



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 009

Tuesday, May 19, 2020

Chair: The Honourable Anthony Rota



Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tuesday, May 19, 2020

• (1200)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.)): We're now at noon. I'll call this meeting to order.

Welcome to the ninth meeting of the House of Commons Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic.

I understand there is an agreement to observe a moment of silence in memory of Captain Jennifer Casey, a member of the Snowbirds team who died on Sunday in a crash in Kamloops.

[A moment of silence observed]

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you're ready to speak, please activate your microphone. When you aren't speaking, leave your microphone on mute.

[English]

I would like to remind the honourable members that if you want to speak in English, you should be on the English channel, and if you want to speak in French, you should be on the French channel. Should you wish to alternate between the two languages, you should change the channel to the language that you are speaking each time you switch languages.

In addition, please direct your remarks through the chair and speak slowly and clearly all the time to help our interpreters.

Finally, we strongly recommend that you use the headsets. I noticed almost everyone has picked up a headset. It's very much appreciated, not only by your fellow members of Parliament but also by the interpreters.

I understand there are no ministerial announcements today.

We'll now go to presenting petitions for a period of not exceeding 15 minutes.

I would like to remind the members that any petition presented during a meeting of this special committee must have already been certified by the clerk of petitions.

Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'm pleased to be presenting two petitions today. The first one deals with Bill C-7, a piece of government legislation that seems to

remove many of the safeguards associated with the existing euthanasia regime. Petitioners are concerned about efforts to remove many of these safeguards. They note, in particular, the removal of the 10-day reflection period. They know that the reflection period can already be waived by physicians in certain situations, but this legislation proposes to eliminate that reflection period entirely.

The second petition deals with another piece of legislation, Bill S-204, a bill composed in the Senate which seeks to make it a criminal offence for someone to go abroad to receive an organ for which there was not consent. Petitioners are very supportive of this petition. It's noted as well that world health officials have actually praised China's organ transplant regime despite problems we know of dealing with organ harvesting and trafficking.

I commend these petitions for the consideration of members today.

• (1205)

The Chair: Mr. Manly.

Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Mr. Chair, I have a petition today sent in by members of my constituency of Nanaimo—Ladysmith.

It calls upon the House of Commons in Parliament assembled to commit to upholding the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action by immediately putting a halt to all existing and planned construction of the Coastal GasLink project on Wet'suwet'en territory, ordering the RCMP to dismantle its exclusion zone and stand down, scheduling nation-to-nation talks between the Wet'suwet'en nation and the federal and provincial government—something that has already happened, and I'm sure that the petitioners would be pleased that the government has taken that action—and prioritizing the real implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): I have a point of order. I can't hear you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Can you hear me now? Okay, very good. Technology is not perfect.

The next petition will be presented by Ms. May.

Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's an honour to present a petition. It was certified by the clerk. Petition number 431-00198 relates to the ongoing opioid crisis. The petitioners call on the House to declare this a public health emergency and to take all the immediate steps that are necessary to address this crisis.

I note that the number of deaths from the opioid crisis in Canada far exceeds the number of deaths from COVID-19. The petitioners call on the government to declare this a public health emergency; to move expeditiously to assist moving towards protecting the people who are victims; to deal with this issue as a public health crisis, not as a criminal matter; and to work towards the decriminalization of drugs so that we can save lives in Canada that are at risk due to the opioid crisis.

The Chair: We'll now proceed to the questioning of ministers.

Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Over the weekend, we learned of a tragic accident during the CF Snowbirds' Operation Inspiration tour to salute Canadians for doing their part during this pandemic.

On behalf of the Conservative Party of Canada, I would like to extend our deepest condolences to the family and friends of Captain Jennifer Casey and to the entire military community on this profound loss. We also send our thoughts and strength for a full recovery to Captain Richard MacDougall who was seriously injured in the incident.

Could the Prime Minister provide an update on the incident investigation?

The Chair: The right honourable Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister): Mr. Chair, I thank the member opposite for her question and her words. It is with heavy heart that we grieve the loss of a member of the Snowbirds team who had been flying across the country to lift up Canadians during these challenging times. Our thoughts are with the families of Captain Jennifer Casey, Captain Richard MacDougall and the entire Canadian Forces Snowbirds team during this difficult time. Our thoughts, in particular, are mourning Captain Casey, who was another brave Nova Scotian lost during these very, very difficult times for that province.

We thank the emergency personnel in Kamloops who responded so quickly to this tragic incident. A flight safety team will investigate the incident, and until the investigation concludes, the CT-114 Tutor fleet will be on operational pause. Our hearts go out to everyone.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Communications Security Establishment has warned that intellectual property that Canadian health organizations are developing associated with researching vaccines, treatments and tests for coronavirus are valuable targets for the Chinese Communist Party-backed hacking.

Has the Prime Minister or any member of cabinet been made aware of any cyber breaches?

• (1210)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, as a government, we take extremely seriously the safety and security of Canadians and of our intellectual property. That's why the Communications Security Establishment continues to do extraordinary work in keeping Canada and Canadians safe. We receive regular updates from the CSE and from all our intelligence agencies on what we can do and what we continue to do to ensure that Canada is protected.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Mr. Chair, the Communications Security Establishment has indicated that there is a heightened risk and that increased measures are needed to protect Canadian national security interests at this time.

Could the Prime Minister let us know what additional measures the government is taking to heed these increased warnings and protect Canada?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We have, over the past years, increased the resources available to the CSE because we know how important it is to constantly remain vigilant in protecting Canadian networks, Canadian institutions and the safety and security of Canadians from cyber-intrusion and cyber-attacks. We continue to ensure that our national security agencies have the tools necessary to do what needs to be done.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Canada is a member of international organizations like the WHO. We expect to receive accurate and timely information that enables us to make decisions on the actions we need to take to keep Canadians safe. However, if the WHO doesn't validate and verify the information it shares with member states, it puts us all at risk.

Over the weekend, the international development minister said that it is not the WHO's responsibility to question the information provided by China in this pandemic. Right from day one, Canada has made bad decisions based on bad information from the WHO.

The crisis is not over. Is the government continuing to trust the information from the WHO without verifying it?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, Canadians know well that this is a global crisis hitting locally in every country around the world, and we need strong global institutions to be able to counter it. That is why we continue to support the work of the WHO. However, as we go through this, it is clear there will need to be improvements to the WHO and to the international institutions that serve us. Canada will be there, as we have been, to ask questions and demand answers.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Ste-Marie will ask the next question.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On April 11, the House passed a motion ordering the government to implement, over the short term, support measures for SMEs to cover their fixed costs.

What has the government done?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: In terms of fixed costs, we acknowledge that the largest costs are associated with the payroll of many businesses. As a result, we've moved forward with the emergency wage subsidy. We've also implemented measures with regard to rent.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: The payroll is indeed substantial, but these costs are variable.

I want to ask the Prime Minister my question again. What has the government done in terms of fixed costs and in keeping with the motion passed by the House?

The Prime Minister can answer my question in more time than it took me to ask the question.

The Chair: Thank you for the clarification.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I want to thank the member, but I'll be brief.

We've implemented measures for commercial rent because we acknowledge that it constitutes a significant amount of money for many small businesses. We're working with the provinces to ensure that we support businesses in terms of fixed costs, including costs associated with commercial rent.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: The Canada emergency commercial rent assistance isn't working. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business, or CFIB, is calling for a major overhaul of the program for small businesses. For example, the 70% drop in revenue criterion is excessive and will leave many SMEs on the sidelines.

The program excludes SMEs whose owners don't have mortgages. Chain stores are also excluded. When an SME is eligible for the program, it must depend on the co-operation of the building owner, which isn't automatic.

According to the Conseil québécois du commerce de détail, 40% of eligible business owners don't want to participate in the program.

Has the government assessed the program's effectiveness? How does it plan to make the program truly accessible?

• (1215)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Since the start, we've been setting up programs to provide timely assistance. As we identify flaws or weaknesses and we learn more about the impact, we've been making improvements to the programs. We're continuing to assess how the program is working, in order to strengthen and improve it.

The Liberal Party recognizes provincial jurisdictions. We know that we must work with the provinces when it comes to rent. The work will be done in partnership with Quebec and the other provinces.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: With regard to provincial jurisdiction, the office of Quebec's finance minister, Éric Girard, doesn't agree with the Prime Minister. The office says that the federal government announced the program and that the CMHC is entirely responsible for running it. The program as it stands has no provincial component at all.

The Association Restauration Québec surveyed its members. Two-thirds of its members said that they were very or extremely worried about paying their rent, suppliers and employees in the coming weeks. According to the survey, fewer than one in four restaurant owners have managed to apply for rent assistance. The association is asking for a real commercial rent payment program.

What will the Prime Minister do?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Since the start, we've been implementing programs to help workers, small businesses, Canadians and families facing terrible challenges during this crisis.

As the situation changes and as we understand where improvements are needed, we've been improving the programs. We're working on a mechanism for property owners without mortgages, for example, and on the eligibility of small businesses. We'll work with the property owners as well.

We acknowledge that we still have more to do, and we'll be there for entrepreneurs and small businesses.

The Chair: Mr. Ste-Marie, please ask your question in 30 seconds or less.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: The fixed costs for SMEs far exceed the rental payments for a whole host of economic sectors. Examples include hotels and hair salons, along with zoological gardens.

How will the government address fixed costs for SMEs in addition to providing rent support?

The Chair: The right honourable Prime Minister has 30 seconds.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: This morning, we announced an expansion of the \$40,000 loan program for small businesses that didn't qualify for the program.

Small businesses with contract employees or small businesses where the owner is also the sole employee can now access the \$40,000 loan to help them cover their fixed costs.

[English]

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

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Canadians are suffering during this pandemic, but some very wealthy are profiting. During World War II, there were laws against profiteering, but this government seems to be providing incentives for profiteering. First, we talk about the corporate bailout program, LEEFF. It is open to companies that use tax havens, which is over 90% of Canada's largest publicly traded companies.

Why didn't this government shut the door to LEEFF to all companies that use tax havens?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, as a government, we have increased substantially the resources available to Revenue Canada to go after tax avoidance and tax evasion in the billions of dollars. We will continue to do exactly that. We have no patience for those who don't pay their fair share of taxes as a government or as a country.

At the same time, we need to make sure that we are supporting workers across the country, whether they work for large companies or not. Perhaps the NDP is willing to put aside the tens of thousands of workers in 90% of Canada's largest companies, but we are not. We will continue to be there for Canadians.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, not a single company listed in the Panama papers or the Paradise papers and not a single company involved in the Isle of Man scam have ever been charged with, let alone convicted of, tax evasion. They can all get the Prime Minister's corporate bailout.

Demark, France and other countries have banned tax-haven companies from getting bailouts. Why hasn't this government done the same?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, as a government, we have taken very seriously the responsibility of cracking down on tax avoidance and tax evasion and ensuring that everyone pays their fair share. If the NDP really wants to continue on this approach, they should start naming companies that they feel should not be eligible and explain to their workers why they don't qualify for the help that other Canadians get.

We need to work first and foremost on supporting workers, but if the NDP wants to start listing companies whose workers shouldn't be helped, please go ahead.

• (1220)

Mr. Peter Julian: Other countries have done it and the Prime Minister, with respect, should be doing the same thing.

There are the big banks as well. In the last economic crisis, the Harper government gave over \$69 billion in largesse as the banks racked up over \$27 billion in profits over the same period. Now this government is going even further, approving up to \$150 billion in support to Canada's big banks. The banks can and do impose penalty fees and interest on any deferrals they approve, and they are benefiting from near-zero Bank of Canada rates.

The government has tools to cut the banks' profiteering, why don't they use them?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Again, Mr. Chair, we see the NDP being long on rhetoric and attacks but short on specifics. They will not name the companies where they don't think employees should be getting benefits like other Canadians because of the companies they work for. I'm still waiting for the NDP to start naming companies that shouldn't receive the LEEFF.

On the other side, we will continue to work with the banks, which have made strong measures to support Canadians and will be doing more in the coming months. We know that we need to work together to get through this and that businesses, large and small, are part of the solution in this country. We will keep working with them for the benefit of all Canadians.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Chair, they haven't used a single tool. People should come before profiteering. It's time the Prime Minister understood this.

Amazon is owned by the world's richest man, who's made an estimated \$30 billion off the backs of Amazon workers during this pandemic. Amazon has announced it's cutting wages at the end of this month. Amazon is on the dirty-dozen list of most dangerous employers. Instead of defending workers, this government is helping Amazon with public money. This government has given Amazon a sweetheart contract to take over from our post office and our federal emergency warehouses.

Why support Amazon's profiteering with public funds?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We know how important it is to get personal protective equipment out to places across the country that need it quickly and urgently. That is why we're working with Amazon Canada as a distribution space.

Perhaps the NDP is suggesting that Amazon Canada employees shouldn't be receiving benefits from the government. We think that employees, regardless of the companies they work for, large or small, should be getting the help they need. We're ensuring that the help that goes to companies goes directly to employees. Those are the things, with the wage subsidy and others, that we are focused on to make sure that Canada can come back strong, both health-wise and economy-wise, once this is through.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, it's your turn. You have the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer expressed concern about the lack of a budget plan from the government.

Does the government plan to table an economic update or a budget by the end of June, yes or no?

The Chair: The right honourable Prime Minister has the floor.

Rather, the honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Bill Morneau (Minister of Finance): Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for his question.

Of course, we must be transparent with Canadians. We've explained all our measures and the approximate cost of the measures.

We'll continue to use the transparency approach. When the situation is more stable, we'll have the opportunity to better explain the future of our fiscal situation.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, I hope that the time taken to choose the person who would answer me will be taken into account in the calculation of my speaking time.

I'll repeat my question for the minister. If he can't table a full budget, what's stopping him from providing an economic update?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, as I said, we know that we must be transparent. That's why we provided the information to the committees, to Parliament and, of course, to Canadians.

We'll continue to use our approach, and when we have a somewhat more stable economic situation—

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, you have the floor again.

• (1225)

Mr. Alain Rayes: I'll ask a simple question. Will we have an economic update by the end of June, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, when the economic situation is more stable, we'll have more to say.

Mr. Alain Rayes: The government announces billions of dollars in spending every day without any accountability. I want to point this out.

Can the Prime Minister tell us when we can return to the House of Commons in a small group and in accordance with the guidelines of the Public Health Agency of Canada so that democracy can be properly exercised?

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

The Leader of the Government in the House of Commons has his microphone muted.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Yes, Mr. Chair, I'm sorry—

The Chair: Sorry to interrupt you.

I want to tell those who are asking the questions that we're extending the time so that they don't lose any time. They have five minutes.

The honourable Leader of the Government in the House of Commons has the floor.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for his question.

The mere fact that we're engaged in a discussion and asking and answering questions shows that we can do some things differently. We must strike a balance between the fundamental role played by parliamentarians and compliance with public health guidelines. We believe that this balance has been achieved—

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, you have the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: I want to point out to the Leader of the Government in the House, the government and the Prime Minister that, at this time, lockdown measures are being eased everywhere. Businesses are opening, almost without exception.

What's stopping the House from sitting in accordance with public health guidelines?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: I hope that my colleague isn't suggesting that 338 members sit in the House and then return home.

We're looking to strike a balance. We sent a document to the various parties last week and we're waiting for their response.

Parliament must be able to play its role while complying with—

The Chair: Mr. Rayes has the floor.

Mr. Alain Rayes: I want to tell the Leader of the Government in the House that he had better avoid demagoguery. I specifically stated in my question that a small group would sit in accordance with public health guidelines. This isn't about asking 338 members to return to the House.

My question is for the Minister of Finance.

We know that the CESB has just been sent out. The money sent to people is retroactive to May 10. Some students contacted us to say that, after three weeks, they had the opportunity to return to work full time. They're wondering whether they need to pay back the CESB.

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Mr. Chair, we have put a limit of \$1,000 on what a student can earn, which is exactly the same as the CERB. Of course, we are encouraging students to work as much as they can. Hopefully that will allow them to work full time and not avail themselves of the CESB. The CESB is there as a backstop for students who can't work or earn more than \$1,000 a month.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Rayes: I'll simply repeat my question.

Take the example of a student who has been receiving the CESB for three weeks because they're unemployed. However, they manage to find full-time employment. Therefore, they'll earn over \$1,000 this month.

Does the student need to pay back \$1,250 or \$312.50 for each week of unemployment?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the clarification.

Every four weeks, students will have to attest to whether they will be earning more than \$1,000 in the upcoming period. If they will be, they are not eligible for the CESB.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, you have only 20 seconds left. Will your question be 10 seconds?

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, the Conservatives required that students be matched with available jobs before they could receive financial assistance, as stated in the bill passed.

Why hasn't the matching program already been implemented?

The Chair: Minister Qualtrough, please respond in 15 seconds or less.

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We are doing just that through our job bank. Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll go to the next questioner.

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's indeed a pleasure to be with everyone today.

I, too, want to offer my condolences to the family, the friends and particularly the colleagues in the Royal Canadian Air Force of Captain Jenn Casey, who perished in the Snowbirds accident this weekend. I'd like to extend them to the entire Canadian Armed Forces family. I also want to wish a speedy recovery to Captain Richard MacDougall.

Over the last couple of days, some aviation experts have called for the permanent grounding of the vintage 1960s Snowbirds fleet of CT-114 Tutors. The Prime Minister did allude to the fact that the Snowbirds are going to be grounded during the investigation.

If the investigation proves that this was mechanical failure, will the government be looking at grounding the fleet permanently?

• (1230)

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): I want to join the member in expressing our very sincere condolences regarding the air force officer who was lost and our very sincere wishes for a speedy recovery of the injured captain.

The safety of our women and men in uniform is our top priority, and a Royal Canadian Air Force flight safety team is currently in British Columbia investigating the accident. As the Prime Minister indicated, the Tutor fleet has been placed on an operational pause, and, of course, Operation Inspiration has been delayed indefinitely.

As the investigation is ongoing, I believe it's inappropriate to speculate or provide information at this time. However, we will be monitoring that investigation and its results and advice very carefully.

Mr. James Bezan: Under the previous Conservative government, we launched a process of replacing the Tutors, back in 2012. The Trudeau government actually stopped that in 2018.

Why did the government stop the replacement program for the Tutors for our Snowbirds?

Hon. Bill Blair: I will simply reiterate, Mr. Chair, that the safety of our men and women in uniform is a top priority. As there is an investigation ongoing, we have temporarily paused the use of the Tutor fleet. The investigation will provide us with information.

I am not going to speculate or provide any additional information at this time, but we will monitor very carefully the results of that investigation and act as required.

Mr. James Bezan: Minister Blair, I was just asking when we were going to actually get around to replacing this fleet and why you paused it in 2018 and plan to have the Snowbirds fly until 2030.

While we're talking about jets for the Royal Canadian Air Force, let's talk about the CF-18 replacement program, which has been delayed by the Liberals on numerous occasions. The most recent delays happened in February of this year and again earlier in this month of May, pushing the deadline now until July 31.

My questions to the government are about this last delay. Was it related to the COVID-19 circumstances? Was it requested by the competitors, or was it requested by the government because of the lack of departmental staff to actually process the bids?

Hon. Bill Blair: I want to assure the member opposite that the replacement of the air fleet is a top priority for the government. We are working diligently toward making the best determination on the best equipment for our members. That process will proceed, as has been indicated. We remain committed to ensuring that our people have the best tools and the safest tools they need to do their job of keeping Canadians safe.

Mr. James Bezan: That was a non-answer. It didn't shed any light at all on what we were talking about with the CF-18 replacement.

In my next couple of questions, I want to switch to force protection. The media is reporting that a number of Canadian Armed Forces members who are serving on the front line in long-term care facilities have contracted COVID-19. I would like to know the total number of infections now in the Canadian Armed Forces. How many of those are related to serving in long-term care facilities? What is the government doing to continue with force protection of those who are serving during this pandemic?

Hon. Bill Blair: In response to requests for assistance from the Quebec and Ontario governments, we have provided over 1,400 personnel to 25 long-term care facilities in Quebec and committed 275 members to five facilities in Ontario. As of May 15, five Canadian Armed Forces members supporting these facilities have tested positive for COVID-19. We are prepared to provide regular updates on a weekly basis.

All of the CAF personnel in these facilities are thoroughly trained and provided with appropriate personnel protection. I take this opportunity to thank them for their dedication and commitment.

The Chair: Ms. Stubbs.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

On April 13 and again on May 4, the Ontario Petroleum Institute wrote the finance minister asking for federal assistance for Ontario's orphan wells that's in line with what has been offered to other provinces. On April 17 the Prime Minister announced \$1.7 billion for orphan wells in B.C., Alberta and Saskatchewan, but there are 1,500 inactive wells in Manitoba and 27,000 orphan and inactive wells in Ontario.

Will the Liberals provide the same opportunity to oil services companies in Ontario and Manitoba?

• (1235)

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): I'd like to thank the member for her important question. It gives me an opportunity to point out how important our \$1.7 billion for cleaning up the orphan wells has been.

This program, as we have already seen, is creating great jobs for workers in the oil and gas sector in Alberta, Saskatchewan and B.C. These are the parts of the country that have been the most affected, and that's why we have targeted our support there.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: The OPI proposed an Ontario orphan well reclamation program to create jobs, support the economy and remediate thousands of wells in the province. On what date will the minister at least actually respond to the OPI?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me just say that I am sure the member opposite, who is a member for Alberta, is not in any way suggesting that any of the funds we have dedicated to orphan well cleanup should be taken away from Alberta and moved to any other part of the country. We will—

The Chair: Ms. Stubbs.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: I can assure the minister that what I believe is that support should be given to all provinces to deal with the issue of orphan wells.

On March 17, of course, the finance minister said oil and gas support was coming in "hours" or "days". That was 55 days ago. On April 28 I asked for an update. The minister said it would be "rolled out as quickly as possible". We must have different definitions of quick. It's 21 days later and still nothing.

On what date will the BDC loans for small and medium oil and gas operators and the Canada Development Investment Corporation loans for larger bridge financing actually be available?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I think the member opposite must have a definition different from what the oil and gas sector has for what constitutes real and meaningful support, support that has reassured the industry, support that has reassured the oil sector.

Let me talk about the Calgary Chamber of Commerce and its reaction to the LEEFF financing support. It said, "Today, we welcome the federal government's action to increase access to capital and liquidity".

These are important steps. They've increased confidence in the industry, and that's the right thing to do.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: However, the announcement doesn't equate to support being actually available to the industry. On what date will it actually be available?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, the industry understands very well that this is significant support and that the support absolutely is coming.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: The minister says the right things, but do you know what? Death by delay is a tactic of anti-energy activists. It sure is an effective way to phase out the industry, isn't it?

Talking about nice words, but failing to deliver and letting people down.... My constituents are frustrated. They're spending hours, days and even weeks trying to reach Service Canada. They're being cut off. They're getting busy signals. They're often unable to access the system at all.

I'll give you an example. After finally reaching an agent, Mike from Vermilion was told that the agent was not the "proper level" and couldn't help him, and that he would be escalated for a call-back. That never happened.

I acknowledge that since the pandemic, Service Canada is overloaded, but this was already a problem pre-COVID-19. How will the minister fix it and make sure that Canadians actually get the support they need?

The Honourable Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Our priority has always been, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that Canadians have access to their benefits through Service Canada. We have re-deployed over 3,000 staff members to provide services to Canadians with regard to EI and the CERB. We have also ensured that we set up a 1,500-agent call centre to respond very quickly to any Canadian who has applied for the CERB and has questions.

Our focus will remain on making sure that we continue to provide the benefits to Canadians through Service Canada.

The Chair: Ms. Stubbs, you have 25 seconds left, so ask a 10-second question, if possible. Then we'll see about an answer.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Sure. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I have a quick question, and it should be a clear answer.

What will the Liberals do to support Keystone XL, depending on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, our government has long been clear in its support for Keystone XL. In fact, in 2013, before we were in government, our then future prime minister travelled to Washington to make very clear our support for that important pipeline.

• (1240)

The Chair: The next question goes to Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Last week, it was reported that many single parents, mostly women, are struggling. Due to the pandemic, they're not receiving their support payments from their former spouses. Many of the parents have been impacted due to a job loss.

What is the government doing to ensure that single parents who rely on these types of supports are getting their funds?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, we know that single parents, particularly single women, are struggling. That's why we have put in place a number of measures, including the GST credit and the augmented CCB payment. We're looking to see how much more we can do, but I can assure the member that we too are very concerned about this vulnerable population.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much.

The government provided the first round of funding for the shelters through delivery agents. This question is for the Minister for Women and Gender Equality: Has this money actually flowed into the bank accounts of these shelters?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, very early in the pandemic, we made sure that we flowed that money to all the community entities. An additional \$50 million that went directly to women's shelters has enabled—

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Exactly, and that was specifically my question. Have these women's shelters received the money, yes or no?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: They have, in the sense that the money was distributed very quickly through us to make sure they're able to respond very quickly to COVID-19.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to remind the honourable members to place their questions through the chair and not directly to the person to whom they're asking the question.

Please continue, Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Will do. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We know that many municipalities and sexual assault centres have been there to help women who are fleeing and are at risk. Many of these organizations, especially some of the sexual assault centres, do not get money.

What is the federal government doing to help these municipalities and these organizations that are using their funds and these operating expenses to fill the voids that the government has not addressed?

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development): Mr. Chair, I can assure my colleague that today over 500 sexual assault centres and women's shelters have received funding to respond to the challenges that COVID-19 brings. There is an additional \$10 million to be rolled out to those organizations that have not yet received funding. That funding will flow as early as early June.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: How many seconds or minutes do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes and 41 seconds.

I will take this opportunity to remind you that when I'm speaking, usually the clock is stopped, so you don't have to worry about it eating into your time.

I want to remind all members that when you are asking a question or answering a question, please talk at a reasonable pace. The interpreters are working hard in the background. We don't see them, but we want to make sure their health remains intact during this crisis.

Go ahead, Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you very much for the reminder. I do get excited about my questions.

Organizations from across Canada are providing services to young women and girls who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and human trafficking. They are calling on this government for support.

In September 2019, the Minister of Public Safety announced \$75 million to support anti-trafficking initiatives, yet agencies like the London Abused Women's Centre, La CLES and RESET are closing their trafficking programs this week.

I'm going to ask this very simply. Where is the money and why are we not supporting these vulnerable women and girls at this incredibly difficult time?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, let me take this opportunity to thank every individual on the front line of support for survivors of gender-based violence, be it in trafficking or sex work, and of other forms of hardship that affect too many women in this country.

We've already invested over a quarter of a billion dollars to support these agencies pre-COVID. We've rolled out tens of millions of dollars to further support them. We have a human trafficking strategy, as my colleague suggested, with \$10 million in additional supports to ensure that every organization providing this critical work is supported, and we do this in partnership with provinces and territories.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thanks very much, but as I said, we are closing the programs at the end of the week. There are nine organizations, including the London Abused Women's Centre, that have come together to ask about the \$75 million announced. Where's the money?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, we have rolled out tens of millions of dollars to the front lines and we are committed to ensuring that every organization providing critical support is able to keep its doors open and its staff paid. We are working very closely with provinces on this issue.

• (1245)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: That's fair enough, but they are closing this Friday. As of this Friday, any of these vulnerable young women and girls who are looking for support will not have it. What happens after Friday?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Mr. Chair, our government is in regular conversation with those on the front line of supports for survivors and victims of gender-based violence. We have rolled out more funds than any other government before, and we are committed to ensuring their success.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Where's the money?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: We've already rolled out funds, and come early June, new funds will flow to organizations that are eligible for further supports.

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

Hon. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is an ongoing issue that is impacting small businesses all over my riding and small businesses from coast to coast to coast in our great country.

Two weeks ago I asked the minister about businesses that continue to fall through the cracks, businesses that are not eligible for supports for the simple fact that they have operated their business out of a personal bank account rather than opening up a business bank account. They qualify in every other way except for the bank account they operate from.

When I asked the minister about this a couple of weeks ago, it was indicated that help would be coming, yet we have not seen it. Where is the help for businesses that are struggling and are at risk of closing down permanently?

Hon. Mona Fortier (Minister of Middle Class Prosperity and Associate Minister of Finance): Mr. Chair, I want to thank the honourable member for his question. As members know, throughout COVID-19 we have listened to small businesses and entrepreneurs across the country.

Today we announced the expansion of the eligibility criteria for CEBA. It will now include many owner-operated small businesses.

We will continue to work on potential solutions to help business owners and entrepreneurs who operate through their personal bank accounts or who have yet to file a tax return, such as in the case of newly created businesses.

Hon. Rob Moore: Mr. Chair, applicants to the regional relief and recovery fund program in Atlantic Canada are to receive help through the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. They are required to attest that they've applied to other government programs before being deemed eligible for support.

Let's think of what that means. It means that they are required to have applied for a program even if they know they do not qualify.

Even if they have been told by their accountant or their lawyer that they do not qualify, they are being told that they must attest to having applied for one of these other programs. This means they are applying for a program like CERB, CEBA, or the wage subsidy even if they know they are not eligible.

Is it the government's intention to have small business owners apply for programs they know they are not eligible for in order to receive support from Canada's regional development agencies like ACOA?

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages): I thank my colleague for this very important question, because what businesses across Atlantic Canada are being told is that they have access to the wage subsidy and they have access to the CEBA. As my colleague just mentioned, access was further expanded today.

Those businesses also have access to ACOA, and we know that ACOA is trusted by people in Atlantic Canada. It is a very well-known federal agency that is there to support economic development and to stabilize businesses as they go through this very difficult and anxious time.

It would be a pleasure, if my colleague has specific examples, to work together to make sure businesses have access to the regional relief fund, because this is the intent of the government. We have their backs; that's what we're telling businesses.

Hon. Rob Moore: I thank the minister for her answer, but this gets to the very question being asked of businesses before they apply. They have to attest that they've applied for one of these other programs in order to be eligible. I would be happy to take the minister up on the offer to help out with specific cases, but there are many cases across our country of business owners receiving advice from professionals that they're not eligible for these other programs. That cannot be a criterion. If we want to help these businesses, it cannot be a criterion for accessing programming under ACOA that they have applied to another program for which they are not eligible.

Will the minister commit to clarifying this so that a business isn't being asked to do something they know they ought not to do?

• (1250)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Chair, as my colleague knows, we've massively expanded the social safety net, including the safety net for businesses. While we were expanding it, we didn't want businesses to fall through the cracks. If they have access to the wage subsidy, great, and now we have the wage subsidy until the end of the summer. If they have access to the CEBA, the \$40,000 loan, perfect. We've also just increased the eligibility criteria of the CEBA.

If that's not the case, I really hope that they come and see ACOA, because it will be there to help. Also, if they already have access to CEBA—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor to ask the next question.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Mr. Chair, after Air Canada announced that it was laying off 20,000 people over the weekend, the Prime Minister said that he would be working closely with companies such as Air Canada to see what more he could do to help them.

Before giving more money to airlines, will the Prime Minister at least ensure that the airlines reimburse the thousands of customers whose money they confiscated?

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport): Mr. Chair, as you know, the government has implemented measures to help the airline industry. I'm referring, of course, to the wage subsidy program. Several airlines have used this program, including Air Canada. There's also the loan program for large businesses. This program has just been launched and we'll see how it progresses over the coming days.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I asked the minister whether he would be seeking a refund for the thousands of customers who had their money confiscated.

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, I understand the frustration of people who would have preferred a refund at this time. However, the industry is going through a very difficult time.

The Chair: A point of order was raised.

[*English*]

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Mr. Chair, on a point of order, could you ask the member to switch over to the French channel when he speaks, please?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Barsalou-Duval. I'm on the English channel.

[*English*]

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, I have been—

The Chair: One second, please....

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, can you use the French channel when you speak French?

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Okay.

[*English*]

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, I've been on the French channel since the beginning.

I didn't hear the last question.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We'll stop the clock. There's a technical issue.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, could you repeat your last question, please?

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Over the weekend, Air Canada announced the layoff of 20,000 people. I was wondering whether the minister would at least ensure that the people whose flights were cancelled would receive a refund, since the Prime Minister said that he would be helping Air Canada.

Hon. Marc Garneau: As I said earlier, I understand the frustration of people who would have preferred a refund rather than a credit. The point is that our airlines are going through a very difficult time right now, since 95% of their revenue has disappeared.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Air Canada stated that it laid off 20,000 people to preserve its cash flow, among other reasons. However, according to the March 31 financial statements, Air Canada has \$6 billion in cash flow. Even if the company were losing \$20 million a day, it would have enough money to meet its needs for almost a year. Of that \$6 billion, \$2.6 billion belongs to its customers. In many cases, these customers have lost their jobs and are far from being able to cover their expenses for a year.

Why did the Liberal government give an additional \$800 million to the company without even requiring it to reimburse its customers?

• (1255)

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, we have introduced programs to help Canadian businesses such as the Canada emergency wage subsidy and the credit availability program for large businesses.

As everyone knows, airlines, including Air Canada, have lost 95% of their revenue, since people can't fly right now. Those companies have major expenditures nevertheless.

They all have fixed costs given their extensive assets, aircraft and other monthly expenses, and that's why they all need our help.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Mr. Chair, I would like the Minister of Transport to explain why European and American airlines have to give people whose flights were cancelled refunds, but Canadian airlines don't.

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, I won't comment on measures other countries have taken.

What I will say is that Canada has a solid understanding of the health of its airlines. I also understand the frustration of those who would've preferred to receive refunds.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Mr. Chair, the Civil Code of Québec and the Consumer Protection Act require airlines to refund customers for cancelled flights.

Why are the Canadian Transportation Agency and Canada's Minister of Transport encouraging airlines to break Quebec law?

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, the Canadian Transportation Agency is an independent body that makes its own decisions. It's a quasi-judicial tribunal, so I can't speak for it.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: The question was also for the Minister of Transport.

Why does the Minister of Transport think it's okay to confiscate people's money and not provide them with a service when it's against Quebec law?

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, I won't comment on the decision or opinion issued by the Canadian Transportation Agency.

The Chair: Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have 30 seconds left. That means 15 seconds to ask your question and 15 seconds to get an answer.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Again, my question is for the Minister of Transport, not the Canadian Transportation Agency, although I would like to ask its officials the same question.

Hon. Marc Garneau: As Minister of Transport, my priority is the health of Canada's airlines because they are going to have to start operating again post-COVID-19.

The Chair: We now continue with Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Please note that I'll be sharing my time with the member for Cape Breton—Canso.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank front-line workers in all essential sectors for their tireless work and tremendous dedication. Hats off to all the heroes!

I listened to voters about the need for better access to high-speed Internet and cellular networks in my riding of Nickel Belt and in northern Ontario. In an effort to find solutions, I met with local organizations, mayors, city councillors and high-speed Internet providers in the private sector. More than ever, the Internet is an essential tool, whether for front-line workers, businesses that deliver essential services, people working from home or students doing their schooling at home.

Can the Minister of Rural Economic Development describe our government's recent plan and tell us what was announced in the 2019 budget to ensure high-speed Internet and cellular service is available to all Canadians?

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Thanks to the leadership of members like my honourable friend from Nickel Belt, we developed a plan to

bring reliable and affordable high-speed Internet to all Canadians, and the plan is working.

[English]

COVID-19 has added further urgency to our work. To Canadians in Nickel Belt and across rural communities, we have a plan to get you connected and we've got your back.

We're well on our way to connecting one million households to high-speed Internet, which was not part of the plan until we formed government in 2015. Our new program, the universal broadband fund, will connect hundreds of thousands more Canadians to high-speed Internet. We will be working with all willing partners to connect as many Canadians as possible to high-speed Internet as quickly as possible.

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

• (1300)

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to be able to ask a question to our government in such a historic manner.

After weeks of working with local industry representatives in the fishery and hearing their concerns, I was very proud to hear the Prime Minister and the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans announce nearly half a billion dollars to support the fishing sector. With the announcement of the new fish harvester benefit and the new fish harvester grant, many licence-holders will now be able to access similar supports to other small and medium-sized businesses across the country.

Further, by committing to making changes to employment insurance benefits for harvesters and sharepersons, we've helped reduce the stress that such uncertainty caused to the industry by this pandemic.

Mr. Chair, this announcement is very commendable; however, there is always more to be done. With that in mind, I would like to ask the honourable Minister of Fisheries and Oceans to outline for the House how these measures will support fish harvesters and sharepersons during this pandemic.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I want to thank my colleague for Cape Breton—Canso for his many texts, phone calls and emails. He represents his area and the fishers in that area very well. A lot of what he fed to us and our department was able to form part of what we announced last week. I want to thank him for his advocacy.

In rural coastal communities, the fishery is sometimes the only thing we have for our economic driver. That is why it was so important for us to support our harvesters. Last week, we announced close to half a billion dollars going to the fish harvester benefit, which will allow harvesters and sharepersons to collect \$847 a week for up to 12 weeks in this very difficult time. We also announced the fish harvester grant, which is a \$10,000 grant to harvesters that will be able to help with their fixed costs. Making the change in the employment insurance is going to be a huge win for our fishers. They are going to be able to base their EI claims on last year's season, and that is going to be extremely helpful, because this year we're not really sure what's going to happen.

We will continue to work with our harvesters and industry partners to make sure that we're addressing their needs as we go forward. We know that these are very challenging times and we will make sure that we are there for our fishing sector.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP)): The next question is from the hon. member for North Island—Powell River.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, like so many of my colleagues before me, I would like to express my personal condolences to the loved ones of Captain Jennifer Casey. This is from the NDP, my riding of North Island—Powell River and, of course, specifically from 19 Wing Co-mox, which I have the great honour to represent. The Royal Canadian Air Force is a small family, and I know this has hit everyone so badly. My prayers are also, of course, with Captain MacDougall and his loved ones as he faces the challenges of his recovery.

My riding of North Island—Powell River has a significant and diverse group of small businesses that serve the communities very well. COVID-19 has hit them very hard, and these businesses are working to keep their heads above water during this very trying time. Money for the regional economic development agencies and community futures program was announced weeks ago as a means to support these types of businesses that can't access other COVID-19 emergency funds, but the money is still yet to be seen.

Small businesses in my riding are lining up for these supports. They are ready to get to work, but every day that they have to wait brings them closer to losing everything that they have worked so hard to build. When are they finally going to get the help that they so desperately deserve and need?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, dear colleague. It's a pleasure to answer a question about that.

We announced last Wednesday the launch of the new program, so in direct response to the question, the money is available now. Obviously, if they can't access the wage subsidy and they don't have access to the new version of the CEBA account that was announced today, please let's make sure that they have access to the regional development agency, including, of course, in western Canada, Western Economic Diversification Canada and the different community futures organizations, which are also called the CFDCs.

If my colleague has a clear example in mind, please feel free to connect with me, and we'll make sure that we can find solutions.

• (1305)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I certainly will be contacting the minister, as I know in my riding there are wait-lists and the money is still not there.

Now I'd like to move to the important issue of seniors. The government announced a much-needed top-up for seniors in receipt of GIS and OAS, which the member of Hamilton Mountain has fought so hard for. I encourage the government to follow his recommendations to maintain this in the future to prevent the growing poverty in the senior populations across Canada.

The top-up that was announced was said to be tax free, but OAS is taxable under the Old Age Security Act. How does the minister plan on delivering this benefit tax free? Can she explain as well when this money will be coming to the seniors who need it so desperately?

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors): I want to assure the member that we are totally committed to deliver for seniors. We have provided financial support to seniors sooner through the GST credit top-up and now through an additional tax-free payment to recipients of OAS and GIS. This provides support for seniors of all ages. It's comparable for many, and is greater for the most vulnerable. This year we are investing over twice as much in financial assistance for seniors as we committed to in our platform. Seniors need our help, and we took action sooner and delivered.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I will let the minister know that seniors in rural and remote communities have been waiting months for this little bit of funding and have had no extra additions for services or supports for them.

The next subject that I want to talk about today is the concern around the Canadian border. I appreciate the 30-day extension that was announced today, but communities in my riding, rural and remote communities, have specific challenges and specific vulnerabilities that are challenging because of their limited health resources. In my riding, we saw an outbreak in one of our smaller communities that is accessible by ferry. The chief in council and the mayor in council were amazing and worked very hard during that time. Unfortunately, we did lose an elder to COVID-19.

I'm just wondering if the minister could inform us all how rural and small communities are being included in my riding and across Canada to address the issue of changing border-crossing abilities, because they are more vulnerable to COVID-19, and an outbreak in their communities can be absolutely devastating.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I would like to thank the member opposite for her very important question. It gives me an opportunity to underscore what the Prime Minister announced earlier today, which is that our government has now agreed with our American partners to roll over for another 30 days the restrictions on non-essential travel between Canada and the United States.

The member is quite right that for ridings like hers, these restrictions are particularly important. We've worked very closely with the provinces on the border. The Premier of British Columbia was very clear that the epidemiological situation in B.C., in his view, meant that we needed to maintain those restrictions in place. I'm very glad that by working co-operatively and collaboratively with the U.S., we have been able to do that.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Madam Chair, contracts normally lay out the expectations of the buyer and commitments by the seller. Given the number of contracts the government has signed for PPE, what is the total amount of PPE supplies Minister Anand expected to have received to date based on these contracts?

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Madam Chair, I thank the member opposite for the question. As she knows, our government has been working through a whole-of-government approach to ensure that we can acquire personal protective equipment for all front-line workers and medical workers. We've been working very closely with our counterparts at the provincial and territorial levels to ensure that we understand the demand and to make sure that we have appropriate orders in place.

In addition, we've been working, as you know, on the domestic front to ensure the ability to produce PPE going into the future.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Madam Chair, stories about suitcases of cash and supplies being diverted are appearing in media around the world. How many of the government's orders for PPE have gone missing?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We'll have a brief answer from the minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

As we know, the supply chain is extremely fragile in terms of acquiring PPE around the world. Canada, like many other countries, has struggled, but we have been working very diligently, as you know, on the ground—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Ms. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Madam—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —and with many countries as well here to ensure the safety of the supply.

• (1310)

Mrs. Kelly Block: Madam Chair, I'll take that to mean that they have no idea.

Over 80% of the N95 masks received have not met the standard of an N95 mask. What are the names of the suppliers and manufacturers that provided Canada with the eight million substandard N95 and KN95 masks?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable Minister of Health can give a brief answer, please.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

As the member opposite knows, we would never allow defective N95 masks to be used by front-line workers. That's why all of the masks that we receive here in Canada—

Mrs. Kelly Block: That's not what I asked, Madam Chair. I asked for the names of the suppliers and manufacturers.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member will have to allow the minister to respond in the appropriate amount of time that she used to ask the question, and if she has another question, she can then ask that question.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable minister may respond.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and I thank the member for the question.

As the member knows, it's extremely important that the equipment we procure overseas meets quality standards to protect the front-line health care workers for whom it's destined and that we ensure that we complete full testing.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Madam Chair, what is the total value of the contracts to these suppliers and manufacturers of the substandard N95 masks?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will have a brief answer, please, from the honourable minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Madam Chair.

It is very important to understand that this is an extremely difficult procurement situation. Canada has been working together, as I said, and collaboratively with our provinces and territories to ensure that we can acquire the PPE that is so desperately needed by our front-line workers.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Madam Chair, I'll try another question. It is for Minister Anand.

What mechanism is in the contracts for recouping Canadians' money?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Madam Chair, I don't assume that the member means to imply that we can put a price on the safety of front-line workers. I know that she understands just how tight the supply chain is and just how difficult it is across the world as countries compete for PPE that is very hard to procure. She, I am sure, understands the value of protecting our front-line health care workers to the best of our ability.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Madam Chair, I absolutely understand that, which is why I'm asking questions about substandard masks and what sorts of mechanisms have been put into these contracts to ensure that we have the funds available to procure masks in other places.

With the government prepaying suppliers for PPE, mostly with Chinese manufacturing, what guarantee does the government have that we will actually receive the PPE at all?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Madam Chair, as the member knows, we've been working very closely with a number of partners, including Ambassador Barton, to ensure that we have a strong supply chain coming out of not only China but also out of many other countries. It is important for the member opposite to know that we will stop at nothing to protect our front-line health care workers. That's what they deserve, given the enormous sacrifices they're making for all of us.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There are only 13 seconds left, Ms. Block.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Madam Chair, at committee on Friday, the deputy minister for PSPC indicated that the role of Deloitte in Canada was, number one, reporting, and number two, vetting potential suppliers. Can Minister Anand tell us if Deloitte vetted the supplier of the eight million substandard masks sold in Canada?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There's no more time left, but I'll allow the minister to respond quickly.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

We're working with a number of partners, private sector and otherwise, to ensure that we can get what we need to protect our front-line health care workers and that the materials we acquire meet the strong standards needed to protect their health and safety.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The honourable member for Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis has the floor.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The people who have been overlooked so far are those in the regions, the ones working from home, the students doing their schooling remotely and those seeking some entertainment. Right now, they don't have reliable high-speed Internet service.

My question is for the government, which announced funding to support high-speed Internet access in the 2019 budget.

As far as investing that money goes, what is the government waiting for? It's raining billions of dollars on every other sector. People in my riding don't have access to high-speed Internet, which is an essential service.

• (1315)

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry): I'd like to thank the honourable member for his question.

I understand the importance of having access to high-speed Internet. That's why we introduced a \$1.7-billion program for broadband infrastructure to help and support communities across the country, especially in the regions.

I realize how serious the situation is, so we will keep working hard every single day to find solutions.

Hon. Steven Blaney: My question is straightforward. Are you prepared to speed up the investment?

The money was announced in 2019, but none of it has been forthcoming since.

Will you commit here and now to expediting the connect to innovate program for the regions so that all Canadians can have access to high-speed Internet appropriate to this day and age?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I would remind the member that he must address the chair, not the minister directly.

The honourable minister now has the floor.

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

Our priority is very clear. High-speed Internet is not a luxury; it's absolutely essential. That's why we introduced the connect to innovate program, which has helped 900 communities across Canada, especially in Quebec's regions. We will continue building a broadband network that will support the regions as well.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Unfortunately, the connect to innovate program was criticized by the Auditor General, and today, we have no response from the government, despite the fact that we are in the throes of a pandemic and the Internet is an essential service. The government is not giving people an answer.

Others in my riding also feel they have been shortchanged, law-abiding people who make an honest living. They are one of the most law-abiding groups around. Canada has one of the best gun control regimes, and yet, these honest people are now looked upon as criminals.

My question is for the public safety minister. If I take a Honda Civic and soup it up with spoilers, does that make it a Formula One race car?

No. Why, then, are semi-automatic weapons being banned solely for random and cosmetic reasons?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: I want to be very clear. The weapons that we have prohibited are weapons that were not designed for any hunting or sporting purposes. We have very specifically identified the makes, models and variants that will now be prohibited.

Overwhelmingly I think there is a consensus among Canadians that these weapons have no place in a civil society, and that's why they are prohibited.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Blaney: A weapon used by a sport shooter or hunter is a recreational weapon. The minister is making a mistake that will result in hundreds of millions of dollars being wasted, when he should be tackling the real issues: illegal weapons and street gangs.

My next question is for the Minister of Canadian Heritage about an initiative that is apparently meant to counter the spread of fake news related to COVID-19.

How is it that the government is choosing what Canadians should or should not see?

Is it an attempt to control freedom of expression? If so, is the minister willing to withdraw his digital citizen initiative?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Madam Chair, the government considers freedom of expression to be absolutely fundamental. It invested—and continues to invest—in support for regional media and the broader media to ensure the diversity of news content.

My fellow member, whom I have great respect for, knows full well how fundamentally important the diversity of news content and media neutrality are to us.

Hon. Steven Blaney: That's not an answer.

My last question—

[*English*]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to the honourable member for Calgary Confederation.

Mr. Len Webber (Calgary Confederation, CPC): Madam Chair, I too would like to offer my sincere condolences to the family of air force officer Captain Jenn Casey—our hearts are with them—and also for the speedy recovery of Captain Richard MacDougall.

• (1320)

We know that elective surgeries across Canada, such as heart valve replacements, heart bypass surgeries and even cancer tumour removals were put on hold as we braced for a wave of COVID-19 cases in hospitals. Some provinces are now finally re-booking these elective surgeries, while others are not. We have been sacrificing the health and well-being of many thousands of Canadians who have other equally significant health concerns. In many cases, these people are dying because their surgeries are not available. In fact, at the health committee, which I serve on, Dr. Paul Dorian, a cardiologist and researcher at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, testified that these cancellations are costing lives. He said he personally knew of four deaths in one hospital just last week due to hospitals prioritizing COVID-19.

I understand that surgery decisions are of provincial jurisdiction. However, Canadians expect the federal government to take a leadership position on these issues, as it is their advice provinces are relying on for guidance during this pandemic.

Can the Minister of Health tell us how many Canadians have died because their surgery was postponed due to COVID-19 prioritization?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Madam Chair, as the member notes, provinces and territories have the jurisdictional authority over how they deliver health care in their own territory or province.

I also want to thank the many hard-working physicians and hospital administrators, and in fact ministers of health and their ministries, for the very difficult decisions they've made over the last several months to ensure that we can actually deal with the

COVID-19 situation. As we saw the rise in cases across Canada, these provinces and territories took appropriate action to ensure that they would have the capacity in their own health care facilities to deal with surgeries on an urgent basis and postpone those that were less urgent in order to be prepared for any potential wave.

Thankfully, the work of Canadians has meant that our health care system has managed to get through this first stage intact, and that was only through those hard decisions and, in fact, the patience and the perseverance of Canadians to ensure that we flatten the curve.

Mr. Len Webber: Can I ask this again, do you know how many Canadians have died because their surgeries were postponed due to the COVID-19 prioritization?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I don't particularly know, but I would ask the member to address the question to the minister through the chair.

Mr. Len Webber: Yes, I am asking the minister through the chair.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Madam Chair, in fact it is a complicated question that the member is asking, because it's hard often to count those kinds of things in a way that would give him satisfaction right now.

I can tell you that Statistics Canada is keeping a very close count on the number of deaths across Canada, and we'll have a better sense in the next quarter.

Mr. Len Webber: If you don't know how many people have died because of the postponements, then how many elective surgeries were postponed? I ask through the chair.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It seems the member needs another reminder that in fact health care delivery—

Mr. Len Webber: I understand it comes through the provinces.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to remind the member for Calgary Confederation that he's to allow the minister to respond.

The honourable minister may respond.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm glad to see that civility still exists, even in our virtual realm.

It is important to remember that health care delivery, and in fact the collection of statistics that are related to that delivery, reside within the jurisdiction of the provinces and territories. Now we know—

Mr. Len Webber: I'll take that as "I have no idea how many people died because of postponement".

Can the minister tell us how long it will take to address the new backlog of surgeries?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much.

In fact it will be different from province to province and from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, depending on the level of load and requirements in those particular areas. It's important to—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Go ahead, Mr. Webber.

Mr. Len Webber: Many of my constituents are not happy with the World Health Organization's early handling of this pandemic. As the minister is aware, the health committee has been stonewalled by the World Health Organization in our attempts to get Canadian, Dr. Bruce Aylward, to testify.

We know the minister and her government support the World Health Organization with Canadian taxpayer money.

Madam Chair, does the minister believe the World Health Organization should allow Dr. Aylward to testify?

• (1325)

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There's not much time left. I will allow the minister to respond.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Madam Chair, we fully support the independent nature of House of Commons committees.

Mr. Len Webber: What specific actions—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): We will go to the honourable member for Flamborough—Glanbrook, Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I just want to join my colleagues in sending our condolences and prayers to Captain Casey's family as well as our prayers for a speedy recovery to Captain MacDougall and, of course, our hearts go out to the whole Royal Canadian Air Force.

Madam Chair, last week the finance committee heard from the Auditor General that his office had been severely constrained, and today, the newly nominated AG stated the same at committee. What measures are being taken to correct this lack of accountability and transparency?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Madam Chair, I'm happy to take that question.

We continue to support the Auditor General. We are of course pleased to have a new Auditor General being appointed, and we will look forward to working with her to make sure that her good work can continue.

Mr. David Sweet: Madam Chair, four audits have been delayed to 2021 and six others are incomplete at a time when we have unprecedented federal spending, rocketing deficits and debt. Canadians want a commitment to accountability now. How will the minister demonstrate this?

Hon. Joyce Murray (Minister of Digital Government): Madam Chair, if the Auditor General identifies a need for addition-

al resources, we will work with the Office of the Auditor General to ensure that the office has the resources to continue fulfilling its mandate efficiently and effectively. Our government worked with the Auditor General to increase funding levels in 2018-19, and they were able to add the equivalent of 38 new full-time staff to their team.

Mr. David Sweet: Madam Chair, the Office of the Auditor General has already requested \$10.8 million in funding to meet the new demand that this government has placed upon them, and the newly appointed Auditor General today at committee was clear that this previous funding was all eaten up by IT improvements to very dated equipment.

Now what they're asking for is six one-thousandths of a percentage point of the federal COVID-19 spending. When will the government give Canadian taxpayers the assurance that the Auditor General's office will be properly funded?

Hon. Joyce Murray: Madam Chair, as I mentioned, our government is fully committed to supporting the important and ongoing work of the Auditor General, who is an independent officer of Parliament. We will work with the Auditor General's office to ensure they have the resources they need to fulfill the very important mandate they have on behalf of Canadians.

Mr. David Sweet: Madam Chair, no Auditor General has ever come to Parliament complaining of a lack of funding until now, and today the newly nominated AG was saying the same thing, that they require more sustainable, predictable funding.

When will that be available? It's very clear what they need. When will the minister deliver it?

Hon. Joyce Murray: Madam Chair, I appreciate the concern of the member from the Conservative Party, but he should recall that major cuts to the Auditor General's office happened when the Conservatives were in government, and our government committed to restoring that funding, and increased funding levels, and we continue to be respectful of the Auditor—

Mr. David Sweet: Madam Chair, apparently the minister did not hear me. No Auditor General has ever come to Parliament complaining of lack of funding. Any past reduction was done in consultation and with the agreement of the Auditor General's office. While health care workers, grocery store workers, prison guards and more have been hard at work, the government refuses to allow the official opposition to bring back to the chamber a reduced number of members to demonstrate the commitment to accountability. Now the Auditor General's office is crippled as well.

Does the minister not agree that this is looking more and more like an untenable double standard?

• (1330)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Madam Chair, as my colleague says, the role of Parliament and parliamentarians is fundamental for the government. So is respecting the advice and rules from Health Canada, so we're trying to look for a balance, and this is what we have through the events like today, or physically in the House tomorrow.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Carol Hughes): There are 17 seconds left, Mr. Sweet. Be very quick.

Mr. David Sweet: Madam Chair, our farmers are facing unprecedented challenges. Is the minister concerned that this will impact the Canadian food supply?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Compton—Stanstead, Lib.): Madam Chair, we are lucky in Canada to have a very strong food supply chain and we are collaborating very well with our trading partners as well as with the farmers all across the country.

The Chair: We will now go to Ms. Atwin.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, GP): Mr. Chair, I recently spoke with the leadership of the Native Women's Association of Canada, and they do not feel heard within this government. They are frustrated by the red tape in funding applications, with colonial criteria that leave them either without operational funding or without infrastructure funding, depending on the stream.

Their disappointment with being left out of critical discussions was also expressed in a letter to the Prime Minister in March.

In light of the one-year anniversary of the release of the report "Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls", and considering the recent spike in indigenous women experiencing violence due to COVID-19, would the minister commit to direct, solid core funding for the Native Women's Association of Canada?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): I thank the member for her question and her ongoing advocacy for not only first nations but also indigenous women and girls.

I think the member will be pleased to hear that when we signed the accord with the Native Women's Association last February, we understood their need for stable, predictable funding and increased the core organizational capacity at that time.

In that accord, they received \$3.1 million in the first year and \$2.1 million in each of the successive years, to a total of \$7.3 million. We also are very grateful that we have received their contribution to the national action plan on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls—

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: I thank the minister for that response.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to switch gears as well. On May 17, we joined our voices to support the 2SLGBTQIA rights during the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia.

In a statement on that day, the Prime Minister said that this community continues to face stigma and discrimination for simply being themselves.

In 2015 a promise was made to Canadians to put an end to the policy prohibiting men who have intimate relations with other men from donating blood. While it is true that the temporary ban period

has been reduced, this shorter ban period has not had a real impact on the ability to give blood with dignity, and the policy in place remains a discriminatory one.

Mr. Chair, can the minister clarify why this discriminatory legislation has not yet been repealed and when all men, regardless of who they love, will also be allowed to save lives by giving blood?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, thanks to our efforts over the years, Canada has one of the safest blood systems in the world, and it is supported by evidence-based policy. That is why earlier this year we approved the Canadian Blood Services and Héma-Québec's request to reduce the deferral period for donation to three months for men who have had sex with other men. This is a significant step toward eliminating the deferral period and moving to a behaviour-based model.

[Translation]

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Mr. Chair, the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta is making a heartfelt plea with its *Sauvons Saint-Jean* campaign. The University of Alberta's Campus Saint-Jean is the only French-language post-secondary institution in Alberta.

Campus Saint-Jean is in financial straits owing to chronic underfunding. It may be forced to close. We must continue to support the dreams of students as they fulfill their potential in whichever language they choose.

Can the minister confirm today that the federal government will step in to help the Franco-Albertan community and save an institution that is a pillar for western Canada's francophones? After all, the government did the same for Franco-Ontarians in the case of Université de l'Ontario français.

• (1335)

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the member for her important question. I'd also like to thank her for helping to champion language rights in the country.

Our two official languages are clearly important, and we still need to do more to promote official languages. We must stand up to protect official languages in institutions that are at the heart of minority language communities and their vitality.

I had a productive conversation with the dean of Campus Saint-Jean, Pierre-Yves Mocuais, and the president of the Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, Sheila Risbud. We are in the process of gaining a clear understanding of the problem so we can look for lasting solutions.

I look forward to discussing it further with the member at a later time.

[English]

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Mr. Chair, my final question will be for the Minister of Finance. When can we expect to see the updated budget?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I have to apologize. I was changing from the French to the English and I missed the question in English.

The Chair: Ms. Atwin, could you repeat your question? It was a brief one.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: My pleasure.

For the Minister of Finance, through you, Mr. Chair: When can we expect the updated budget?

Hon. Bill Morneau: We are trying our best to be very transparent with all the measures we are putting forward. As the economy becomes more stable, we will endeavour to make sure that we have a fuller understanding for Canadians.

The Chair: The next question goes to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): The commercial rent assistance program is supposed to provide much-needed support for small businesses so they can survive the pandemic. By only allowing landlords with a mortgage to apply for it, the Liberals show they are less concerned about supporting small businesses than ensuring that big banks get their mortgage payments. Surely, the Liberals know that Bay Street is not the target here.

Will the minister eliminate the mortgage requirement and allow small businesses to apply instead of landlords?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we do see that this emergency rent approach will be very helpful for small businesses and landlords. We have come out and said that we will be providing more information to allow those landlords without mortgages to be part of this program. We are looking forward to providing more details so this can work for Canadian small businesses.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: At the moment, the reality is that not one small business in the Chinatown parkade in my riding is eligible for the commercial rent subsidy, and they're not alone. Representatives from the Hastings-North BIA tell me that small businesses there are also struggling. Even the landlords are saying they should not be the ones applying for the rent subsidy, and they all want the mortgage requirement eliminated.

It is absurd that the Prime Minister will bail out big companies that use tax havens, but he won't help out these small mom and pop shops. When will the minister realize that small businesses are the economic engines in all of our communities and fix the program so that small businesses can get the help they need?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we are very much trying to ensure that small businesses are in a strong position. The emergency business account we announced this morning will be expanded to encompass and be available for more businesses, which is important. There will be more information on the emergency rent approach, which of course we're trying to work together on with the provinces, since it is within provincial jurisdiction. As with all of our programs, we will endeavour to make sure that they are improved as we go along, recognizing the challenges this emergency is presenting us.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Time is of the essence, Minister, and repeating the same message week after week will not change a thing, but stopping bailouts for big corporations using tax havens will.

In addition to small businesses, municipalities and public entities are also struggling. TransLink had to cut services and laid off 1,500 workers.

The PNE, after 110 years, will not survive the pandemic if it can't get some help. If it doesn't, it would mean a permanent loss of 125 full-time and 1,600 part-time workers, not to mention a loss of an additional 2,500 summer jobs for young students. Will the minister do what is necessary to save the PNE, or will he just turn a blind eye and let this 110-year-old institution die?

• (1340)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I would like to thank the member opposite for her very important question.

Our government is absolutely aware of the essential role municipalities play every day, and particularly of the essential role they will play as we are all looking toward restarting the economy.

As the member opposite suggested, public transit is an essential part of the work municipalities do. At the FMM meeting, over the phone last week with the Prime Minister and the first ministers, the Prime Minister did discuss the need to support municipalities and for provinces to really work with the municipalities and with us to ensure that our municipalities are able to be part of a successful relaunch of the Canadian economy.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Support for them is essential. I hope the government will act.

The B.C. government has an aggressive acquisition strategy to address the homelessness crisis. To start, it purchased a Comfort Inn last week. Did the federal government provide any support to the B.C. government for this acquisition?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, we have provided additional money in the amount of \$157.5 million to municipalities and community entities across the country to use in a flexible manner to deal with the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic and the homeless population.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The truth is that the federal government failed to provide one dime for the purchase of the Comfort Inn. Surely the minister realizes that he cannot carry on business as usual. COVID-19 has exposed how we are failing the most vulnerable. More than ever, we need a national housing acquisition strategy. Will the minister fund a new stimulus package to address the homelessness crisis?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, the amounts of money that we have provided to community entities are in addition to the regular funding that we provide on an annual basis, and we trust the community entities to respond in the local circumstances. The member opposite must know that it is the community entities that make the best decisions based on their local circumstances.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, it's your turn. You may go ahead.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to begin by extending my sincere condolences to the loved ones of Captain Jennifer Casey.

Now, I'll turn to my questions. The Bloc Québécois has repeatedly asked the government to provide assistance to seniors. I have even travelled to Ottawa three times since the beginning of the crisis to question ministers. Last week, the federal government finally announced that seniors receiving old age security would get a \$300 payment and those eligible for the guaranteed income supplement would receive an additional \$200.

However, a lot of unknowns remain. Will the assistance be taxable or not? Will it be included in the old age security pension or come in the form of a refundable tax credit? Can the government provide some clarification and tell us when seniors will get their cheques?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to clarify any conditions that are not clear. It's a one-time, tax-free payment made to OAS and GIS recipients. This is in addition to a previous payment that was done through the GIS top-up, which, again, went directly into the accounts of low- and moderate-income Canadians, including seniors.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: There is another unknown. The government said that the assistance would be retroactive. If that's the case, will it go back to March 15? Will it cover three months, which would take us to mid-June? What happens after that? Could seniors still be confined this summer without the support they usually receive, perhaps for months? Do they have reason to worry, or can the government assure them that this assistance will continue beyond mid-June so they can meet their needs?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: I just want to make it clear: These are one-time payments. First, in April, low- and moderate-income seniors would have received the GIS top-up in their bank accounts. We saw that more was required as the pandemic was extending, so we have now provided another benefit to those getting the guaranteed income supplement and also to those getting old age security. It's a one-time, tax-free payment that will be coming soon. Just to put it in perspective, if you take a guaranteed-income-supplement couple and you take the two benefits the government has provided, it's \$1,500.

• (1345)

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Doesn't the government think that opting for a temporary measure sends the message that the problem is temporary and, therefore, that the situation facing seniors is acceptable in the current crisis?

Why is the measure temporary? Does the government intend to take more permanent action such as enhancing the old age security pension?

Seniors' financial circumstances certainly weren't acceptable before the crisis and won't be any more so after the crisis. Prices will keep going up for seniors as well, whether it's the cost of groceries, delivery services, home care, drugs or rent, and that's not all.

Will the government be keeping its election promise to raise the old age security pension?

[English]

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much again for giving me the opportunity to clarify any confusion.

The government remains committed to implementing the policies in our platform. However, at this time we are focused on providing support to seniors enduring the COVID-19 public health crisis. We provided financial support to seniors sooner through the GST top-up and the OAS and GIS payments. This provides support for seniors of all ages that is comparable for many, and is greater for the most vulnerable. This year we're investing over twice as much in financial assistance to seniors as we committed in our platform. That's \$3.8 billion, compared with the \$1.56 billion in our platform. Seniors needed our help, and we've taken action sooner and have delivered.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, you have time for a very short question.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Does the minister acknowledge that, once the government increases the pension, it will also have to increase the guaranteed income supplement accordingly so no senior is penalized in 2021?

[English]

The Chair: The honourable minister, in 15 seconds or less, please.

Hon. Deb Schulte: What I'm saying is that those who are on the GIS already or who get a GIS amount from the government did receive a top-up. Those who are on old age security and guaranteed income will be receiving this one-time tax-free payment soon.

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

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): I've received an email from a commercial landlord in my riding of Dufferin—Caledon, and the email says, "Commercial rent relief is just a headache for people like me. Why do I have to apply? It's not my problem. The tenant needs to pay."

Mr. Chair, why has this program been designed such that only landlords can apply, and if they refuse to apply, they can still demand the rent from their commercial tenants?

Hon. Bill Morneau: As the member may know, the tenant and landlord relationship is one that has provincial jurisdiction. We decided to move forward in co-operation with the provinces, providing the lion's share of funding for a program that would allow us to provide support to small businesses and also to landlords to get through this time of crisis.

We're looking forward to providing more details on this program, recognizing that it needs to be part of our broader approach to providing loans and to providing wage subsidies and emergency response benefits for businesses and for people.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: That doesn't actually answer the question. By putting all of the burden on the landlord or all of the privilege on the landlord, whether they choose to apply for this rent subsidy or not, they are putting small businesses in this country in serious jeopardy. These are small businesses that have shut down their businesses and have lost all their revenue for what is now going on two months, and their landlord is saying effectively, "We're not applying for this program. Pay up."

Why won't they change the conditions of the program to allow for tenants to apply directly for the rent? They could covenant or undertake to guarantee that they would use that money to pay the landlord.

When landlords are behaving badly, why are we not helping small business tenants?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned, we are working through the approach we have with the federal government tool, which is the mortgage system, of course looking to the provinces to be part of this as well.

We do know that there are other supports that are important. The emergency business account is particularly important. Over 600,000 loans of \$40,000 have been applied for and approved.

We'll continue to work with small businesses. We are looking forward to take-up by landlords of this emergency rent program and would encourage that to move forward to support businesses and landlords.

• (1350)

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Mr. Chair, I am of course encouraging landlords in my riding to apply for this program. That is something I consider one of my duties as a member of Parliament. However, there are some who are clearly, based on this email, not going to do it.

My question for the minister is fairly simple. Will he change the program to allow for tenants to apply for rent relief if their landlord refuses to do so, yes or no?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we will always be looking at the programs we are putting forward in order to make sure they are working. We've made changes as we've moved along.

In this program, we have chosen an approach whereby we are actually able to get funding through the landlord. That will be the ap-

proach on this, but we will be open to looking at how we can make sure it works.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Right now, I can tell you it's not working. This is not one isolated incident. I receive emails and telephone calls on a daily basis from small businesses that are commercial tenants whose landlords are not applying for this program.

I'm asking, Minister, whether you will provide now some certainty that you will examine this, provide a timeline for when you will examine this, and provide an answer for these tenants so they can have some certainty. Is there a timeline for when you will look to change this program? It's been two months. They need the help now, not in another two months.

The Chair: I want to remind the honourable members to place their questions through the chair and not directly to the person they're asking.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, again, I'd like to thank the member. We're all trying to work hard to make sure that we support small businesses. The small business loan through the business account, as I mentioned, has been particularly important. We're looking forward to providing more details on this program that have not yet been fully disclosed and which, we hope, will help landlords and tenants work together to make it work.

The Chair: Mr. Seeback, you have 30 seconds for a very quick question, please.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: I'm asking again, what is the timeline for this commitment to relook at this program so these tenants can have some hope at the end of the tunnel? Getting into more debt is not the answer for them. Is there a timeline that you will look at for changing this program so that tenants can apply when landlords refuse to, so that their businesses don't go under?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, again, I do want to thank the member for his question and assure him that we are always looking to support small businesses. We're encouraging landlords to avail themselves of this program and encouraging them to work together with their commercial tenants to provide the relief.

Of course, provinces need to step forward as well, and that's why we recognize that we all need to work together to support these small businesses.

The Chair: That's all the time we have for today. I want to thank everyone.

[*Translation*]

That was quite pleasant and very professional. Thank you again.

The meeting is adjourned. See you tomorrow at noon.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>