

We've done the right thing, Mr. Chair, and we—

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Nater next.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Chair, agricultural societies across rural Ontario are making the difficult decision to cancel their fall fairs this year. Some of these fall fairs have been around since before Confederation. Not only is this a terrible loss for these communities of important community events, but it's also putting a significant financial strain on these agricultural societies.

What action is the government taking to support agricultural societies in Canada?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, what we've done is we've put forward monies to support our regional development agencies. These agencies have the mandate and the ability to support local initiatives, including the events the member has highlighted. This is more than doubling the budget that currently exists, so that we have sufficient resources to support communities and these very important local events.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, the arts and culture industry has a massive impact on local economies. In my riding alone we have the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, the Stratford Festival, Drayton Entertainment and Stratford Summer Music. The post-

ponement and cancellation of the seasons of these important cultural institutions is having a massive impact on the hospitality industry, including local restaurants, hotels and bed and breakfasts. Many of these businesses are small businesses and owner-operated businesses that are falling through the cracks in the government's programs that have been introduced.

How will the government address the blind spot in their programs for small businesses in communities like this, which rely on the tourism and the arts and culture industries?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, clearly, we understand how important these organizations are to these communities. That is why we allocated \$500 million to respond to the specific financial needs of arts, heritage and sports organizations, to help them be more resilient through this difficult time. Last week we rolled out the funding of this announcement, and we look forward to engaging with communities across the country.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, 1.8 million jobs are attributed to the tourism industry in Canada. Among these, 740,000 are related to international travelling. No one wants to see the borders reopen until it's safe to do so, but can the government provide clarity on what criteria will be used to provide some information to these tourism operators of how, when and under what criteria international borders will be reopened?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I would like to thank the member opposite for his view that we need to be cautious and prudent and put the health and safety of Canadians first. That is very much the view of our government as well.

When it comes to international borders, the health and safety of Canadians is absolutely the first criterion we are going to look at. Of course, we will be looking at the situation with coronavirus—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Nater.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, many Canadians continue to fall through the cracks of programs announced by this government. One of my constituents only recently returned to the workforce after spending many years out of the workforce raising her children. As such, she doesn't qualify under the \$5,000 minimum requirement for income over the past 12 months.

How will the government address these people who are falling through the cracks?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, we are mindful of the very difficult circumstances in which many Canadians who have a foot in two places find themselves. We have a number of different measures to help them and we're going to continue to do so.

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, it has been reported that as many as 15% of farmers and farm families in Canada could face going out of business and bankruptcy because of the massive impact that COVID-19 is having on agriculture in Canada. Business risk management programs are not working for these farm families, and the processing capacity is simply not there for farmers and for farm families, especially in the beef and pork industries.

How will the government immediately address the short-term processing capacity issues found in the beef and pork sectors? When will they finally live up to the commitment of a complete review of the business risk management programs?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, I've been holding discussions with my provincial counterparts to review the risk management programs.

With respect to the AgriStability program, we've offered producers some accommodations and pushed back the enrolment date to July 3. We've also increased, from 50% to 75%, the advance payment that they can obtain quickly, in provinces where this is possible.

We've also posted a calculator online. So before they say that the program isn't working, I encourage them to use this calculator to find out how much they can receive.

• (1325)

[*English*]

Mr. John Nater: Mr. Chair, this government continues to show a blind spot for small businesses in Canada. Many don't qualify for the CEBA because they don't have a high enough payroll or because they don't have a business account.

So many small businesses are falling through the cracks. Will the government expand the criteria so that small businesses in my community and across Canada can qualify for the important assistance they need at this time?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I would like to remind my honourable colleague that we did expand the eligibility criteria threshold from \$50,000 down to \$20,000 so that more businesses could be eligible, and on the top end, for salaries, from \$1 million to \$1.5 million. That is why we have seen 590,000 small business loans issued. That's a testament to the program.

The Chair: The next question will go to Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Chair, hog and beef producers have seen drastic price drops. Producers are telling me that they would use the western livestock price insurance program if the premiums were affordable, which they are not.

Will the Minister of Agriculture work with the industry to make the premiums affordable so that producers can have price protection against these market fluctuations?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Mr. Chair, we're working closely with the industry and my provincial counterparts to identify the best programs to help producers in this difficult time.

Last week, we announced specific programs for the meat sector: \$77.5 million for processors, \$50 million for beef producers and \$50 million for pork producers.

[*English*]

Mr. Larry Maguire: Mr. Chair, Chez Angela Bakery in Brandon has seen tremendous success since it opened two years ago. Due to this growth and the eligibility criteria for the wage subsidy program, their revenues would have to decline much further than 30% in order for them to receive help.

Will the Minister of Finance amend the eligibility for the wage subsidy program so that Chez Angela and similar businesses can apply?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC)): The honourable Minister of Industry.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the honourable member for his question.

I want to highlight the fact that we did make an amendment. When we originally proposed this initiative, the threshold was 30% for the month of March. Now businesses will only need to show a 15% decline in revenue, and businesses will have the option of using January and February as a reference period to show revenue losses, or of using the same time last year. This reflects, again, our ability to understand the needs of businesses, to act quickly and to make sure that they benefit from this very important initiative.

Mr. Larry Maguire: They still don't qualify, Mr. Chair.

The Blarney Stone restaurant in Killarney has repeatedly asked the Minister of Finance if they could refinance their loans through the Canada small business financing program.

Will the Minister of Finance give small business owners the ability to refinance their existing loans through the program, yes or no?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, again, we've demonstrated flexibility and nimbleness when it comes to these financing options.

I'd also like to highlight another very important initiative that was mentioned earlier, the deferring of GST/HST and customs duty payments for businesses for the next three months. This will help 3.2 million business owners and entrepreneurs across the country. Again, it's another initiative to put more money in the pockets of businesses as they deal with this unprecedented health care crisis.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Mr. Chair, the Liberals still haven't fixed the payroll eligibility problems for many small business owners who need to access the zero-interest loans available in CEBA.

Can the minister provide any rationale for why countless small businesses are not being allowed to access these loans?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, as of today, 590,000 small business loans have been issued. I think that's contrary to the point the member opposite is making.

Clearly we recognize that we need to be agile and that we need to understand the needs of businesses. That's why we made changes to this particular program. We'll continue to listen to businesses. I can assure the member opposite that 590,000 small business loans is no small feat.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Mr. Chair, Canada has some of the best competitive sport shooters in the world. The Liberals' order in council on firearms will put an end to many Canadians being able to represent our country.

Can the Minister of Public Safety list even one of these sport shooting competitions, which will now be illegal due to his order in council?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable Minister of Public Safety.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, it's an important question because sport shooting is a very important tradition for many Canadian sport shooters. I want to assure the member opposite that the weapons we have prohibited by this order in council were not designed for sport shooting and are not used in the Olympics or Paralympic Games. They are not included in this and therefore have no impact on that activity of legitimate sport shooting.

• (1330)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): You have time for one more short question, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Mr. Chair, statistics show that women are more likely to live paycheque to paycheque, so women continue to be disproportionately impacted by this pandemic in a negative way. Many are worried they won't have a job to go back to.

Will the government commit to helping women who are bearing this financial burden return to the workforce?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, this is a very good question. I would love to have a lot of time to answer it. The answer is yes, of course. We are making sure that many of our measures do not disproportionately impact women, because when women succeed, all Canadians succeed.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll now continue with Mr. Blanchette-Joncas.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a privilege to be here in the House today to represent the people of Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, but also to serve as the Bloc Québécois tourism critic.

Tourism in Quebec is a significant economic engine and wealth creator. This industry is vital to the regions of Quebec, as I'll demonstrate.

The tourism industry in Quebec generates over \$15 billion in economic spinoffs and employs more than 400,000 workers. In Quebec, one in ten jobs is connected to the tourism industry. Every dollar spent on tourism generates about 70 cents in the Quebec economy.

The tourism industry consists of over 30,000 businesses, and two-thirds of these businesses are outside the major centres in the Quebec City and Montreal regions. In the tourism industry, 82% of businesses have fewer than 20 employees. This shows once again the need to support this industry.

I heard my honourable colleague on the other side of the House say that a plan was in place for the tourism industry. I want to hear what he has to say about this plan. To date, what specific measures has the government taken to support the tourism industry?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I want to thank my colleague for his question.

He's right. The situation is very difficult for all regions of our country and for Quebec. That's why we've invested in regional development. These investments will improve the situation in the tourism sector. These investments will provide assistance for festivals, programs and other initiatives.

We'll continue to work with my colleague and the other members to find solutions that will improve the situation.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Mr. Chair, I'm not sure that I fully understood the plan. However, I can say that the people in the tourism industry don't understand the plan, because they're still waiting for it.

One issue in the tourism industry involves fixed costs. Initially, we asked that part of the wage subsidy be set aside to cover fixed costs. The government implemented the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance. The assistance covers 75% of commercial rental payments under \$50,000, and property owners pay the remaining 25%.

To date, how many applications have been submitted under this program?

Hon. Bill Morneau: The wage subsidy is very significant. However, we know that there are other fixed costs. That's why we've taken other measures, such as the measures related to credit and rent. We've combined several measures that will help companies bridge the gap until the end of the crisis.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: We expect to hear a figure and not necessarily words.

We could see that the program was ineffective, particularly for seasonal businesses, including businesses in the tourism industry. Businesses need to have suspended operations or to show a decline of at least 70% in operations since the start of the public health crisis. How can a tourism business that hasn't yet launched operations show a decline of 70%? It doesn't make sense.

A recent survey conducted by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business shows that only one in ten businesses can benefit from this assistance. Yet these businesses need the assistance. Does the government believe that commercial rent assistance is effective even though only one in ten businesses can benefit from it?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I know that the situation is very difficult. That's why we've introduced another option.

Through the community futures development corporations and business development centres, we're providing \$71 million to businesses and organizations in rural communities by giving them much-needed access to capital. This investment will help many businesses in Quebec, particularly in the tourism sector.

• (1335)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, you have one minute left.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Mr. Chair, in my humble opinion, one out of ten businesses amounts to 10%. This figure isn't very high and is far from a passing grade.

What does the government plan to do? Does it plan to implement an expanded program to support businesses in the tourism and seasonal industries to ensure that fixed costs are more fully covered?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, we have a strategy. We've invested in regional development and in small and medium-sized businesses. We've helped the workers and we'll continue to work with the provincial governments to find solutions.

We must work together, particularly in the tourism sector, because the situation in the sector is very serious. I'm sure that we can find solutions to help improve the situation for people in the tourism sector.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We will now continue with Mr. Van Bynen.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I would like to inform you that I will be splitting my time with the member for Kingston and the Islands.

Mr. Chair, last week was Mental Health Week. We know that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a great deal of stress and uncertainty for all Canadians and that during this uncertain time, it is normal for many people to feel increased anxiety, depression and

mental health issues. In fact, a poll by the Canadian Mental Health Association's Ontario branch showed that 61% of respondents were worried about the mental health of a loved one and more than half of the respondents were worried about their own mental health.

In the Standing Committee on Health, we've also heard from many witnesses that our front-line heroes, working around the clock to protect us from the virus and to help others recover, are at great risk of physical and mental burnout. This shows how seriously Canadians need supports for their mental health and well-being during this most trying time.

Can the Minister of Health tell my constituents what the government is doing to support Canadians during this uncertain time?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for Newmarket—Aurora for that very insightful question.

In fact, we've been very worried about Canadians' mental health as resulting from the pandemic, but even prior to that we knew that we needed to create rapidly more tools for Canadians across the country, no matter where they lived. We've worked very closely with our provincial and territorial partners, for example, to amplify the work that they're doing through increased supports, financial supports.

We also launched Wellness Together Canada, which is a digital portal, where all Canadians can get access to tools they can use to help with the circumstances they find themselves in and to get the information they need during COVID-19. It also allows Canadians to connect to paid professionals who can provide support in a variety of different ways, whether it's over the telephone, through email or by text, understanding that Canadians have different ways of connecting that work for them.

We've also partnered with a number of organizations that provide supports to Canadians, many of the crisis hotlines, for example, that are working double-time or triple-time to try to keep up with the volume of demand. This is a difficult time for all Canadians and we will continue to work to ensure Canadians have the supports they need.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll go to Mr. Gerretsen, from Kingston and the Islands.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Chair, students from across the country have been significantly impacted by the effects of COVID-19. As we know, thousands of post-secondary students depend on employment throughout the summer in order to pay for expenses throughout their academic year. Unfortunately the pandemic has resulted in the closure of many businesses and organizations that would normally employ students who work during the summer.

Thousands of students are now left without the financial means they were depending on to pay for their post-secondary educational expenses. In response to the concerns raised by students, the government announced the creation of the Canada emergency student benefit, which will provide students with the assistance they need to make it through these uncertain financial times.

I represent a riding that has multiple post-secondary institutions, and my constituents have been asking when they should expect to apply for the Canada emergency student benefit.

Can the President of the Treasury Board please give us an update on the status of the Canada emergency student benefit, and in particular, when students will be able to start accessing this benefit, and also confirm if and how it may be retroactive?

• (1340)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, I would first like to thank the member for Kingston and the Islands for his strong advocacy in favour of young Canadians in his riding and across Canada.

Mr. Chair, our government is committed to ensuring that young Canadians have the support that they need during this very difficult time. That's why we are investing \$9 billion to support students and recent graduates affected by COVID-19. The measures include doubling the Canada student grants, raising the cap on student loans, creating new employment opportunities for students and launching the Canada emergency student benefit. I'm pleased to share with the House that the application period for the Canada emergency student benefit will commence on May 15. That is this Friday. This benefit will provide \$1,250 a month to eligible students or \$2,000 for students who have disabilities or dependants.

Mr. Chair, when Canada emerges from this pandemic, we want to make sure that students are in a financial position to continue their studies so that they can pursue fruitful careers and help build a strong Canada.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll wait a few seconds before moving on to the next five-minute period to allow the console operator to switch with someone else.

[English]

We'll next go to the honourable member for Calgary Skyview, Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Victims of human trafficking continue to suffer during this crisis. Many are facing worse conditions and additional barriers to escaping human trafficking than before the pandemic. The government has been completely silent on this issue, and now funding to fight human trafficking is being taken away from front-line organizations. Why would the government choose to do this at this vulnerable time?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, human trafficking is, as we all know, one of the most heinous crimes imaginable. Our government is working to eliminate all instances of it. To combat human trafficking, we've launched a comprehensive national strategy that brings together federal efforts under one strategic framework. We have

backed that new move with \$75 million in additional investments, and the new strategy now strengthens Canada's ability to fight this abhorrent attack on human rights and human dignity.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Mr. Chair, this simply isn't good enough. The government is letting down our most vulnerable Canadians. We know that human trafficking hasn't stopped during this pandemic, and these front-line organizations have received the message that supporting them in fighting these heinous crimes is not a priority.

What is the minister going to do to rectify this situation?

Hon. Bill Blair: As I said, we have developed a national strategy to combat human trafficking. We've made \$75 million in additional investments, and this new strategy takes a whole-of-government approach. It empowers victims and survivors to regain their self-confidence and control over their lives, and it will prevent more of these crimes from taking place. It provides better protection and support for those most vulnerable to human trafficking, and it will ensure that police and prosecutors have the resources to prosecute these traffickers for their heinous crimes.

Mr. Chair, we'll continue to work collaboratively with victims groups and to provide the supports that are required.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Mr. Chair, more vulnerable Canadians continue to be let down. There are effective medications that have been developed for those living with cystic fibrosis, yet this medication is not available here. We know that the pharmaceutical company has not been able to apply to market this drug in Canada because of the changes to the PMPRB, which have been heavily criticized by stakeholders and patients.

Will the minister delay the July 1 implementation date and review the regulations so that drugs like Trikafta are made available in Canada?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, there are two separate issues in that question, so I will talk about the PMPRB.

As a government, we are committed, as you know, to increasing affordability of and accessibility to Canadian medications, to medications across Canada, and the PMPRB regulatory amendments will help Canadians to be able to afford their prescriptions.

Canada will continue to be an important market for new medicines. In fact, many countries with much lower prices for medicine gain access to new medicines in the same time frame as Canada, or even faster.

• (1345)

Ms. Jag Sahota: Mr. Chair, for those living with a rare disease, every single day can be a struggle. We know the importance of lowering drug costs, but not at the cost of life-saving drugs not being available here in Canada. Waiting years for the government to reduce regulations is not an option. We also know that the nature of the disease makes those people more susceptible to contracting COVID-19, and they are at a higher risk of its being lethal.

Why is this government continuing to let those with CF struggle and suffer needlessly?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I believe the member opposite is talking about the drug Trikafta, and many cystic fibrosis patient groups have been advocating having access to it in Canada. In fact, the manufacturer of Trikafta has not submitted an application to market this product in Canada.

However, that said, we do have a special access program for drugs that are not marketed in Canada. As of May 6, Health Canada approved 95 applications for 98 patients to access Trikafta through the special access program. I would encourage all patients with cystic fibrosis to speak to their doctor to ensure that they too can apply through the special access program.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): You have time for one short question of 45 seconds.

Ms. Jag Sahota: We know the importance of lowering drug costs. As you know, 4,300 people suffer from this rare genetic disease. Most of them are children and young adults. One young woman from Calgary is a CF champion, fighting for her passion to be a famous opera singer. She's very talented. Her reality of living with CF has meant that she has had many visits to the hospital and had many health crises that have made singing impossible for a time.

CF patients are waiting for this drug, which was fast-tracked in other countries. Now it seems that the changes to the PMPRB will cause further delays or complications. Will the minister delay the implementation and review the PMPRB?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Honourable Minister, please provide a short response.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will just repeat that the manufacturer has not applied to sell this drug in Canada.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Now we will go to Mr. Lobb of Huron—Bruce.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you very much.

On July 25, 2019, after the federal-provincial-territorial agriculture meeting, the agriculture minister promised big changes in 2020 for programs like AgriStability and AgriRecovery.

Besides a pilot program in a couple of provinces and an application deadline, is there anything else you would like to report?

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Yes, Mr. Chair. Since the July meeting in Quebec City with the provincial and territorial ministers of agriculture, we've been working to improve the AgriStability program. This issue remains a priority, and it's included in my mandate letter. However, at this time, we're responding to emergencies

that go beyond what the various risk management programs can provide to our producers.

[English]

Mr. Ben Lobb: You can appreciate, Minister, the issue we're dealing with here. The United States Department of Agriculture has allocated \$19 billion to farmers, \$16 billion of that in direct support. The program that was offered last week, \$252 million, was a mere fraction of what the United States is getting. If the minister is telling farmers to bank on the existing business risk management program, it's not going to work.

Countless numbers of pork farmers, just in my riding alone, have one thousand, two thousand, three thousand head of hogs ready to be shipped within the near future. They will lose \$70 a head. AgriStability isn't going to cut it. We need an immediate program to help out these hard-working pork farmers.

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: I fully understand my colleague's comments. That's why we announced specific programs for the meat sector: \$77.5 million for processors, \$50 million for beef producers and \$50 million for pork producers.

We've also increased, improved and facilitated access to AgriStability. One pork producer tried the calculator and told me that he could quickly receive \$11 per head of hog. Alberta's agriculture minister even publicly stated that some producers could obtain the desired amount of \$20 per head using the AgriStability program.

[English]

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Chair, you can see the problem right there with the math. The minister just said that one of her pork producers is going to get \$11. They are losing \$70. There's a \$59-per-head gap, times likely several thousand head of hogs in their barns.

Let's go to another trying issue with agriculture. It's the carbon tax. I know that the government has their position on the carbon tax, and I know that I'm not going to change it, but I want to give the members of Parliament across the way, the government, an idea of what a pork farmer might go through.

A pork farmer sent me their bill for February 26 to March 24. Their natural gas bill was about \$2,400. In there was close to \$500 in federal carbon tax. Farmers manage their woodlots ethically. They have environmental farm plans. They have nutrient management plans. They get no credit for any of the carbon sequestration and ethical environmental management on their farm, yet every month they are asked to pay a carbon tax. It just doesn't seem fair.

I want the minister's opinion on that.

• (1350)

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: As you know, our pollution pricing policy is designed to build a clean economy. We've introduced exemptions for agriculture. On one hand, emissions from animal and vegetable production are not subject to carbon pricing, and on the other hand, farm fuels and other fuels delivered to off-farm points-of-sale are exempt. We've also provided partial reimbursements for propane and natural gas used in commercial greenhouses.

We have already done a lot. We encourage producers to take advantage of the business risk management programs, and we are ready to do more. We've already shown that, and we will continue to do so.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There is time for one short question and response. Go ahead, Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Chair, I know the Minister of Agriculture has toured my riding. She knows very well what the lay of the land is here.

What about pork farmers? What about chicken farmers? What about hens? What about drying in the fall? All those farmers pay a carbon tax, and there is no program for them. They pay and they pay and they pay, and what makes it worse is that they are given no credit for the environmental work they do on their farms.

[Translation]

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: It's true that our producers work incredibly hard to protect the environment and ensure the well-being of their animals. That's important, to be sure, but I'd like to put the impact of pollution pricing into perspective.

[English]

To put these estimates into context, AAFC used data from agricultural tax data programs to show the impact on a per-farm basis as a percentage of total operating costs. The estimates ranged from \$210 to \$819 per farm and 0.05% to 0.42% of total farm operating expenses.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We now move on to Mr. Lehoux.

Mr. Richard Lehoux (Beauce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Being from a rural area, myself, I can assure you that people who live in rural communities are resourceful and resilient. Instead of staying cooped up in their homes, they are doing their best to retool and save the companies they work for. One of the only options they have is to work from home. Unfortunately, though, they don't have

access to the tools they need. Cellular and Internet networks are inadequate, even non-existent in some cases.

I want to know, not whether the government is going to help these Canadians join the 21st century, but when.

Can you give us any assurances and, above all, a timetable for a real plan?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I agree with the member. The situation is very serious. High-speed Internet is not a luxury; it's a necessity. That's why we launched the connect to innovate program.

My fellow minister Ms. Monsef will be introducing the next strategy to improve the situation in all regions, especially rural areas. Finding a solution is absolutely imperative.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: I don't think the minister understood my question.

In the 2019 budget, the government promised to connect all Canadians to the Internet by 2030. This is 2020. That's 10 years away. People don't need reliable Internet service 10 years down the road. The pandemic has made the need even more acute right now.

When, then, will people have Internet access? I'm simply asking you for a date now.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, under the last budget, we launched a \$1.7-billion program to support broadband infrastructure. That's a lot of money for high-speed Internet. My fellow minister Ms. Monsef is in charge of the program. We also introduced the connect to innovate program, which has helped 900 communities all over the country.

We will keep working to make the lives of people who live in rural areas better, and we will find solutions to provide high-speed Internet access.

• (1355)

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Mr. Chair, you no doubt know that Beauce is the cradle of small and medium-sized businesses.

On March 27, the Prime Minister introduced the emergency wage subsidy to help businesses cope with the pandemic. Unfortunately, general partnerships were overlooked. Of the many constituents in my riding who have reached out to me on the subject, one, in particular, has contacted me three times since mid-April. I still don't have anything to tell him because the government is dragging its feet. We'd like to get a clear and specific answer. The same goes for sole proprietors, who were also overlooked.

When is the government going to include these businesses in the current programs?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, we announced [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in financial support for vulnerable small and medium-sized businesses that are not eligible for the measures already in place and that are struggling with cash flow issues.

We've also invested \$71 million to support businesses and organizations by giving them access to capital in rural communities. As well, we've invested in programs for rural areas, and we will continue to make investments to help small and medium-sized businesses.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Lehoux, please keep it brief.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: All right, Mr. Chair.

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture asked the federal government for an agriculture and agri-food emergency fund of \$2.6 billion to help maintain food security in Canada in response to COVID-19.

Will the minister address the federation's request?

Minister, I'd like you to give us a date.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We already have a host of business risk management programs, through which, \$1.6 billion is available to producers annually. More support is actually available, even through those programs, since they meet the demand. We are prepared to do more, and we will.

I urge producers to apply for the AgriStability program and to use the funds in their AgriInvest accounts. Some \$2.3 billion is available through that program.

[*English*]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll now go to the honourable member for Langley—Aldergrove, Mr. Van Popta.

Mr. Tako Van Popta (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Mr. Chair, the government's wage subsidy program is designed to help traditional companies, not high-growth companies.

For example, I was talking to Ron, who operates an engineering firm in my riding that specializes in designing and building very expensive machines for their ever-expanding overseas markets. Business is down, but not by the requisite 30%. Of course not, since they're in high-growth mode, but just recently they had to lay off some very talented staff.

Can the minister confirm that the wage subsidy program can be expanded or adapted to deal with high-growth companies that will play such a key role in Canada's economic relaunch?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, my honourable colleague is absolutely correct.

We, the government, take enormous pride in our small businesses, particularly the start-ups and the high-growth firms. They're going to be absolutely essential for our economic recovery, and we know that some of them are ineligible for the wage subsidy. That is why we introduced a \$250-million program in the industrial research assistance program through the National Research Council, strictly targeting and focusing on those high-growth firms that were ineligible for the wage subsidy, so that they can provide the wage support to keep those highly skilled individuals in Canada.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Mr. Chair, there is another category of businesses that are falling through the cracks and feel they are being left behind by the wage subsidy program. Those are recently merged companies.

For example, there is a trucking company in my riding that is significantly bigger this year than it was last year as a result of some key acquisitions and mergers late last year. All of the legacy companies by themselves would qualify individually for the wage subsidy, but the merged company does not.

Can the minister confirm that the wage subsidy program is sufficiently flexible to accommodate recently merged companies?

● (1400)

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, again I want to thank my honourable colleague for his question. He is identifying unique pain points that exist within the overall economy with specific examples of companies that are not able to access some of the programming we have provided.

I do want to highlight, when it comes to the wage subsidy, that we have made changes to the revenue thresholds to make more companies eligible. The specific example that the member opposite raises is something that is under consideration.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Mr. Chair, the government's commercial rent assistance program discriminates against certain tenants based solely on whether their landlord has a mortgage on the subject building.

I was talking to Leslie the other day. She manages a number of commercial office buildings in my riding. Some of these buildings have mortgages and some don't, and it all depends on what they were able to negotiate with their banker. Leslie is having a very hard time explaining to her tenants why some will qualify for the rental subsidy and some won't, depending on which building they are in.

Can the government confirm that the nonsensical mortgage requirement in the rent subsidy program is gone?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, the approach that was taken on trying to assist small businesses with rent is very much based on the fact that this is a provincial jurisdiction, so we have used the mortgage system as a way to do it. It is, in fact, not nonsensical.

That said, we are looking at this particular issue. It's something that is under consideration. We expect that we will find a way to ensure that those landlords who don't have mortgages can work with the CMHC to have the appropriate approach to be eligible for this program.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): You have about one minute left, Mr. Van Popta. Go ahead with a short question.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Many people in my riding have reached out to me to say they are quite disturbed that their favourite hunting and sport shooting firearms are now on the banned list.

Can the minister inform Canadians how many Canadian taxpayer dollars are going to go to the buyback program for legal gun owners and how far that money would go if it were to be diverted to something useful, such as more border controls to stop the illegal importation of firearms?

Hon. Bill Blair: Our first priority is the protection and safety of Canadians. We've seen an unacceptable rise in gun violence right across our community. All weapons are being regulated in our country. Some, such as handguns, represent such a significant risk that we strongly restrict them. Some weapons, quite frankly, are completely unsuitable for any sporting or hunting activity, such as weapons designed for soldiers to engage in combat with other soldiers. We have now prohibited those weapons. The saving of lives is worth an investment in public safety.

I want to assure the member we will bring forward legislation that will facilitate an appropriate buyback program. I look forward to a discussion in this House with the member opposite on how that can be done to ensure public safety and to ensure that we do it in as effective a way as possible.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll now go to Mr. Manly.

Mr. Paul Manly: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the government and ministers present for the rapid relief that they've provided to Canadians. I know the constituents in my riding really appreciate that. I'd like to thank them also for being responsive to the MPs who have brought forward gaps in the program.

The CERB requirements recognize dividend income for eligibility for the Canada emergency business account, CEBA, but the Canada emergency business account does not recognize dividends or contract payments. I've been contacted by many small business owners who have been legally paying themselves with dividends for years, but these companies cannot apply for the CEBA even though this might save them from bankruptcy during this crisis.

Will the government make the necessary changes to allow dividend income to be admissible for CEBA eligibility?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I'd like to thank the honourable colleague for his very thoughtful question and his advocacy in looking for different solutions and in working with us to help small businesses, not only in his riding but across the country as well.

He's absolutely correct that the Canada emergency business account has been successful, as 590,000 loans have been issued. That's a reflection of some of the changes that we introduced,

which made the criteria more generous so that more businesses could obtain assistance.

He has raised the issue of dividends. As I said before, we continue to work with Canadians and Canadian businesses and colleagues in this House to see how we can assist more Canadians, not less of them, and we'll continue to endeavour to do that.

● (1405)

Mr. Paul Manly: Mr. Chair, there are still many Canadians stranded overseas who are trying to return to Canada. Some have no assurance that their non-Canadian spouse will be allowed into Canada with them. Many are being forced to make an impossible choice between sheltering in place overseas or separating from their spouse in order to return home.

Will the government remove unnecessary barriers and allow these Canadians to return to Canada immediately with their spouses?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, in an effort to flatten the curve and to protect Canadians, we've taken a number of extraordinary measures at the border and we have restricted non-essential travel of people coming into Canada. While Canadian citizens and permanent residents will always be admissible—subject, of course, to a 14-day quarantine upon entry—foreign nationals are subject to travel restrictions. For individuals to be eligible to travel to Canada, their travel must be considered essential travel, consistent with the emergency order put in place.

I recognize and very much respect the spirit of the member's question. We recognize these are difficult situations. It is not our desire to keep families apart. I want to assure that each situation will be decided on a case-by-case basis based on the information made available to border service officers. I welcome any inquiries he may have. If he reaches out to my office, we'll help in any way we can.

Mr. Paul Manly: Mr. Chair, the Alberta energy regulator has suspended a wide range of environmental monitoring requirements for oil sands companies during this pandemic. This includes environmental reporting. It includes wetland wildlife and bird monitoring, even though Canada is a signatory to the international migratory bird treaty. Water that escapes from storm ponds doesn't need to be tested. Air quality programs, including for first nations communities, have been reduced. Testing for leaks of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, has been suspended. This is after the federal government has provided \$750 million in funding for methane emission reductions. The federal government has also just committed \$1.7 billion to clean up orphaned oil wells. That message, clearly, is about the negligence of the Alberta government. It is something corporations should be paying for.

Will the federal government hold the Alberta government to account and withhold energy sector relief funding until these environmental regulations are reinstated?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the member for his question and for his very collaborative approach with our government on a number of issues. I would like to thank him for this particular question and his particular reference to methane, because it gives me an opportunity to highlight some very important progress that the federal government made this week in working with the Province of Alberta.

Just yesterday Alberta joined B.C. and Saskatchewan and published its own draft regulations on methane. This will allow us, in working with Alberta, to work on equivalency on methane, which will allow us to work towards standing down the federal system in those jurisdictions. This is tremendously important, because it will allow us to cut methane emissions by 45% by 2025. It's hugely important for fighting climate change together.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Now we'll go to the honourable member for Hamilton Mountain, Mr. Duvall.

Mr. Scott Duvall (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Chair, I was pleased to hear about extending the tax deadline to October 1 in yesterday's announcement for seniors. After many discussions with the Minister of Seniors, I was glad to hear that she was listening to the NDP and many others on making this happen. It stops a lot of interruptions for people who couldn't get their taxes done.

Mr. Chair, COVID-19 has been showing us in stark terms that Canadian seniors are struggling to make ends meet in Canada. Before enduring the crisis, it was clear that OAS and GIS benefits levels were just not enough for seniors to keep up with the cost of living, so we need to fix this now.

Why is the government refusing to increase OAS and GIS benefits to lift seniors out of poverty on a permanent basis?

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors): Mr. Chair, I want to thank my honourable colleague for giving me this opportunity to rise today and talk about how we are supporting Canadian seniors during this pandemic.

Many Canadian seniors are facing significant health, economic and social challenges as a result of the pandemic. They built this country and now they need our help.

Our government is taking significant action to provide Canadian seniors with greater financial security and give them the help they need during this crisis. We're building on past measures by introducing a one-time tax-free payment of \$300 for those who receive OAS and of \$200 for those receiving GIS, totalling \$500 to seniors who receive both. We are also supporting community-based projects to improve the quality of life for seniors through the New Horizons for Seniors program, and investing in other charities. Seniors need our help, and we are delivering for them.

● (1410)

Mr. Scott Duvall: Mr. Chair, I was glad to hear that the Minister of Seniors is acknowledging the financial burden that our seniors are taking on. She mentioned the prescription dispensing fees, the added costs of their groceries and the delivery charges. I was glad that the Prime Minister acknowledged the heavy toll seniors are facing, and that they helped to shape this country and now they need our help.

A surprising statement that I heard yesterday was the Treasury Board and the seniors minister's admission in their press briefing that the level of assistance being provided to Canadian seniors is quite low. Why is the seniors minister acknowledging all the burdens they're trying to help the seniors with, but the response they're giving is just a very low way of handling it?

Hon. Deb Schulte: I really do want to acknowledge my honourable colleague for his advocacy. I just want to assure him that while the government remains committed to implementing policies in our platform, we are focused on this health crisis right now. We have provided financial support to seniors sooner through the GST credit top-up, and now with additional payments to OAS and GIS recipients. This year we are investing over twice as much on financial assistance for seniors as we committed to in our platform, which is \$3.8 billion compared to \$1.56 billion in the platform.

Seniors need our help and we're delivering. These payments have provided greater support for the most vulnerable seniors. Just to give some details, for those on OAS and GIS, they will get, in conjunction with the GST credit top-up, \$875 per adult, and over \$1,500 per couple. This is not an insignificant amount. This is a significant amount to support our seniors during this pandemic.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): You have about one minute left for both a question and a response. Go ahead, Mr. Duvall.

Mr. Scott Duvall: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The minister was talking about there being a maximum payment, if it's possible. What I've heard from seniors is this is a one-shot deal and it's an insult to them. They want some stability on an on-going basis.

We did make an agreement about two weeks ago that help would be implemented without delay on the seniors issue and for people with disabilities. Why did yesterday's announcement include only the people who are seniors, but not people with disabilities? Why have they been omitted? When can they expect help to come?

Hon. Deb Schulte: I just want to touch on the two points raised. On the one-time payment, we know that seniors need help now, and that's why it's important to get that money into seniors' accounts as soon as possible. That is why we're providing the one payment right away, instead of small amounts spread over months.

In the coming weeks we will look at additional supports for other vulnerable Canadians. I just want to let him know we are working on additional measures.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll go now—

Mr. Scott Duvall: I didn't hear anything about the disability—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The five minutes are finished.

[*Translation*]

It is now over to Mrs. Gill, the member for Manicouagan.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be sharing my time with the member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques.

I have just one question. It's for the government, and this will be the fourth time I've asked today.

When I go back home, what am I going to tell the people of Chandler, Amqui, Bic, Saint-Siméon, Tadoussac and Harrington Harbour? Am I going to tell them that the government supports the Bloc Québécois's proposal? We propose giving seasonal workers access to employment insurance benefits until next season, regardless of whether they received the CERB, how many hours they worked or how many they accumulated. Should I instead tell them that the Liberal government has nothing in store for them as they suffer through the crisis? The government hasn't managed to bridge the employment insurance gap, and is even planning to bring it to six, if not eight, months. That means they'll have nothing to put on the dinner table for the next year.

I'd like an answer, Mr. Chair.

• (1415)

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos: Mr. Chair, I have three things to say in response to the member's important question.

First, we obviously understand what she's saying. The work is seasonal, not the workers. The work they do is fundamental so they can support their families and their communities in eastern Quebec and other regions.

Second, the CERB delivers significant assistance to those often vulnerable workers, the majority of whom would be able or certainly eager to find another job.

Third, and finally, before any longer-term investments are made, it's important to keep in mind that those who may have received employment insurance benefits but who lost them in recent weeks or who do seasonal work are eligible for the CERB.

That said, we are also looking ahead. We've already announced some very important measures—and we'll continue to do so—in support of tourism, culture, agriculture, fisheries, forestry and many other key contributors to regional development in Quebec and elsewhere.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, has the floor.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Mr. Chair, the situation my fellow member just described is of little comfort to those in Quebec's regions.

To be frank, the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance program is a flop. According to the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, one in three businesses doesn't qualify for rent relief because it doesn't meet the 70% drop in revenues requirement.

Half of businesses have indicated that their landlords won't be applying for the program because it's optional. Commercial landlords can choose to participate in the program or not.

How is that going to help businesses, Mr. Chair? We are still trying to figure that out. Businesses, especially seasonal ones, need more support to cover their fixed costs.

Will the government commit to reviewing the program, which is too restrictive for businesses and optional for landlords? The program must do more to help businesses, particularly seasonal ones, cover their fixed costs.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we know that businesses are, of course, very concerned about fixed costs.

Our rent relief program is very significant. We haven't yet announced all the details, so it's much too soon to say that it's flawed. More information will be available in the next few days. At that point, we hope to be on the right track when it comes to fixed costs and rent.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I hope you're making adjustments. It's totally unacceptable that only 10% of businesses who need the relief can get it.

What's more, the public health crisis has brought its share of change for businesses, particularly with the new health measures. They have to plan, implement preventative measures, have response plans, train staff and acquire the necessary equipment. In order to do those things, protect the public and reopen their doors, businesses have to assume the costs.

Will the government commit to providing financial assistance to businesses, especially those in the tourism industry, so they can cover the costs of putting the new health measures in place?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I know the situation is very serious in rural communities. That's why we've invested \$71 million in community futures development corporations, or CFDCs, and business development centres.

Both of those will go a long way towards helping businesses in rural communities, and I have no doubt that we will continue working together to find other solutions.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Now we'll move on to the honourable member for Calgary Centre, Mr. McLean.

Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One of the terms for accessing the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance, CECRA, is that you must have a mortgage on the property. One of the key terms of eligibility for this support is that the landlord owes money to a bank. Will the Minister of Finance tell us if this program was designed for the benefit of landlords and tenants or for the benefit of banks?

• (1420)

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I appreciate the question from the member opposite. I think that it's important to know that commercial rent and landlord-tenant relationships are provincial jurisdictions. Therefore, as we embarked on an approach that could enable landlords and tenants to get to an agreement that would help both, we used the CMHC as a vehicle from which we could do that.

We think that we've come up with a program that provides advantages for the landlords and advantages for the tenants, and we will be announcing details that will include how mortgages can be put in place for those landlords who don't currently have them.

Mr. Greg McLean: Brookfield Properties, a large Canadian firm, announced that its rent collections on commercial properties for April were 15% of the lease terms. Luckily, Brookfield has another company, Brookfield Business Partners, poised to help by buying up the distressed equity of the firms that owe them money. Did the Minister of Finance design CECRA with this outcome in mind, washing out individual investors and small companies and

transferring that value into the hands of vulture financiers who hold all the cards?

Hon. Bill Morneau: In fact, Mr. Chair, we designed this program exactly with the idea in mind of the challenge that we're seeing. We're seeing that in many cases commercial tenants are not actually able to pay their rent, so landlords are not getting the rent that's due. Therefore, there's a mutual interest from tenants and from landlords in coming to an agreement. By providing funding through the mortgage system to those landlords, we recognize that we'll enable both of those two parts of the equation to come to an agreement that we think will be advantageous for the sector over the long term.

Mr. Greg McLean: In the past two months, the Bank of Canada has tripled the size of its balance sheet to almost \$400 billion, with more to come, Mr. Chair. In the 2008 recession, the world's major economies endured quantitative easing on a previously unknown scale, most of which has not since been unwound. Canada endured a then-record \$50-billion deficit, but we did not need to enter the uncertain world of QE, quantitative easing, as a result of the strength of Canada's oil and gas industry. Will the minister acknowledge that this government's oil and gas policy mismanagement has led to economic decline, necessitating hundreds of billions of dollars of quantitative easing?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me challenge one assumption implicit in the honourable member's question, the assumption that our government fails to understand the importance of the oil and gas sector to our economy. Let me quote some leaders from Alberta and their response to the lease program.

Tim McMillan, CEO of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, said, "I think this is essential. Not all companies are going to need to tap into this sort of liquidity...but some that are normally high-quality, stable companies likely will be looking for this program to provide a certain amount of liquidity for them."

CAPP understands that we are supporting Canadian companies, including in the oil and gas sector, and I would urge the members opposite to understand that as well.

Mr. Greg McLean: BlackRock is one of the world's largest investment companies, managing trillions of dollars of bonds. It has lobbied regulators around the world to not be named a systemically important financial institution.

The Bank of Canada unexpectedly engaged BlackRock as an adviser on its bond-buying plans.

Is the Minister of Finance mindful of the conflict of interest that exists between the world's largest bond manager, BlackRock, and the advice it's giving the Bank of Canada on buying bonds?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, the member opposite might know that the Bank of Canada is independent from the government, and as such we are not privy to those decisions and support the continuing independence of the Bank of Canada from the government.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. McLean, you may have just a short question.

Mr. Greg McLean: The finance sector seems to be getting well served during this economic crisis.

Will the minister endeavour to provide a more balanced program of benefits going forward for the sake of the entire Canadian economy, and not just the Brookfields, the BlackRocks and the big banks?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I think the notion that one sector is being advantaged versus another actually defies the facts. More than 550,000 loans have gone out to small businesses in the form of \$40,000 loans per business over a very short time period.

Canada is a leader in this regard, and we'll continue to support businesses all across Canada with loans and support as they need it to get ourselves through this difficult time.

• (1425)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll go to the last five-minute round.

We'll begin with the honourable member for Carleton, Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What is the dollar value of the total assets of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, earlier today we were given incorrect information on the Auditor General. I would like to be able to provide more information at my next response.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is the total dollar value of the assets of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, the member for Carleton said that the previous government spent more on the Auditor General than the current government, and that is actually incorrect.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is the total dollar value of the assets of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, in fact, in the last full year of the Harper government, in 2014-15, the total spending on the Auditor General was \$85.8 million.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is the dollar value of the assets of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, in the most recent year, 2018-19, the total spend was \$92.4 million for the Auditor General, showing a 7.7% increase.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What are the total liabilities of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I would just say it's shocking when people bring forward incorrect information to the House to try to make a point.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What are the total liabilities of the Government of Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we will continue to support Canadians through this time, with support not only for businesses but for individuals to get through and get a bridge to a better time.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is just the dollar value?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, that's a continuing commitment.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I know we shouldn't ask the minister about numbers. He's just the finance minister, after all, but what is the equity on the Government of Canada's balance sheet?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I would advise the member for Carleton to memorize those Auditor General figures for his next foray into the House of Commons.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: The minister has claimed that our balance sheet is strong. There are three components to a balance sheet: the assets, the liabilities, and the equity. The minister doesn't know any of the three, so clearly he doesn't actually know anything about our balance sheet. That's reassuring.

According to the Auditor General, the negative net worth of our Government of Canada will be as much as \$1 trillion by the end of this fiscal year.

Can the minister, if he is familiar with any of these numbers, tell us if it is possible that his government will hit \$1 trillion of debt this year?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I want to assure Canadians that our approach will be to continue to make investments on their behalf. That is available to us because of our strong fiscal position, but we will continue to take that approach, which we think is the appropriate one.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Will it be \$1 trillion, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, as I said, we will continue to focus on the importance of supporting Canadians.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is the size of our current national debt?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I think what will happen as we do that is that we will allow ourselves to have a stronger economy at the end because of these investments.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is the size of the national debt?

Hon. Bill Morneau: We have always seen, Mr. Chair, that these investments are not only supporting Canadians; they are supporting businesses so that we do have a strong economy and a strong fiscal position coming out of this.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Does the finance minister know the size of our national debt?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I will continue to focus our efforts, as we believe we should, on supporting Canadians through this time.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Does the finance minister know what \$1 trillion is?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we are continuing to make investments that we believe are prudent in the face of this economic challenge, supporting Canadians as we know we need to.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is the total dollar value of all the public and private debt in Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we know that by supporting Canadians, by continuing to make investments, we will enable Canadians to have less debt themselves because that—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Poilievre.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: What is the total debt, public and private, as a share of GDP in Canada?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, the important consideration here is that the federal government is taking a position that we should support Canadians so that they don't take on the debt themselves.

• (1430)

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Yet they have. They have record household debt, record corporate debt and growing government debt.

The finance minister doesn't seem to know any of the basic numbers that would be required to govern the finances of the Government of Canada, so I will give him one last chance.

Based on his latest briefings, what is the total size of Canada's national debt?

If he doesn't know, can he have the humility and honesty just to say so?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for slightly more time in this response to say that we think the best thing to do during this time period is to invest in Canadians. We know that in that way they will not be supporting as much debt themselves.

The government is in a fiscal position that enables us to take on debt at this time, which we think is appropriate to get our economy to a better position at the end of this crisis. We think that's appropriate. We will continue to take that approach.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. government House leader is rising on a point of order.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I think we need to keep the interpreters in mind and the work they are doing, particularly when it comes to the flow and speed of questions. As the interpreters have already mentioned, they've suffered more injuries during this short time than during all of last year.

Mr. Chair, I kindly ask that you make sure members take that into account. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I'm not sure whether that constitutes a point of order, but it's certainly an important reminder for members of the House to respect interpreters' working conditions.

[*English*]

Please note that this is the end of our questions to ministers for this afternoon.

Honourable members, please note too that pursuant to an order made on April 20, the House has been recalled. As such, the committee will now adjourn and the House sitting will begin shortly thereafter. The bells will be rung to call in members, and a parade will begin the sitting.

This committee is now adjourned.

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