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# Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina





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• (1835)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

I start by acknowledging that I am meeting with you on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonton first nations.

The committee is meeting today to consider the supplementary estimates (B), 2020-21.

Remember to select the language of your choice at the bottom of the screen for the interpretation version that you wish: “Floor”, “English” or “French”.

With us today by video conference for the first hour is Minister of Indigenous Services Marc Miller, accompanied by the following senior officials: Christiane Fox, the deputy minister; Valerie Gideon, the associate deputy minister; Mary-Luisa Kapelus, the assistant deputy minister; Chad Westmacott, director general; and Philippe Thompson, chief of finances.

Welcome, everyone. It's time for Minister Miller to make his opening statements. We allow six minutes for that opening statement.

Minister, please go ahead.

**Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Indigenous Services):** Thank you, Chair.

*Kwe. Unnusakkut. Boohzoo.* Good evening.

I am speaking to you this evening from the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, I'm pleased to join you virtually today.

I also want to note the presence, as the chair did, of Christiane Fox, deputy minister; Valerie Gideon, associate deputy minister; and the senior officials from Indigenous Services Canada named by the chair.

[*Translation*]

I appear before the committee today knowing that, despite these very difficult days, we continue to make great strides in reducing socio-economic gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. In these unprecedented times, we must not fail in our commitment to reconciliation or our efforts to address the inequality experienced by indigenous peoples.

Colonial practices and decades of inequality and discrimination have compounded the challenges faced by indigenous communities during the pandemic. Once again, we have witnessed the tremendous resilience and determination of indigenous communities and leaders all over the country, both during the first wave and now in the midst of the second.

As of November 18, we can confirm that there are 1,170 active cases of COVID-19 in on-reserve first nations communities, for a total of 2,890 confirmed cases. Of that number, 1,668 people have recovered and, unfortunately, 22 have died.

Nunavut has 70 confirmed positive cases. Nunavik, in Quebec, has 29 confirmed positive cases. Nunavik has one active case, and the rest of those affected have recovered. Nunatsiavut, however, has no confirmed positive cases at the moment.

Lastly, the Northwest Territories have 15 confirmed positive cases and 10 cases in which people have recovered, for a total of 25 confirmed positive cases. The Yukon has 25 confirmed positive cases, 22 of which are people who have recovered.

I remain convinced that, thanks to first nations, Inuit and Métis leadership during this crisis, lives will continue to be saved as the appropriate measures are taken and support is made available to community members.

[*English*]

I will now turn to the topic of today's hearing, which is closely related to the pandemic response.

These supplementary estimates include total authorities for Indigenous Services Canada in 2020-21 of \$16.3 billion, a historical high in line with these unprecedented times. They reflect a net increase of \$1.8 billion.

Of that \$1.8 billion in new funding, \$1.1 billion in both voted and statutory appropriations, or approximately 60%, is related to various COVID-19 responses, measures that have been integral to our response to date.

Most of the remaining funds, including \$740 million in vote 10 grants and contributions, are providing further support to indigenous businesses impacted by COVID-19 as well as to maintain essential services through the non-insured health benefits program, child and family services, Jordan's principle and long-term care engagement.

Key programs and initiatives included in these estimates directly linked to addressing the impacts of COVID-19 include \$305 million for the first wave of the indigenous community support fund, allocated directly to indigenous communities off-reserve or to urban indigenous service delivery organizations that were so key in fighting the first wave.

There is an amount of \$298.3 million to address the specific needs of indigenous businesses impacted by COVID-19; \$245.4 million in funding for a safe restart and reopening and for health and safety measures for schools and child care centres on reserve; \$105.9 million to support students and youth, primarily delivered through the post-secondary education program and first nations and Inuit youth employment strategy; \$82.5 million in support of surge capacity and adaptation of indigenous mental wellness services; and finally, \$75 million for first nations, Inuit and Métis businesses and indigenous businesses in the tourism sector, which has been hit so hard.

To continue our effort to support children and families, \$240.9 million has been assigned to child and family services in these supplementary estimates.

I will close by saying that while our commitment to sustained attention and action to address the challenges faced by first nations, Inuit and Métis during this pandemic will be maintained over the course of the next several months, we're not losing sight of the broader need to advance on our government's and Canada's shared priorities with indigenous leaders. These include infrastructure; supports for children, women and families; health legislation and transformation; new fiscal relationships; economic development; and the recent universal broadband fund announcement, under which \$50 million will be dedicated to mobile Internet projects that primarily benefit indigenous peoples.

As COVID-19 continues to progress, we will continue to do everything in our power to ensure that indigenous peoples have all the supports they need to protect their health and safety in both the immediate and the long term.

I am encouraged to say that tomorrow, along with the Prime Minister, we will be announcing support on this matter in light of the various surges, notably across the Prairies.

I look forward to taking your questions.

*Meegwetch, nakurmiik, merci, thank you.*

● (1840)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Our first round of questioners, for six minutes, are Gary Vidal, Marcus Powlowski, Madame Bérubé, who is not yet with us.

If she's still not here, we'll move to Ms. Blaney and hope that Ms. Bérubé—

**Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC):** She is in the committee room here, Mr. Chair.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Naaman Sugrue):** She is here now.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you very much. Great. Everybody is here.

Mr. Vidal, please go ahead, for six minutes.

**Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank Mr. Miller and his team for being here.

As I've said before, I know your worlds are very busy, and we appreciate your time.

Mr. Miller, it seems that you and I have had this conversation too many times over the last few months, with a serious outbreak in northern Saskatchewan.

I want to ask you about another serious outbreak we have, this time in the Athabasca region, and particularly in the Fond du Lac community where, according to a call I was on yesterday, they had 49 active cases and 233 people on their contact lists.

To add to that, they have a very significant water treatment plant issue. They had a breakdown of some pumps and whatnot in their water plant. Obviously, in a fly-in community, that's putting the front-line health workers and the whole community at a pretty significant risk, when they're trying to do swabs and make health calls and at the same time can't wash their hands in the middle of a pandemic.

I also had the opportunity to discuss this situation with the vice-chief of the P.A. Grand Council yesterday. We were on a conference call with the people from these communities yesterday, and you could hear the desperation in their voices. You could hear the trouble they're experiencing.

My question is pretty simple. What is the department doing to provide the leadership of these communities and the health care workers and the people in these communities with the help they need right away?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Thank you.

Gary, thank you for your question, and thank you for the briefings you took with my team to keep you up to date in real time about what is going on. Again, I'm willing personally to do it if you reach out.

I did have a chance to speak to Chief Louie Mercredi yesterday to ensure that he was getting the service that was due in this time of crisis. He identified a number of issues. The ones you identified, particularly the shutdown of the water services, is exceedingly alarming, for the reasons you mentioned. There are ways to work around it, but it's obviously unacceptable that this is the status quo.

There were talks about some pieces that would have taken a little longer to get into the community. We've accelerated that, in particular in relation to the pump and the service to the plant. Up to now, we're confident that it is either in the community today or will be tomorrow, with work being done to make sure that the water comes back on.

We've been assured that they do have enough water and we've ensured that they've had supplies of water shipped into the community. That's key, but so is the pandemic response. As you've alluded to, part of tracking down COVID is ensuring that those people you are doing contract tracing on are identified with very short delay, or else you just expand the number of people that positive cases come into contact with. We are hopeful that not all of those 200-plus contact cases will be positive, but we can't take anything for granted.

As part of that, we're assisting in enhanced PPE and enhanced resources. The chief recently expressed concern with respect to food security, and we've employed some financial resources to assist with that on an immediate basis. Our teams are working around the clock in those communities that are affected.

Sadly, I suspect that these conversations you and I will be having on that response will continue. We're not through this second wave by any stretch of the imagination. If you look at the numbers that I identified in the introduction, they're essentially four times the total numbers that affected indigenous communities in the first wave. Therefore, this is hitting indigenous communities hard. The role I have, along with other ministers in government, is to deploy resources and funds as quickly as possible and allow communities to implement those pandemic response plans that they've been so good at implementing up to now.

• (1845)

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you.

I want to ask you a couple of really quick questions, because time flies here in our six-minute segments.

Are there actual adequate testing machines and supplies in this community to do the rapid testing, and are they getting the results back in a very quick manner?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Things could always be more expedient, but we have deployed resources into the community.

If Valerie Gideon is on the line, I'd perhaps allow her to talk about the specific assets in the communities at this time.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Ms. Gideon, if you would, just a quick response, please. I really want to get to some other things.

**Ms. Valerie Gideon (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services):** Absolutely.

I think we are ensuring that they have the necessary supplies and access to testing. So far, we've provided over \$3 million and will continue to provide support to the community as is needed.

**The Chair:** Gary, you have one minute. Go ahead.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Thank you.

Minister, I'm going to shift gears quickly.

I'm also hearing today from another first nation, not in my riding but just on the edge of my riding, the James Smith Cree Nation, where they're having a bit of an outbreak. They're locking down their communities.

I talked to the chief today, and he expressed a very significant level of frustration with his interaction with the department. He expressed a concern about not getting answers to questions and not

being engaged. They have not had any meaningful response or dialogue from the minister and from the department to address their requests and they remain without PPE to protect their community.

Can you maybe explain, in the time you have left, why this chief would feel that he has such frustration and lack of response?

**The Chair:** Do it briefly, please.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** It's very hard to speculate on precisely the concern without speaking together. We've had a number of conversations, organized by FSIN, with the chief in question. We do have numerous amounts of medical-purpose PPE that have been sent into the community to assist them with their needs, and we will assist them throughout this and their lockdown.

We've had a number of exchanges of letters. They've had a Canada-wide request to distribute PPE. It is a complex matter of significant financial proportions that would exceed what their community has requested for their own purposes and needs. It's an initiative that we are looking at and continue to look at internally, but it is something that I will do with the chief in question.

**The Chair:** Thanks very much, Minister.

Mr. Powlowski, it's your turn. You have six minutes for your questioning.

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.):** Thank you.

A lot of the supplementary estimates money is going to the COVID response. So far in northwestern Ontario, there hasn't been a substantial number of cases in the indigenous community, but I think it's pretty inevitable that this is going to change, since we seem to be in the process of an outbreak at the moment. I think we've had something like 100 cases in the last week, whereas we were getting one or two cases per week up until then.

Certainly there's a concern that it's going to spread to first nations communities, many of them in Mr. Melillo's riding, like the Nishnawbe Aski Nation communities, the NAN communities, but Thunder Bay is the conduit. People fly from Thunder Bay to those communities. A lot of the medical services are in Thunder Bay. If for whatever reason people come down to Thunder Bay, get it and go back to those communities, there's certainly a concern.

You're probably not going to be able to answer my first question because it's a medical question, but I found your numbers interesting. I think you said that so far in first nations communities, there have been 28 deaths and over 1,700 cases. This is somewhat reassuring, because there was a concern that in the indigenous communities the death rate would be above the national average, especially based on the fact that H1N1, an influenza, seemed to hit those communities particularly hard, with higher rates of mortality.

From the experience so far, is the mortality rate higher in the indigenous community than in the non-indigenous community? That was the first question.

If there is an answer to that, my second question is, what have we done to try to protect those communities? They have largely, shut down, but the risk has certainly gone up as of the last couple of weeks.

● (1850)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Members will note that a Liberal member has posed a question that he knows I can't answer with the proper expertise. I think during this pandemic, those of us who are called upon to act quickly have all become armchair epidemiologists and have been diving into some of the numbers.

What we do see when we look at comparables in the U.S. is that indigenous communities there are being hit 3.5 to 5 times more, if you look at Alaska, than the already soaring rates that exist in the U.S. If you look at the numbers from the first wave, they're much lower in comparison to those among non-indigenous Canadians. It's not really something we look at so we can pat ourselves on the back. Particularly when we look at how severely the second wave is hitting, we're still under the national non-indigenous averages, but what we are seeing is really, really dangerous. The trends are alarming in a number of ways.

We know about the leadership and work that's been done in indigenous communities, most notably on reserves, to shut down and take these things seriously. Indigenous people have faced historic epidemics over time. Tuberculosis is not only present but still fresh in their minds in the communities that have been hit in the recent past. The Inuit still have rates that are 300 times the national average, and they're 60 times higher in first nations communities. There's also pulmonary disease, with very much the same symptoms and the same comorbidities. Overcrowding in housing has been a source of that. These things aren't going away because of the pandemic, and the risk still remains.

The alarming numbers that I see are now in urban areas in Manitoba, where you see higher rates of hospitalizations and higher rates of people in intensive care who are indigenous. That is very alarming to me. It challenges the borders of our effective capacity of execution in our jurisdiction in Indigenous Services Canada, which is to help the urban populations that are hit harder.

Now, there are things that have been done well. Communities have stepped up. We've supported them with funds. We know about COVID as it's developing, but we're not out of the woods yet. There is no magic to keeping COVID out of the community. When people let their guards down, mostly at emotional events like funerals and weddings or at large social gatherings, COVID will hit and

hit hard, and it will affect indigenous populations in a disproportionate fashion.

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski:** Minister, for someone who's not a doctor, you did a very excellent job—far better than I would have managed.

What about the second part, the preparation for those NAN communities?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** We work with NAN, and Grand Chief Fidler in particular. We know the challenges that NAN communities face. The one that will probably be raised is the water advisories. If we look at the wellness indexes that we track across Indigenous Services Canada through the wellness survey, we know that those communities face a number of disproportionate inequalities. Not every community is the same, but this is the card we've had to deal with going into this.

I also note the hidden pandemic with respect to mental health. NAN has some really incredible initiatives that deal with that, but if you look at the mortalities that have occurred in the NAN area, more have occurred from suicide than from COVID.

Therefore, there are challenges that remain, but they start and end with co-operation through, first and foremost, local leadership, but also through regional organizations, and in this case, as you've named, NAN.

● (1855)

**The Chair:** You're right on time. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Good evening, Ms. Bérubé.

You have six minutes. You may go ahead.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Minister Miller.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the council of Gespeg has taken the necessary measures to reduce the impact of the crisis on its members. However, like many other communities in similar situations, the community of Gespeg was shut out of government support programs.

That is still the case, so should the government introduce programs that fairly and more effectively address all the needs of communities, to give all indigenous people access to supports?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Thank you, Ms. Bérubé.

Another layer of the challenge I was describing concerns urban indigenous communities. We provided funding to the Gespeg nation to address many of its needs. Whether a community is covered by an agreement or not, whether a community is located in an urban area or not, our goal is the same. All indigenous communities deserve appropriate high-quality health care, something they have been denied for far too long—well before the pandemic. We are endeavouring to do what is needed to keep COVID-19 out of communities.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** There is something else you can do to stimulate the economies of indigenous communities, and it really wouldn't cost the government a penny more. All you have to do is ensure indigenous communities and businesses receive their fair share of government contracts.

What are you doing to ensure communities have access to government contracts?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** You are referring implicitly to the 2019 throne speech and the 5% target. It was in either the throne speech or Minister Anand's mandate letter. I am actually meeting with Ms. Anand and Minister Duclos in the next few days to see what the federal government can do to make sure indigenous businesses receive their fair share of federal procurement spending—5%. That isn't happening now. It's very uneven. The target applies to not just Indigenous Services Canada, but also all departments.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** You brought up the COVID-19 cases affecting communities all over the country. Nunavik's case count is growing. At first it had two, and now the number of cases stands at 29, if I'm not mistaken.

Have you put out an alert? Do the people there have the resources they need to stave off a second wave more serious than the first?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** We are maintaining our commitment. Today I spoke with Natan Obed about the specific needs of Inuit, including those in Nunavik. We are putting together a funding package tomorrow for Nunavut, which is experiencing a major increase in cases, as we've seen on the news. In my opening statement, I mentioned that it had 70 confirmed positive cases, and I fear that the number is going to rise.

We are committed to working closely with the Quebec government to provide appropriate medical resources and funding to Nunavik or the Nunavut government.

• (1900)

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you.

You have good co-operation with the community chiefs in northern Quebec.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I have very good co-operation with the supporters and the communities that have signed territorial arrangements. We can always improve our relationship to streamline feedback and resource deployment. I hope it's not too bold of me to say that we have a very good relationship.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have one minute.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** I want to follow up on Nunavik. In Eeyou Istchee, little development is happening in light of the pandemic. There is little support for air transportation or roadways. Winter is fast approaching in our neck of the woods.

What steps can you take to avert disaster in those areas, with the second wave on its way?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** That's a very pertinent question for the entire country. Regional air transportation is an essential service. We have allocated a number of funding envelopes for that purpose. You brought up Nunavik. Discussions with the Quebec government are necessary to ensure the continuity of air transportation in the Inuit territories affected. Discussions with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador are also necessary.

Since the crisis began, we have been working to keep air service going and supply communities with essential goods, especially medical equipment. We want to make sure small air carriers that are struggling financially can survive. There are numbers to back this up, but I don't have them with me.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you. We'll end it there.

We're moving on to Ms. Blaney now, and we'll perhaps pick up those numbers later, Minister.

Ms. Blaney, please go ahead for six minutes.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, and your team, for being here with us this evening.

Minister, yesterday, in response to the question I asked in question period about systemic racism in health care, the Prime Minister said that your government is working on indigenous health care legislation, and he believes this will assist with racism.

When we can look forward to seeing this legislation?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Thank you, MP Blaney.

First, I'd like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your appointment, as well as the recent briefing with my team on Bill C-92, which I know is near and dear to everyone's heart on this committee.

This is an exceedingly difficult topic, and particularly because of what we've seen in the last month or so with respect to indigenous people. While it was a shock to non-indigenous people in Canada, it was not shocking, but a repeating pattern of a lived experience to indigenous people, who are treated badly and poorly and are subject to systemic racism across the health care system.

This is something that, as you well remember, was announced in the Speech from the Throne. COVID, again, like many things, has just exacerbated the reality.

In terms of putting forward health care legislation, we have to do this in proper consultation with indigenous communities. I have asked my team, conscious of the fact that we are operating in COVID times and have to observe physical distancing for people's health and well-being, to take the time to do the proper consultation with indigenous partners and treaty areas. A number of them have different perspectives on health needs and health engagement.

A number of the recommendations, as you'll recall, do exist in a number of reports. The one that comes to mind, obviously, is the Viens report. These issues are intermingled with jurisdictional challenges. The federal government has its role to play, which is unquestionable, but this is something we will need to do not only in partnership with indigenous people, first and foremost, but also in partnership with the provinces.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Okay, so there is no clear timeline, but you're working on it.

My next question for you is about the connected coast project, which aims to bring fibre optic Internet to the entire Canadian west coast, including dozens of unserved and underserved indigenous communities.

The universal broadband fund will cover 75% of the cost for last-mile infrastructure. If the department, depending on whether it's treaty or non-treaty, doesn't cover the final 25%, many of these communities will suffer. The province is planning to cover the 25% for non-indigenous communities. To me, it is another example of systemic racism for non-indigenous communities to be covered and indigenous communities not to be covered.

I'm wondering if I can get a commitment that the department will cover the 25% to ensure that these communities finally have Internet access and can be brought closer to equity.

• (1905)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Ms. Blaney, I'll respond to your conclusion, from before you asked your question, on the timing of the legislation. While it is perhaps the prerogative of the federal government to decide when to introduce this type of legislation, it really will be indigenous communities, after our consultations, that will guide that timeline. I think this is always important to remember, and I know you know that.

On the question with respect to broadband, this is a portfolio that falls under the responsibility of Minister Monsef. I would note that in the announcement by the Prime Minister, \$100 million is reserved for indigenous communities—

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I'm actually talking more specifically. I understand that the 75% is with Minister Monsef. The limit is the 25%. The province has already stepped up and said it will fulfill that 25% in partnership with the federal government to make sure that non-indigenous communities get Internet accessibility.

What I'm asking is whether this department will acknowledge that it needs to work with indigenous communities to make sure that the 25% gap is covered.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I am agreeing with you when I say we have to work with indigenous communities to identify their broadband needs and prioritize them when they are identified as priorities.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Therefore, there is no commitment to supporting them to make sure they get the final 25%. Even looking into this would be so helpful to the many indigenous communities that I serve in my riding.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I'm absolutely glad to look into this. These issues are raised constantly and are, as I mentioned earlier with respect to health care legislation, exacerbated by COVID. Students in particular have been asked to study at home, and this isn't necessarily a function of remoteness, although that does pose a challenge.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I can tell you that in one community in particular in my riding it was a matter of metres, and because Indigenous Services would not step up to pick that up, the community bordering the indigenous community got Internet accessibility and the reserve that was right there, across the bridge, did not.

This is the challenge, and I'm hoping that your department will look into it, because if this is not addressed, indigenous communities across this region will not get access while all communities around them will. To me, this is another explicit example of systems failing indigenous people, which is systemic racism.

My time is done.

**The Chair:** Thanks very much, Ms. Blaney, and you are right on time too.

Mr. Viersen, you have five minutes for your first round of questioning.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. I appreciate it. I don't quite know where you are right now, but it's a little weird to talk to an empty room.

Across this country, we've seen first nations communities step up to deal with COVID, but there are a number of other issues being dealt with across the country. I'm thinking in particular about the Mi'kmaq fishermen and the non-indigenous fishermen.

Minister, about a month ago, you made some comments about the RCMP letting down New Brunswickers. I'm just wondering if you could clarify that.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** You'd have to clarify your question, MP Viersen. My comment about the RCMP letting down indigenous communities wasn't about New Brunswick.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Was it Nova Scotia?



**Hon. Marc Miller:** Yes, it was about communities in Nova Scotia, and particularly the assault on Chief Sack and, two days later, the burning of a fish plant.

I think what everyone saw, and what indigenous communities have seen time and time again, is police services failing to serve them. You can look at the statistics, and I would direct everyone to the report by former justice Bastarache that came out today. I think it was quite clear insofar as it relates to indigenous peoples.

● (1910)

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** I would say, though, Minister, that the government has let down all Nova Scotians on this issue. This issue has been escalating for months, and I'm concerned that the government has failed to step in.

On the policing aspect of it, are you the minister responsible for policing?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I am not.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Have you spoken to the minister who is responsible for policing?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I have.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Do you have a plan to ensure that the RCMP doesn't let down Nova Scotians again?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Again, my comments were made in relation to indigenous peoples feeling let down by—

**Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.):** I have a point of order, Chair. Is the minister not here on supplementary estimates? This is not in the estimates.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** I'll be getting to them shortly.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** But you're not right now.

**The Chair:** We'll take that as advice.

Please go ahead, Mr. Viersen. You have two minutes.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** As my question, Minister, have you spoken to the minister responsible for policing and has he come up with a plan?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** The answer is yes. Obviously I will not disclose cabinet confidences, but I will point the member to the Speech from the Throne, which I am sure he has read, and the four or five points dealing with policing therein.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Is there any requirement for your ministry to help with funding? Policing is considered a service across this country. Is there any requirement or will there be any proposals for your ministry to help fund this?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Actually, I appreciate that question, because Indigenous Services Canada does have that relationship with indigenous communities, and we obviously hear, from community members and leadership, about the need for policing as an essential service on numerous occasions, including today with partners from Treaty 7 wanting to be engaged in the consultation in and around police reform, and not only with respect to policing as an essential service.

I think when we say “essential service” for policing in indigenous communities, we should all reflect on the fact that we take our own policing services in non-indigenous communities for granted,

as they are not taken for granted in indigenous communities. It is a reflection of where we are as a country—but the answer, MP Viersen, is absolutely yes.

We can also examine, with indigenous communities and Minister Blair and his team, alternatives to policing, particularly when it comes to mental health interventions. I think a lot of the stuff we saw at the beginning of the year are areas where it might not be appropriate to have—

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Mr. Miller, what's—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Arnold, but we're out of time.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** You do that to me every time. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Well, you're right that when your time is up, I do in fact do it every time.

Ms. Zann, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

**Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.):** Thank you so much, Minister, for being here and making yourself available to us for all of these questions.

Yesterday, I had a really good meeting with CASA, the Canadian association of students, and they were telling me about some of the issues that indigenous students are facing. It is true that indigenous students and youth are another group of people who have been significantly impacted by COVID-19, and I want to commend them for being so resilient during this crisis.

Minister, could you please expand on the \$15.9 million for supporting first nations and Inuit students and youth? How many students and youth will this help? What is our government doing to support them during the COVID-19 pandemic?

● (1915)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Thank you so much for the question.

As schools were shut down at the very beginning of the pandemic, particularly given the vulnerabilities that I've highlighted earlier on, people were very worried about their children not only getting COVID but also being vectors of spread within the communities. The portrait of indigenous education across Canada is obviously not limited to the on-reserve reality of schools, although it is one reality, and we continue to build schools on reserves where they're requested and needed.

To that end, a month ago the Prime Minister announced, as part of the school support packages, \$112 million dedicated to helping kids go back to school as part of a safe return now. It should be an inescapable reality that there are enhanced needs with respect to communities that have taken the difficult decision to keep their kids at home. Not everyone can be plugged in to an iPad or a computer device to do online learning, so some of the supports we've given—for example, under Jordan's principle—have been precisely to give supports to indigenous students in communities that are keeping them at home.

There is also the reality that this has stressed the mental health of children. A lot of the funding support for the stress we see—funding on which the estimates touch—deals with that reality. It is bleak at times, but we're obviously there to help. Wherever communities see that need, we do our best to step in.

MP Blaney raised the issue of connectivity, and it isn't just the reality of remote communities necessarily. It is the reality, for example, in Six Nations, which is between Toronto and Brantford. It is a challenge across communities to deliver the quality service and quality education to which indigenous children are entitled. It is not one we've overcome completely yet, but we're working toward it.

We also have invested, as of October 30, about \$200 million in additional funding to provide education-related supports to indigenous peoples in the community. When it comes to the older students, if you recall, I believe in May the Prime Minister announced education supports to all Canadians, and about \$60 million or \$75 million was dedicated specifically to indigenous students. That's an important aspect of it. This is coupled with the supports for post-secondary institutions, which had been suffering up to now, that we announced a few weeks back.

**Ms. Lenore Zann:** Thank you for that. It was actually the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, as I should have said. Sorry about that.

Minister, I also want to ask about your supplementary estimates, particularly the \$240.9-million investment in funding for child and family services.

Could you please tell us how this funding will support the implementation of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's ruling, and what our government is doing to make sure that all children, including indigenous children, are safe and healthy, and that indigenous families remain together? That's very important.

**The Chair:** Minister, you have less than a minute. Go ahead.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** As a result of the rulings, with respect to which we continue to implement the support for children, \$200 million has been dedicated to supporting children and families. This is an ongoing challenge as we reform our approaches internally at Indigenous Services Canada to ensure substantive equality between indigenous and non-indigenous youth. We continue to implement those orders. We continue to work with the partners that continue to introduce claims, whether within the CHRT or through class actions, to ensure that we come to a resolution that properly compensates indigenous children.

With respect to the sums in question, they reflect an additional amount that was added to the larger amount of supports for indige-

nous children to ensure that we get to that goal, which is what all Canadians want to see.

**The Chair:** Before we go to Ms. Bérubé again, your mike could be bent a little closer to your mouth, Minister Miller. Interpretation thinks you could speak a little louder or have the mike a little closer.

With that in mind, Ms. Bérubé, you have two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Miller, we have seen that indigenous businesses are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, as compared with other businesses in Canada. The federal government rarely turns to indigenous businesses to procure goods and services, including those to address COVID-19.

When it comes to procurement spending, do you plan to turn to indigenous businesses more often?

• (1920)

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Since the pandemic began, indigenous businesses have been worse off. They have had trouble with financing, so we invested more than \$400 million to support local business. We also invested millions of dollars to support indigenous tourism.

Clearly, the role these businesses play in the communities can be a bit different. That is especially the case with the band council-run businesses, which often replace investments in the community. Their purpose is not necessarily to turn a profit. The challenges are numerous and multi-faceted, and we are prepared to do more because we do not know when the pandemic will end.

I can't thank you enough for that question. Although the communities do have access to the support measures that were announced for all of Canada, they have specificities that call for a direct response.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** You brought up tourism. Certainly, there hasn't been any with the roadblocks set up by the communities in order to protect themselves from COVID-19.

How did you help communities in that situation?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Minister, you have 15 seconds.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Marc Miller:** We took a number of steps, including investing \$16 million to support 640 indigenous tourism businesses. That investment was aimed specifically at helping them through this period.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Blaney, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I want to thank you, Minister, for committing to working with my office on this 25% gap. I'm really thankful for that. If our office can do anything, please let us know.

Minister, the last question I have for you this evening is based on what we heard in committee earlier this week. We were told by the aboriginal financial institutions and the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association that there was a certain level of frustration—extreme frustration, actually—because they had to wait two and a half months for the indigenous business programs to get set up, unlike the non-indigenous business programs such as the CE-BA. One of their concerns now is that they still don't know if their members will qualify for the additional \$20,000 that non-indigenous businesses are already getting through the CEBA.

The biggest concern for them is that this is an issue of economic justice. Indigenous communities have been working to build economies, as you know, for a very long time. Continuous provincial and federal legislation has historically barred them from being a part of the system. They are now making their way, and there's a lot of success, but with COVID and having to wait an extra two and a half months to access resources that other businesses were able to access, they lost businesses during that time.

Here's what they're wondering: Will their next rollout be two and a half months later than everybody else's?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** MP Blaney, I think you're absolutely right. A number of the instruments we deployed were very general and, absolutely, a number of mistakes were made in eligibility criteria on a number of fronts. We saw a number of these unduly prejudice the indigenous communities. Our teams worked really hard to work with the Minister of Finance at the time to plug those holes, and indeed it did take time.

We're all being asked to do things that fall outside of our authority, essentially to replace private actors in the economy and give those supports. Some of these did in fact need to be tailored. Some of the financial instruments have been distributed, and I think we've had about 1,100 loans go out.

Clearly the timeline was a challenge we faced, and as we fine-tune our response, I don't think—

• (1925)

**The Chair:** We face it too.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Okay. I was going to conclude with something, but—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for that.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** That's fine.

**The Chair:** We're racing toward your own deadline.

Mr. Vidal, go ahead for five minutes.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Minister, in what little time I have left, I want to talk about vaccines.

There is an awful lot of stress and anxiety in northern and remote communities, as you can imagine. I know you've been talking to these people, and we would agree that this is a huge concern.

Where am I going with this? I believe there's an opportunity for us to really give them some hope and share some optimism, and to give them a light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak.

What's the plan for the rollout of vaccines? What's the access going to be like for these remote communities when that opportunity arises?

**Hon. Marc Miller:** This is an excellent question and one we're working on currently.

We've all seen the news stories about the positive results for two vaccines in particular, and the wide suite of access Canada has to other vaccines, but they have to be distributed in a way that reflects not only the needs of those in health care services and the prioritization to be established with respect to who gets them and when, but also what is perhaps one of the largest logistical challenges in vaccinations worldwide that we've ever faced. That's the reality. We're talking about ensuring that these vaccines are transported to all areas and then deployed in an equitable fashion that recognizes the inequality that we've all talked about at this committee. Certainly our team is working night and day to ensure that our approach ensures not only that the vaccines get into communities but also that they are deployed in an effective and culturally sensitive way.

We have learned experience from the H1N1 vaccine and some of the challenges that were faced there. They were surmounted, and in fact I think testimony has shown that indigenous communities received a higher rate of vaccinations finally. There were some challenges in the beginning, and we don't want face those again, but we're very aware of them. We're working not only with local leadership but also with health authorities to ensure that there is proper deployment of those vaccines in the way that I've described.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** I could go a little bit further, specifically in the context of some of the reports we're hearing about the extremely low temperatures at which the vaccines have to be maintained. Obviously that's a huge obstacle for fly-in communities.

Minister, can you or one of the officials flesh that out in a little more detail for me? Seriously, I want to make sure we have a plan and that we're offering these people the hope that they need to get through this.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** I'll leave the last few words to Valerie.

**Ms. Valerie Gideon:** To be clear, the vaccine will be distributed through the provinces and territories. It will be done in partnership with the National Microbiology Laboratory and the Public Health Agency of Canada .

Our role will be to administer the vaccine or to fund communities to do it when it arrives at the community, but we're going to be leveraging the same supply chains and the same distribution mechanisms that the provinces and territories will be using for all of their citizens.

Work is already under way, and some information has been released on the approach that will be taken to prioritization. That is being developed at a federal-provincial-territorial level, with the expertise we're able to bring to the table.

I want to reassure you that we're not going to be treating the vaccine for indigenous peoples with a different supply mechanism that might be more vulnerable. We're going to be leveraging the provincial-territorial distribution mechanisms, and the National Microbiology Laboratory and the Public Health Agency will be instrumental in ensuring the provision of the proper supplies and equipment to support the integrity of the vaccine throughout the process.

**The Chair:** You have less than a minute, Gary.

**Mr. Gary Vidal:** Minister, I have one last quick question.

As I know you're aware, there's often a significant level of mistrust of institutions among some of our indigenous folks in their communities. With regard to the vaccine, is there any kind of strategy or planning for making sure that people with an inherent mistrust of the system, so to speak, will have the confidence they need to participate with the vaccine?

• (1930)

**The Chair:** Minister, you have 30 seconds.

**Hon. Marc Miller:** Absolutely. It's key not only for respecting the reality and the lived experience of indigenous people in the medical system but also in the effective deployment of the vaccine. These are issues that we've been working on internally and with leadership in the last little while. They remain to be perfected.

You spoke about hope, and I think people should be very hopeful, given the results that we've seen. However, we also have to maintain vigilance in ensuring that the public health guidelines are followed properly. That's something we need to continue to do.

This all has to be delivered, administered and worked on in partnership with first nations and indigenous communities, and we will do it. This includes many ways of doing it. I would be glad to come back to committee at a later time to discuss that in more detail.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, but time has run out for this session.

Thank you so much, Minister and senior officials, for joining us.

We're going to suspend for a couple of minutes while we assemble our next panel with our ministers.

• (1930)

(Pause)

• (1935)

**The Chair:** I call this meeting back to order. As we resume the meeting, the committee is continuing to consider the supplementary estimates (B) for 2020-21.

With us for this hour, by video conference, is the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Carolyn Bennett; the Minister of Northern Affairs, Dan Vandal, accompanied by Daniel Quan-Watson, the deputy minister; the assistant deputy minister, Serge Beaudoin; the acting senior assistant deputy minister, Annie Boudreau; and the acting chief of finances, results and delivery officer Jean-François Talbot.

Ms. Bennett, welcome to our panel. Please go ahead for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations):** Thank you.

*Kwe, bonsoir, good evening.*

I am joining you today from my home in Toronto, on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. We honour all of the indigenous peoples who paddled these waters and whoseoccasins walked these lands. We honour all the traditional territories on which all are participating today, as we continue to work so hard to keep our families and communities safe.

It is always important for me to appear before this committee. I look forward to a discussion on the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B) for Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada.

I am joined today by the deputy minister, Daniel Quan-Watson; acting senior deputy minister of policy and strategic direction, Annie Boudreau; assistant deputy minister of northern affairs, Serge Beaudoin; and the acting chief financial, results and delivery officer, Jean-François Talbot.

[English]

The 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B) reflect a net increase of \$936 million, which includes \$790 million of re-profiling funding, \$138 million in new funding and \$8 million of net transfers with other government departments. The total budgetary authorities for 2020-21 will be \$6.7 billion.

These funds will contribute to our government's ongoing work to advance reconciliation with indigenous peoples and to support and accelerate first nations, Inuit and Métis in realizing their inherent right to self-determination.

Acknowledging the limited time for my remarks this evening, I would like to highlight some of the key initiatives outlined in these estimates, and I look forward to discussing the supplementary estimates (B) in more detail through your questions. We have also provided the committee with a deck that I think will be helpful in outlining all the initiatives in the supplementary estimates (B).

I would also like to highlight for the committee that the re-profiling of funds reflected in these estimates is, as I think we have talked about here at the committee before, a common management practice. As I noted for the committee in the past, these re-profiling reflects expenditures for which timing cannot be easily predicted and ensure that funds remain available in future years for their intended purposes.

As an example, the re-profiling of \$760.1 million for the specific claims settlement fund requested through these supplementary estimates will preserve the total amount available in that fund for 2020-21 at approximately \$1.86 billion. The specific claims settlement fund is the source of funds for compensation for both negotiated settlement agreements and financial awards made by the specific claims tribunal. Because the pace of negotiations is difficult to forecast, the fund was set up with the flexibility to transfer monies not spent in a particular year to a future year. The re-profiling of specific claims settlement funding between fiscal years is a normal occurrence that helps ensure the availability of funds needed for settlement compensation in the year in a timely way, as soon as the settlement is reached.

Supplementary estimates also identify \$28.6 million to support recognition of indigenous rights and self-determination tables. These tables represent a new and flexible way to affirm the unique rights, needs and interests that matter most to indigenous communities. It acknowledges that different indigenous communities or groups may want to assert jurisdiction in different areas at their own pace or incrementally.

I am really proud to report there are now over 150 active negotiation tables in more than 500 communities, involving almost one million indigenous people, to support them in realizing their vision of self-determination. We know indigenous self-determination is the most effective way to support improving health and educational

outcomes and unlocking the economic potential in indigenous communities.

• (1940)

Despite the current COVID-19 pandemic, negotiations with participating indigenous groups have continued through virtual means. I have even been able to sign agreements virtually. The \$28.6 million requested through these estimates will ensure continued progress through these important discussions.

The supplementary estimates also include requests for funding to support a number of other initiatives, including further progress on the TRC calls to action; the development of a national action plan for missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse peoples; interest payments for the first nations with loans through the First Nations Finance Authority—that was the relief for that; the ratification of the Anishinabek Nation Governance Agreement and funds to ensure that Canada can resolve outstanding litigation.

I urge the committee to vote in favour of these requests for essential funding and I look forward to your questions.

*Meegwetch. Marsi. Nakurmiik. Thank you. Merci beaucoup.*

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Next we have the Honourable Dan Vandal, the Minister of Northern Affairs, who is in Saint Boniface, apparently.

Dan, please go ahead.

**Hon. Dan Vandal (Minister of Northern Affairs):** Thank you so much, Mr. Chairperson.

The supplementary estimates also reflect \$10.9 million of re-profiled funding for phase III of the federal contaminated sites action plan. It is the government's priority to protect the health and environment—

*Tansi, bonjour, and greetings.*

I want to begin by acknowledging that I am speaking to you from my office here in Saint Boniface—Saint Vital, Treaty No. 1 territory, as well as the homeland of the Métis nation.

I am pleased to appear before this committee today to discuss the important work the department is currently doing in the north and in the Arctic and to answer your questions on supplementary estimates (B).

We also recognize that this is a particularly difficult time for many regions across Canada as we all continue to work together to curb the spread of COVID-19 and keep people healthy and safe across our country.

These estimates reflect our government's commitment to creating greater economic growth and a higher quality of life in the north and the Arctic. I am confident that these estimates demonstrate our government's plan to continue working towards renewing the relationship between Canada and indigenous nations, tackling the impacts of climate change, promoting economic development and creating jobs for those living in the north and the Arctic.

The 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B) reflect a net increase of approximately \$13.4 million in re-profiled funding for the Department of Northern Affairs. This funding will primarily support the federal contaminated sites action plan, the Canadian High Arctic Research Station project and research and higher education in Canada's north.

Access to high-quality education and research for everyone is critical to not only individual success but to local economies and to our country. Canada's Arctic and northern residents, especially indigenous people, have not had access to the same services, the same opportunities and the same standard of living as those in the rest of Canada. That's why our government is making substantial investments and working in partnership with northerners to develop long-term opportunities while building healthier communities, respecting the rights and interests of indigenous nations and supporting a sustainable and dynamic economy.

To support this priority, our government has invested \$1 million to establish a task force on post-secondary education in the north and the Arctic. The task force's mandate commits to seeking the perspective of northerners. It will engage indigenous partners across the Arctic and the north, including young people, other governments, post-secondary institutions, and leaders, on how the federal government can improve post-secondary educational opportunities. We need to close the gaps that exist in education in the north.

In addition, the supplementary estimates (B) include re-profiled funding for the Canadian High Arctic Research Station project that totals \$2.4 million. Based out of Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, the Canadian High Arctic Research Station will become the headquarters of Polar Knowledge Canada, which is responsible for advancing Canada's knowledge of the Arctic and strengthening Canadian leadership in polar science and technology.

The re-profiled funding requested through these supplementary estimates is required for the construction and other anticipated expenses to close out the construction contract, including those related to the Inuit benefits agreement and the extension of the duration of the contract. The outcome of the investments in post-secondary education and in the Canadian High Arctic Research Station project will undoubtedly help northerners close the gaps in education outcomes, provide ongoing learning and skills development opportunities, advance our nation's knowledge of the Arctic and strengthen Canadian leadership in polar science and technology.

• (1945)

**The Chair:** We're losing you, Minister.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Can you hear me?

**The Chair:** Now we can hear you.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** It is the government's priority to protect the health and environment of Canadians by minimizing threats of pol-

lution. My department is also committed to managing contaminated sites in a cost-effective and consistent manner to reduce and eliminate, where possible, risks to human and environmental health and the liability associated with contaminated sites.

[*Translation*]

COVID-19 continues to affect our daily lives, and northerners should not have to worry about putting food on their table or ensuring continued supply of essential items. Earlier this year, our government provided additional investments to nutrition north Canada, to increase the federal subsidy rate in all eligible communities.

By providing additional subsidies on a broad range of items and helping with the costs associated with hunting and harvesting, residents of isolated communities will be better able to afford to feed and protect themselves and their families. We've also provided supports to maintain critical air supply routes, as well as funding for testing and contact tracing, sick leave, income supports for individuals, and support for businesses.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you have.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Vandal.

I have a couple of things to note. First, I had a little bit of a freeze on my end. Vice-chair McLeod, be ready at any time, such as you were at our last meeting.

Second, we will be voting on the supplementary estimates following the rounds of questioning. Cathy McLeod, you are up first for six minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC):** Thank you, ministers, for joining us here tonight. Of course, it's always a very important discussion.

I have a number of questions, but there's something that came to my attention this morning. I want to follow up on this particular issue.

As we know, as we have these settlements, as we resolve these long-term injustices, there are other people who are impacted. It's often third parties that are impacted by the settlements.

I know that my colleague from Cariboo—Prince George has worked through your office, and in August was promised a phone call and a conversation with a number of tourist operators who, in many cases, have put their life savings into their businesses. They have not had that call.

Today one of them got a letter from the Xeni Gwet'in indicating that they will not continue with the permit he has to run his business, so essentially his business is over. It's a huge issue.

Again, I know that we have to solve these issues, the long-standing injustices, but when we create some new injustices, I don't think we do. We create more problems.

Would the minister commit today not only to following through with that phone call that I understand her staff committed to, but also to working with the province to see if we can ease the transition for the people who have been impacted by a significant decision?

• (1950)

**The Chair:** Be brief, please, minister, because I hope we'll get back to the supplementaries before us. Go ahead.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Absolutely. Cathy, I have spoken to your colleague on a number of occasions. Again, it is really important that we work with the Province of British Columbia on all of the issues with respect to lands. I commit to seeing what I can do to really promote the kind of understanding that comes with those leases and the title rights.

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** In terms of specific land claims, I do acknowledge it's a bit of a challenge. We see the estimates and the moving of money, and I understand that. Then I go to your departmental reviews, and they talk about the 74.5% that have been resolved, which sounds very impressive. Then I follow this path to different documents, and I end up with the fact that this many have been solved, but there are actually many out there that have not even been accepted for discussion yet.

You have put a numerator and a denominator of 75% resolution of specific land claims. Could you describe the numerator and the denominator, because it certainly does not align with all the other documents?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** It's really important, Cathy, in the work we are doing with the AFN now, to change the specific claims process. It has been completely frustrating. In the past, people would wait three years to find out that even going to a table was being denied. We are now trying to work together in a different way, with joint research, and a way of moving forward to settle these claims—

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** I appreciate—

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** If harm was done, then we want to work together on that. There are many claims. Some of them are clumped, Cathy, and that's good, like the—

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** No, but—

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** —agricultural claims—

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** Minister, when your department claims that they have solved 75% of the specific land claims, which is in your 2018-19 departmental review, I think it's reasonable to ask what the numerator is and what the denominator is.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Sure. I think that—

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** There are changes that need to be made.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Absolutely, and what we are trying to do is settle those claims so they don't have to go to the tribunal. That means we have to listen to one another and do the research together.

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** Thank you.

I guess if we look at departmental reports, then it really... It sounds like you recognize there is a flawed process that you're trying to fix, but to claim that you're 75% successful in the work you're trying to do is, I think, a bit of a challenge.

I'll move to my next question.

**The Chair:** You have one minute. Go ahead.

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** This aligns with my first question, which talked about other impacted parties.

With the Wet'suwet'en, you went to the territory and you met with the hereditary chiefs. Of course, it would be like going to the Senate and talking to the Senate about the resolution of an issue without bothering to talk to the House of Commons.

How can you justify not having a conversation with those elected chiefs? Can you tell this committee where that conversation is at? I understand that in spite of COVID, there are still some significant challenges with the Wet'suwet'en, the Coastal GasLink and what's going to happen next.

• (1955)

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** As you know, Cathy, the Supreme Court decision in Delgamuukw was with the hereditary leadership. That is where we needed to go to resolve the issue. There is no question—

**The Chair:** Minister, I'm sorry; I'm going to have to interrupt. We're running out of time. We have an 8:30 cold deadline.

Perhaps you could communicate the rest of the answer with Ms. McLeod. We're trying to get our full round of questioning in, and we're beyond six minutes now. I'm sorry for that.

I'll move over to Jaime Battiste for six minutes.

Go ahead.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for appearing before us. I agree with you that accelerating self-determination is the best way to support indigenous communities and people. From education and health outcomes to economic development, we know that indigenous communities achieve the best results when they assert their jurisdiction and chart their own paths on these critical issues.

Can you expand on the \$28.6 million requested through these estimates for recognition of indigenous rights and self-determination tables? Also, how will this funding help support communities in assuming greater control of their own affairs and designing and managing the programs in a way that they know will work in their communities for their people?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Thank you so much, Jaime. We thank you for your career of work, having all Canadians understand the importance of treaties and these kinds of agreements—modern treaties and constructive arrangements with first nations.

We know that there are better health outcomes and education outcomes when first nations, Inuit and Métis are in charge of those decisions. You lived in Nova Scotia with the Mi'kmaq. It went from 30% finishing high school to 95% when the Mi'kmaq were in charge of their education system. The results speak for themselves. It's very important.

In the past, those agreements were very fixed. The minister would have a mandate. They'd go to the community. They'd say, "It's take it or leave it. See you in court." Instead, we've moved to a very flexible system whereby communities are able to choose what area they'd like to assert jurisdiction in, and then we get an agreement on that. I think the Anishinabek agreement here in Ontario is a very good example. Now they are moving on to their full governance agreement, having had their education act passed.

It is, I think, at all of these tables. Child and family services, of course, is one for which we know that it's going to be so important for nations to be able to look after their children and youth and bring their children home.

I think this new flexible approach.... There's also no cede and surrender, no extinguishment of rights, and it's no longer based on loans. We would have negotiations that would last 20 years, and the nation would be \$30 million in debt. That's over, as we move forward to a much better way of doing this.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** That's great to hear, Minister. I agree with you 100% when you talk about how flexibility is an important thing.

I want you to reiterate one thing that you said. As a Canadian government, we are not, as part of these negotiations, asking indigenous communities to extinguish their rights. I know there has been a lot of misrepresentation of what our government is doing out there, with people calling these tables "termination tables of treaties" and things like that.

Can you comment on that a bit?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Absolutely. I think the proof was when we were able to sign the agreement with British Columbia a year ago August. There it was very clear that this would be the new way going forward. It really was about a modern treaty of respect and partnership. I think we're also seeing it now in the collaborative fiscal arrangement we're doing with the already self-governing nations. They work with Canada to figure out what funding they need in order to be able to run their governments.

These two things alone, I think, have made a huge difference in people's understanding that getting out from under the Indian Act is really the objective, as well as rebuilding nations, so that Indian Act bands can come together, like the Anishinabek nation or the Ktunaxa. This is a way they can come together in geography, language, a numbered treaty or however they want to form a governance based on the consensus of their people and their traditional laws and legal customs. It's an exciting time, Jaime, and I thank you for all your work on it.

• (2000)

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** Minister, I wanted to follow a little bit on the Indian Act.

We all know this is a colonial document. It's 100 years old. How can the new recognition of indigenous rights and self-determination tables provide an effective way for communities to move beyond the outdated and colonial structures of that Indian Act?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Even to answer Cathy McLeod's question about the Wet'suwet'en, that really is a matter of the Indian Act bands and the hereditary leadership coming together in their communities to work on a governance of their choosing that then becomes the nation-to-nation partner with Canada.

That's, I think, what's so exciting, as we see communities determining their future and describing their relationship with Canada in this celebration of getting out from under the Indian Act. I remember signing in Slamen and others, and the pregnant moms beaming that their babies would not be born under the Indian Act.

**The Chair:** Thanks very much. We're right at time.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** Okay.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry about that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Bérubé, you may go ahead. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to have you here, Ms. Bennett and Mr. Vandal.

My question is for Minister Bennett.

When Bill C-5 is passed, September 30 will become a statutory holiday, but I realize the funding for that isn't necessarily in supplementary estimates (B).

I'm curious as to how the government plans to mark the holiday, without simply making it a day off for federal employees.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** I don't believe Bill C-5 is addressed in the supplementary estimates.

I am going to ask one of my officials to answer that.

[*English*]

**Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson (Deputy Minister, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs):** If I may, Mr. Chair, that bill was presented to the House by the Minister of Canadian Heritage and the—



[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Mr. Chair, the interpretation is not coming through.

**Mr. Daniel Quan-Watson:** My apologies.

The Minister of Canadian Heritage is responsible for the bill. It is not covered in these supplementary estimates because it does not fall under Minister Bennett's authority.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you.

Ms. Bennett, you are responsible for addressing the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. Last year, the government stated that a national action plan on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls would be released by June 2020.

In May 2020, the government indefinitely postponed the release of the plan.

What progress have you made on the national action plan since June 2020?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Thank you for asking that very important question.

Our hearts go out to the survivors and families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, two-spirit people and first nations members.

Our government is working with the provinces and territories to respond to the very first national inquiry into this tragedy. Each province and territory has to develop its own plan, in co-operation with the families and survivors, to ultimately create a national action plan.

Under the leadership of Gina Wilson and the Yukon deputy minister, 100 indigenous women are working daily to develop an effective action plan that will yield the desired results.

• (2005)

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** As far as missing and murdered indigenous women and girls are concerned, the government must take action to ensure the full implementation of economic, social and political rights of indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse persons.

Is that work under way? Will there be a follow-up?

Things are dormant right now.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Our website lists all the measures taken by federal departments, including Public Safety Canada, Indigenous Services Canada and Women and Gender Equality Canada. A comprehensive and effective plan will be released soon. It's important that we update the website to provide transparency and accountability to all the families and survivors in Canada.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** I see.

Has there been any progress in relation to the Recognition of Indigenous Rights and Self-Determination Tables?

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Yes. The recognition of rights discussion tables are a new approach. They provide flexibility and enable communities to identify their own priorities. A set of priorities is developed and provides the basis for negotiations. Then, the agreement is ratified by the communities before being signed.

**The Chair:** Your time is up.

Thank you.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Ms. Blaney, you have six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to both ministers for being here.

I would like to start with you, Minister Vandal.

As you well know, Nunavut is now in its official lockdown. We have heard some of the horrifying stories and recognize how hard they worked for so long to keep their communities safe. Now they're having to deal with this reality.

What we're hearing from the communities is that people are concerned not only about COVID but also about their mental health. I'm wondering if you could talk to us about what your government is doing to keep everyone physically and mentally safe.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Absolutely. I want to thank you for that very important question.

I can tell you that our government is seized with what is going on in Nunavut right now. We had a call this morning, as we do most mornings, with me, Minister Bennett, Minister Miller and public health officials, to get the latest information on what is occurring in Nunavut. They did such a wonderful job for the first several months to keep the virus out, and now it's an unfortunate situation. It appears that perhaps the virus came up from the city I'm in, Winnipeg, which is one of the isolation hubs. Manitoba, in and of itself, is going through a huge crisis.

At the public health level, I know our federal public health officers are in constant conversation with Nunavut public health officers, and they're talking about supports for contact tracing, testing and rapid response teams. We are also talking with the Government of Nunavut about resources for increasing isolation units and water delivery, as well as perhaps some more resources for making sure that fuel gets to where it needs to be.

Food insecurity is always a huge issue in Nunavut, as we all know. Our government officials, through the Department of Northern Affairs and through Indigenous Services Canada, are talking with Inuit rights holders and Inuit government about how we can provide them with more support to address the food insecurity issues.

On so many different levels, the public health level.... I've spoken to Premier Savikataaq over the last week, and I know the Prime Minister had a very good conversation with him yesterday, I believe. We're engaged at all the levels that we need to be to provide the support that Nunavut needs, and we are going to be there for Nunavut throughout this crisis.

• (2010)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

My next question is around the universal broadband fund that was announced a couple of weeks ago. There's a commitment for \$600 million or a billion dollars or whatever—sorry—that would be set aside for the satellite capabilities for the most northern rural and remote communities where it's simply, as you well know, not feasible to connect to fibre.

I'm wondering how your department is working with them to make sure that this gets done. We know they need access to employment, education and health services right now during the pandemic, and of course they did even before that. That urgency is there, and I'm wondering how you're working to make sure it happens.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Absolutely. That's also an excellent question.

I think if this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that the importance of connectivity is going to be even more important after the pandemic.

The connectivity limitations have been raised for a long time, and they have far-reaching impacts. Many communities rely exclusively on satellite for access to Internet services. They lack access to fast, high-quality and reliable telecommunication networks.

The numbers we recently announced are \$750 million, on top of the \$1 billion that was announced in budget 2019, to help connect all Canadians to high-speed Internet across the country. This investment will connect 98% of Canadians across the country by 2026, with the goal of connecting all Canadians by the year 2030.

I can tell you that I'm working with Minister Monsef to engage the Government of Nunavut, as well as private stakeholders, in how to access this fund. We know that things get a little more difficult the further north you go. I think there's a potential there for low-earth orbit satellite capacity. We are engaging, and this money was recently announced—last week, I believe.

We are in the middle of a pandemic—Nunavut is actually seized with the pandemic right now—but if we've learned anything through the pandemic, it's that connectivity is so very important and will be even more important afterward.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you.

I have only a few seconds, but I want to go to you, Minister Bennett.

Part of what you're committing to is implementing the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls calls to action.

In my riding, the Lil' Red Dress Project is fundraising to put up billboards. I'm wondering if there will be any support for these

kinds of organizations that are desperately trying to find their missing women and girls?

**The Chair:** You have just 10 seconds. I'm sorry about that. Go ahead.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** Absolutely. There is the commemoration funding, and Minister Monsef has been working hard on that. We know that this is important to communities, and it is part of the healing.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Now we'll go as far into a five-minute round as we can go in view of the time.

Mr. Melillo, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to direct my questions to Minister Vandal.

Minister, you mentioned in your remarks that the estimates show your government's commitment to economic development. We know that the proposed Alberta-to-Alaska rail line will be able to generate billions of dollars in economic activity across northern Canada, and the project has recently received a presidential border crossing permit from the United States.

I wonder if you can confirm whether your government is supportive of the project, or if the Prime Minister intends to block it in a way similar to how he has blocked other similar development projects.

• (2015)

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** I can tell you that this is something that is extremely intriguing. I do know that our government has yet to see an actual proposal from anyone on this potentially very exciting project.

We know that connectivity, whether physical or virtual, is something we need more of in the north. We've recently launched Canada's largest-ever infrastructure project to help develop a project in the north.

The short answer is that when we get an actual proposal, we'll do the review of it.

**Mr. Eric Melillo:** Thank you.

I would like you to comment on broadband as well. I realize it's not exclusively in your file, but it's definitely very important to many people across the north. The government is currently planning to connect all communities across Canada by 2030. I believe that for many in the north—and I'm sure, Minister, you'd agree—that timeline is still too long.

The official opposition actually brought forward a plan of our own to help connect Canadians. The plan includes changes to the spectrum auctions, incentives for rural infrastructure and new rules to prevent big companies from profiting off of consumers. We believe that these suggestions could help accelerate that timeline.

They're public and they're out there. Do you have any thoughts on why the government hasn't taken on some of those great suggestions?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** I think our government is very clear that we think suggestions are useful, but we need some actual dollars to come forward to work with territorial governments, to work with private companies and to work with satellite companies. That's why last week the Prime Minister announced \$750 million on top of the \$1 billion announced in the previous budget to connect Canadians to high-speed Internet across Canada. We want to grow businesses. We want to create jobs.

Also, the Prime Minister recently announced an agreement of \$600 million with the Canadian satellite company Telesat to improve connectivity and expand high-speed Internet coverage to the far north, rural areas and remote regions across Canada—

**Mr. Eric Melillo:** Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** —through low-earth orbit satellite capacity.

**Mr. Eric Melillo:** Thank you.

I'd also like to ask a bit about housing, Minister. We've had some conversations about housing, and you know there's a housing crisis across the north, to put it frankly. With the recent rapid housing initiative that was announced, I know there are some people in my riding who had some questions about why certain urban centres were prioritized through the first stream of funding.

I am in agreement with my constituents that a specific northern stream of funding to ensure that northern communities can have access to a lot of these funds, and aren't in any way left behind, would be beneficial.

Could you speak to why the government didn't really seem to consider that?

**The Chair:** You have one minute.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** I can tell you that improving housing outcomes is an absolute priority for our government. I can tell you that in all of my travels, phone calls and Zoom calls, both pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, housing comes up the most often. We realize it's even more important during a pandemic. Our government has a 10-year housing agreement with the Government of Nunavut.

In fact, we have 10-year housing agreements with the territorial governments in Northwest Territories and Yukon, which will invest close to \$800 million in those three territories. As well, we have a 10-year, \$400-million housing agreement with Inuit land claim organizations that are going to invest close to \$400 million in Inuit housing.

We feel we're going in the right direction, but you're absolutely right. The gaps are so large and there's so much work to do that we need to continue what we're doing for many, many years.

• (2020)

**The Chair:** Thanks very much, Minister.

Mr. van Koeverden, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Chair.

I'm joining you from my home, from the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

I want to say thank you to both the minister and staff for joining us today. It's wonderful to have you here.

I also want to give a shout-out to my friend and colleague MP Battiste, whose insight, perspective and knowledge on issues like this are so valuable to this committee. If our friend and colleague Mumilaaq Qaqqaq were here, I would say the same about her perspective.

No offence, MP Blaney; you're wonderful, and it's great to be working with you here, but I know I speak for all of us on this committee when I say that we miss Mumilaaq and we wish her well.

My questions are for you, Minister Vandal.

I would like to focus on something that wasn't touched on too much in your speech, but I think I heard it, which is the post-secondary task force. I'm asking because I'm concerned about youth in the north. I want to make sure we are getting them the services that they need.

I also know that in your youth, and probably still, you were a great athlete, and you know that athletics and sport have a really positive impact. I talked to a good friend yesterday, Beckie Scott, who has a program called Spirit North, which brings endurance sports to a lot of indigenous youth across the country. There were 6,300 last year, actually—great numbers.

Could you elaborate a little bit on the post-secondary program?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Yes. Thank you.

First of all, let me set a little bit of the context.

Prior to the last election, the Arctic and northern policy framework was signed. Minister Bennett did a tremendous amount of work on it. It's a framework whereby the territorial governments and the indigenous nations are all signed on, as well as several provinces, including Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, I believe. It is a policy framework for all the leadership in the north to sit at the same table to hammer out priorities.

One of those priorities is education. One of the ideas that came out was to form a task force with the best and the brightest of the north to look at the post-secondary education systems and consult with people who work in the sector and with other leaders, look at traditional indigenous knowledge and make recommendations to our government on how we can improve.

We reached out to those people who are on the framework—the territorial governments, indigenous nations, Inuit leadership, first nations and Métis leadership of the north—and they have submitted several names that we were able to choose from to put on the task force. Their work started last week. In fact, I had my first meeting with all 13 members, I believe, last week, and we talked about the challenge they have.

They're such a dynamic group. It's a good mix of experience and youth, indigenous and not, and they're going out there. They're going to submit a report to government by...I believe it's March 2021, so it's not a lot of time. They have a lot of work to do, and it's something that is important to our government.

The initiative started before the last election. We've invested over \$40 million in five years to improving post-secondary options in the north. This is something that is exciting, and I hope it's going to bear a lot of fruit in the future.

**The Chair:** You have one minute, Adam.

**Mr. Adam van Koevorden:** Thank you very much, Minister Vandal. I have just one more question.

Could you elaborate on the value and the leverage potential that I think a connection to the natural environment through sport, play and recreation might be able to provide to that program with the post-secondary task force? As well, could you elaborate a little on the food program and how access to post-secondary education and the food program are connected?

**The Chair:** We have less than 30 seconds for those answers.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Yes, absolutely. We all know the value of sports recreation for young people. Something that I don't think has been looked at often enough is the value of indigenous sport. I know that's going to be something that comes up in the task force's work.

We're looking forward to suggestions from them, but we know there's a lot of work to do. Once the report comes in, that's when the actual work must continue, and we're committed to doing it.

● (2025)

**The Chair:** We're over time on that, but thank you for that answer.

Madame Bérubé, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** In supplementary estimates (B), you are requesting \$82.5 million “to support indigenous mental wellness”. We know all too well how important that is right now, with the suicide rates and mental health problems plaguing communities throughout the country.

How do you determine how much funding is needed given the impacts of COVID-19?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Is that question for me?

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Yes.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** We know the COVID-19 pandemic has been very tough on everyone and will certainly intensify the demand for mental health supports. My department is working closely with

Mr. Miller's, Indigenous Services Canada, as well as with the leaders of indigenous nations. We want to provide culturally appropriate services based on indigenous traditions so that everyone can benefit moving forward.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** You do an assessment as far as mental health needs and resources go. I imagine that's part of your estimates.

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Yes. The mental health reality is extremely important in northern communities, as it is throughout Canada.

It is actually an initiative of Indigenous Services Canada, Mr. Miller's department. We are cognizant of how very important the issue is and we work together closely, but it does fall under Mr. Miller's authority.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** The supplementary estimates also address funding for child and family services and the continued implementation of Jordan's principle. Have you taken any steps to ensure child and family services are not disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** Look—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have just 10 seconds. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Dan Vandal:** The initiative is so significant that it's hard to explain in 10 seconds. I can tell you, though, that it also falls under Minister Miller's authority.

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We'll leave it at that and go to Ms. Blaney for two and half minutes.

Go ahead, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you so much, Chair.

Minister Bennett, I recently had a meeting with some representatives from Kanesatake, and I understand that they met with your government not too long ago. The concern they have is that the development of their lands is continuing. They have asked, at the very minimum, to just pause the development so they can have those meaningful conversations in the community on how to move forward in the best possible way. As you know, that is not happening.

These are my questions to you: Why haven't you helped support them in making sure that this pause happens? Are you and your department going to do anything to support these very important discussions?

When we talk about moving forward and looking at self-determination, these are the key parts. One of the things that deeply concerns me is that so often these projects happen and continue to happen even when communities come forward and say that they need the time to have that meaningful conversation internally before a project moves forward.

I'm wondering if you could update this committee on those commitments.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** This is a really important question as we move forward to self-determination and determining governance within communities where there has been elected leadership as well as hereditary leadership. How do communities come together to take decisions as a community?

In most of those land decisions, the decisions on land are provincial decisions. It's difficult, but we want to support those conversations within communities so that they can take decisions together. That's what we're trying to do with provinces and territories, and with communities.

• (2030)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Right now, what we're seeing, though, is this conversation being completely undermined, fundamentally because the project is continuing. Can you commit that you will work with the provincial government to actually honour first people's rights to self-determination in that place?

**The Chair:** You have 15 seconds.

**Hon. Carolyn Bennett:** These are ongoing conversations that we had with the previous minister and that we will begin with the new minister of indigenous affairs. It is complicated in that we, as the federal government, don't have responsibility around the land, but we do have responsibility to do whatever we can to promote those kinds of important conversations within communities to determine their own governance and how they take decisions.

**The Chair:** Thanks very much, Minister. I know that you have to leave us immediately for another meeting.

Minister Vandal, thank you as well.

To the staffers and senior people, thank you for joining us.

Committee, I apologize for having to brusquely truncate the question period, but we are at the point now where we have to deal with the estimates.

I would like to ask if I have unanimous consent to call the votes as a group and adopt them on division.

Are there any thumbs down?

I believe we have unanimous consent to adopt the estimates on division.

I can't quite see everybody, because I can't see the room, but I'm told that we're okay.

Thank you very much.

DEPARTMENT OF CROWN-INDIGENOUS RELATIONS AND NORTHERN AFFAIRS

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$114,527,175

Vote 5b—Capital expenditures.....\$1,584,486

Vote 10b—Grants and contributions.....\$810,294,236

(Votes 1b, 5b and 10b agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF INDIGENOUS SERVICES

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$250,366,759

Vote 10b—Grants and contributions.....\$751,056,175

(Votes 1b and 10b agreed to on division)

**The Chair:** We have passed unanimously the supplementary estimates on division.

Having adopted the supplementary estimates, I must now ask the committee, shall I report the supplementary estimates (B) 2020-21 to the House?

I believe I have unanimous consent once again, so that is agreed.

Once again, thank you to all. These are tough meetings, but I appreciate the spirit in which they're conducted.

Thanks once again to our ministers and staff.

This meeting is now adjourned.





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