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Chair: The Honourable John McKay



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• (1830)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): Thank you.

This is the fifth meeting of the public safety committee, and we are privileged to have Minister Blair with us for the the next two hours to talk about his mandate letter. I particularly appreciate his willingness to make himself available to members.

He's going to open with a statement and then we are going to go directly to questions. We might take a very short break and then go on to the second hour and do a second round of questions.

Minister Blair, you clearly need no introduction at this committee. You're welcome and we look forward to your opening statement.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and to the vice-chairs and committee members, good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to join you today.

I'd like to begin by extending my thanks for your indulgence of me last week when I was scheduled to appear before your committee and, unfortunately, because of rather long votes that went on and then an overlap with a very important cabinet agenda that I had to address.... I'm grateful that you were able to accommodate the rescheduling of my attendance here today.

I'm also pleased to be joined today by the senior officials responsible for the agencies and departments of my portfolio. Specifically, I'm joined by Chairperson Jennifer Oades from the Parole Board; Director David Vigneault from CSIS; Commissioner Anne Kelly from the Correctional Service of Canada; Commissioner Brenda Lucki from the RCMP; and President John Ossowski from the CB-SA.

For all of those who are new to this committee, I'd like to welcome all of you to your new roles and also extend my very sincere good wishes that we will have many opportunities to work together in the best interests of all Canadians. I fully anticipate that this will be perhaps only the first of many opportunities where I'll be asked to come before your committee. I look forward to those opportunities.

I also appreciate the opportunity to say a few words about some of the issues facing us, although we'll canvass that in greater detail in your questions.

I'd like to begin my remarks today by reiterating all of our collective thoughts with the families and friends for the tragic events that took place in Quebec City over the weekend. We know that it was certainly a terrible tragedy for the families, but also for the people of Quebec City. It's important, I think, for Canadians not only to recognize the historic significance and importance of Quebec City, but also to recognize that it is one of the safest cities anywhere in the world. For that community to have its sense of safety and security so terribly wrenched from them was indeed a tragic event. The individual responsible has now been charged.

I also want to take the opportunity, if I may, to offer my very sincere admiration to all the first responders—the medical responders and the police—who took very effective and immediate action. I want to acknowledge them. We reached out, of course, to Quebec and to the Quebec City police to assist if necessary, but this was apparently not, as we've learned from the police, a national security event. Rather, it was just a terrible tragedy.

I also want to acknowledge that since I was last given my mandate in the fall after the 2019 election, the world has changed rather significantly. In short order, the government was required to shift its focus. Although we are still very much in the business of governing—and, in my portfolio, keeping Canadians safe—much of our focus was, by necessity, shifted to the pandemic response. That remains a key priority for the government, and it is a key focus of my ministry.

We have taken very significant and unprecedented action to limit the spread of COVID-19 in Canada. We have, of course, taken very significant actions to protect our borders, and I'll be happy to answer any questions the committee may have about that. Beginning as early as January 26, we began putting in place screening measures at our airports to stop the spread of COVID-19, and then, over the course of the ensuing several weeks, we took the unprecedented but necessary step of actually closing the American border to all discretionary travel, while at the same time working hard to make sure that we maintained vital supply lines and the movement of essential workers and essential goods. I have some updates that I can provide this committee if there is time, Mr. Chair, which I think will assist the members in understanding the effectiveness of the measures that have been taken.

We continue to review those decisions on a regular basis in consultation with both our domestic and international partners, the provinces and territories and particularly the United States. We have, as I'm sure you're aware, recently announced a scaling up of the federal public health presence at the border. We are now covering 36 points of entry that account for 90% of all traffic into Canada, and that's a total force of 190 public health officers, which is up from the 18 we were at when the pandemic first began.

The Canada Border Services Agency has been working very closely with the Public Health Agency of Canada, including on strengthening compliance and enforcement efforts on mandatory quarantine and isolation orders.

• (1835)

Here, Mr. Chair, you will indulge me if I take this opportunity to acknowledge the extraordinary work of our border services officers. We've asked them to do a job that was, frankly, unprecedented and even inconceivable in the weeks and months prior to the closing of that border, and they've responded extraordinarily well. They've done an extremely difficult job. It's a daily issue. MPs from across the country have reached out to attempt to resolve issues at our border, but our border services officers, in my opinion, have done an exemplary job of maintaining the health and safety of Canadians while continuing to adapt to a rapidly evolving situation.

With respect to legislation, I want to advise this committee that we have an ambitious agenda in the year ahead. As you know, in my mandate the Prime Minister asked me to serve as the Minister of Public Safety in part because I bring some experience to the issue of keeping communities safe, having spent many years on the front lines of policing. A number of issues remain a significant priority to us. I would mention in particular that firearms-related crime remains very high in Canada. We've actually seen an unacceptable and very worrisome increase in gun violence in many of the communities across Canada. We are determined to address that gun violence as a priority.

As the committee is aware, on May 1 the government took very significant and decisive action in an effort to protect Canadians and strengthen gun control by prohibiting over 1,500 models of firearms that were not designed for the legitimate activities of hunting and sport shooting but rather were designed, with their intent and effectiveness, as tactical weapons for combatants to shoot other combatants. We also put in place an amnesty to give the existing owners time to come into compliance with the law. We are providing a temporary exception as well for indigenous persons exercising section 35 constitutional rights.

We have signalled our intent to implement a buyback program as part of the legislation that we will bring forward. I would like to reiterate our commitment to ensuring that effective owners and businesses are compensated fairly while at the same time making sure that the implementation and management costs of such a program are responsibly enacted and sustainable. We are working with Parliament, provinces, territories and first nations to get this right for law-abiding gun owners and businesses.

I've also been very clear, and it's clear in my mandate, that the Government of Canada will strengthen Canada's gun control framework. That's why we will be introducing legislation in the near term

to introduce a red-flag regime to reduce cases of intimate partner violence and suicide by temporarily removing firearms from individuals.

Mr. Chair, I take your point, and there are a number of other things I could speak to, but I want to move ahead quickly on two things. I want to speak to the focus of our government and this committee in making progress in policing and justice reform. All Canadians need to have confidence that the justice system is there to provide justice for them. We know that black Canadians and indigenous peoples are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and we are prepared to make significant actions in both investment and legislation in order to change that. I'm happy to speak to those issues.

Finally, if I may, I would also like to speak to some of the actions we are taking with respect to individuals who are involved in hostile activities by state actors that threaten the safety, security and interests of Canadians. I want to be able to assure this committee that we take these matters very seriously and that all of our national security apparatus is focused on remaining vigilant against those threats and taking appropriate action to protect Canadians.

Mr. Chair, given our time constraints, I'll stop my remarks there. I hope to be able to explore a number of these and other matters with the committee in response to your questions.

Thank you.

• (1840)

The Chair: Time is the enemy of us all.

With that, I would just take note that Madam Elizabeth May from the Green Party also wishes to somehow or other wedge a question in here. All the members of the standing committee are also very keen to ask questions. I apologize—insincerely, but upfront—that I may be cutting people off from time to time in order to be able to respect the time of members.

With that, the first six-minute round will go to Madam Stubbs, Mr. Iacono, Madame Michaud and Mr. Harris.

Madam Stubbs, you have six minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being with us this evening.

Your mandate letter commits you to delivering results and effective government to Canadians. On October 22, as you announced, the last commissioner was finally appointed for the inquiry into the mass murder in Nova Scotia. That was almost seven months ago. The families have asked for the inquiry terms of reference to examine and report on the processes and the reasons for the delay in announcing and starting the public inquiry.

Last week I asked you in question period about honouring that request from the families, but you dismissed it and said it was for “political advantage”. I want to give you the opportunity to either clarify those remarks or just answer why it is you think that request from the families is something related to political advantage.

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, I did not ascribe that intent or motive to the families, but rather to you, Ms. Stubbs.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: You did indeed.

Hon. Bill Blair: That's right. Let me be very clear. In the days and hours immediately following the terrible tragedy of the mass shooting that took place on April 18 and 19, I reached out to the Nova Scotia government. I began working very closely with them because we knew that people would have many questions and needed answers. We began immediately to develop a process whereby both the Government of Nova Scotia, which has policing jurisdiction for that community, and also the federal government, because we have a role and a responsibility there, particularly in oversight of the RCMP, would ensure there was a fulsome examination of all of the events that took place there, that gave rise to that terrible tragedy, and how it was responded to in its immediate aftermath, and to make recommendations on how we can improve the response.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Minister, thank you. Of course, the question wasn't from me; it was directly from the families of the victims. I'll quote exactly what they've said, just for clarity. They have said this:

Given the delay and further victimization of the families by the two levels of government, his clients will request that all processes concerning the calling of the public inquiry be included in its terms of reference,” Patterson Law lawyer Robert Pineo said in a press release.... According to Pineo, those governmental actions must be disclosed and examined in a public forum “to ensure a meaningful public inquiry.” “That is the only way that the families and the public will gain a full understanding of the governments’ mishandling of the public inquiry from its inception and ensure that in the future, such processes are transparent, fair and conducted in a timely manner”.

Your government does control the terms of reference through the OIC. Will you commit to honouring the families' request for all the reasons and the processes related to the delay in the public inquiry?

• (1845)

Hon. Bill Blair: We have committed to conduct a full and comprehensive public inquiry. We have empowered three public inquiry commissioners to determine all of the circumstances and factors that gave rise to the terrible tragedy of April 18 and 19; to examine everything that was done in response to that terrible tragedy, with a particular emphasis on the services that were provided to victims in that case; and to then make recommendations to both the Government of Nova Scotia and the federal government on how these terrible tragedies can be prevented. That's the purpose of the public inquiry.

I think it's important. We listened to those families, Shannon. We know they had concerns and questions that needed to be answered. We also heard them say that they were not satisfied with the review, that they wanted a full public inquiry. We responded to those concerns and called that. We've been working diligently to ensure that we have the three right people. I'm very pleased with all three of the people who have agreed to participate as the panel for that public inquiry. We've ensured that they have the resources to establish

the secretariat and the processes to answer the questions provided in those terms of reference.

We promised those people that we would get answers to their questions regarding that terrible tragedy in April. That's what we've undertaken to do. We've now empowered a public inquiry to get them those answers.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Minister, have you spoken directly to any of the family members of the victims?

Hon. Bill Blair: I've been working very closely with the police on the ground and with Attorney General Furey, who has reached out to the families. The Nova Scotia government assigned people to do that.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Okay. I know the Prime Minister has spoken to some of the victims. It might be helpful for you, just so that you're assured that my questions are not asked with political motivation, to hear directly from them that they do believe that governments have acted secretly and not in their best interests.

Moving on, given that your mandate also includes the Parole Board, I thought I'd just ask you another question on behalf of the victims of crime. This one is from Lisa Freeman, whose father was brutally murdered in 1991. She has said very clearly, and I think, has spoken on behalf of victims' families, that they want to be seen and to be heard. She and other victims' families were denied the right to present at parole hearings by video.

I know and I understand you did announce that your department is finally in the process of working on this now, although it probably was an issue that could have been anticipated. I'm only asking this in Lisa's own words. She says, “Why were you satisfied to have a paper hearing when you were aware that I couldn't attend because of COVID 6 months ago, and leave me waiting 3 weeks for an answer?”

The Chair: You have a little less than 30 seconds, Minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, I understand the stress, frankly, of all the people and the importance of having their voices heard. We have been working with the Parole Board to enable, first of all, the families to participate either through paper or by telephone. As I've announced, on November 9 in Ontario and Quebec, video conferencing will be established for victims and elders to attend those parole hearings, and on November 23 that will be implemented right across the country.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Stubbs.

With that, it's six minutes for Mr. Iacono.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, Minister.

I have been very attentive to the announcement in the Speech from the Throne about reforming the parole system. Currently, the high court costs associated with access to parole are very often a barrier for most middle- and low-income citizens. One issue that should be addressed in this reform is the significant number of people with a criminal record who are denied the opportunity to return to work, a factor that is essential for a return to society.

First, Minister, could you describe the broad outlines of this reform project?

Second, the government has responded very well to the COVID-19 pandemic, but will this have an effect on the implementation of this reform?

• (1850)

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Angelo.

These are perhaps the greatest challenges facing government. I think one of the things the pandemic has revealed to us, along with some very difficult situations that we have faced in Canada and right across North America as well, is the existence of significant systemic and structural disparity in the outcomes for indigenous people, poor people and racialized people in our criminal justice system.

It's one of the reasons that in the throne speech, we made it very clear that we will introduce legislation and make investments. Both of them are very important in taking action to address the systemic inequities in all phases of the criminal justice system.

I think it's important to recognize.... People often focus on one element of it, but what we have seen is that there are structural and systemic issues within the broader criminal justice system, from diversion to sentencing, rehabilitation to records, that are having an outcome for Canadians who are indigenous or from racialized communities.

Let me just give you some examples of the things that I believe are necessary for us to reform. You mentioned criminal records. We know that when people apply for a pardon for their criminal record, almost 75% of them have never spent a day in jail, but they have that criminal record. Although they may have received a conditional sentence and not been sentenced to any period of incarceration, 30 and 40 years later, that criminal record is having an impact on the quality of their life and their ability to succeed as Canadians. We are looking at ways in which we will make "record suspension", as it's now called, or "pardons" as it's more commonly referred to, more accessible. Part of that is the impediment of cost.

Another issue for a lot of people is the bureaucratic thing of having to make application, significant background checks. For many people, I think it is fair to say that the pardon regime, or record suspension regime, that has been in place in Canada has made it inaccessible, particularly to people in lower-income margins, racialized communities and indigenous people. We are looking at significant reform to make those pardons more accessible. There are a number of very important ways, I think, that we can do that.

We are also looking at issues of sentencing. I think it's an undeniable fact that in our prison system, there is a very significant and

unacceptable—disproportionate—number of indigenous men and women and racialized people, particularly young black men. It's grossly out of proportion. I believe there are issues within the criminal justice system that we need to look at systemically. We're dealing with things like training and reform for all of the justice participants, to make sure that there's anti-racism training and that they understand the influence that bias can have on them.

There are some systemic and structural changes that we need to make as well. We will do all of those things.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Minister.

I have another question regarding COVID-19, which, as everyone knows, has not spared our prisons. In my riding, the Federal Training Centre was very much affected. The pandemic has had a lot of negative effects.

How do you anticipate the second wave? What steps is the Correctional Service of Canada taking to ensure that this does not happen again in the second wave of the pandemic?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much.

It's a very important question, because we have a duty of care to people who are in federal custody. As you've noted, in the first wave of the pandemic, the infection went into five different institutions, including in your riding via the federal training centre there.

Correctional Services Canada took very proactive steps. They worked first of all with the Public Health Agency of Canada, but also with the provincial and regional health authorities. They took a number of very significant steps.

First of all, they made changes in limiting the number of people coming and going from the prisons, and that had an impact on the prison population as well, which they worked very hard to accommodate. They actually brought in health experts to do infection control measures and workplace health and safety audits. They were one of the very first institutions in the federal government to make the personal protective equipment available both to inmates and to workers in the prisons.

They implemented a very robust testing regime, in the first place, in all of the federal institutions. Unfortunately, we haven't seen that in all of the provincial institutions, but they did it federally. As a result of their excellent work, in a very short period of time—by mid-June—they had eliminated all ongoing infections in the correctional institutions. They have remained a vigilant regime of protecting the inmates and the people who work in those institutions to keep the illness out.

When, for example, a corrections worker contracts the disease in his own community—not in the institution—because of the rigorous regime and the testing regime they've put in place, we've been able to very effectively keep that illness out. It's not a guarantee. We know that's a vulnerable population, but I think Correctional Services Canada did some extraordinary work, which, quite frankly, we have shared with others. There were lessons learned in that work of infection prevention and control, the workplace health and safety audits and the measures that took place in personal protection and in testing and tracing, which were extremely effective in keeping that population safe.

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

I caution all members and witnesses about run-on sentences with many conjunctions.

Madame Michaud, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all the witnesses for being here tonight.

Thank you also, Minister, for being here. It is a pleasure to meet with you again.

I have to say that it's rather curious to ask you about your 2019 mandate letter, when we had a new Speech from the Throne in 2020. I guess the priorities are the same. The good news is that you've already had almost a year to implement your commitments.

I am particularly interested in your border protection strategy. You have committed to working with the United States to modernize the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement. The pandemic has shaken that up a bit, and understandably so. It's all the more reason to be concerned about border management.

I want to go back over the chronology of events, because the few days between the border closure and the time it was requested—also the time when the World Health Organization, or WHO, declared that there was a global pandemic—could have made all the difference in stopping the spread of the virus in Quebec and Canada.

I remember telling the House that Montreal's Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport was a real sieve. It was the mayor of the city of Montreal who had to go there with employees of the Direction régionale de santé publique to inform travellers arriving from Italy and other countries around the world where the epidemic had surged. There was no quarantine information or personal protective equipment. It took some time before measures were put in place.

Why has your government been slow to close borders, especially with the U.S.?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much for the question.

Quite frankly, I'm a little shocked at the suggestion that we were slow to close the border. I've actually gone back through Hansard,

and Hansard keeps an excellent record of all of the questions that were put to the government. I can't find a single incident where anyone in any part of the House recommended closing the border with the United States.

Frankly, we were working really closely at the time primarily with British Columbia, which was very concerned about a high rate of infection in the State of Washington. I can advise that as a direct result of those conversations, the deputy prime minister and I reached out to the Americans and began a conversation with them about restricting non-essential travel. We also engaged with them in a very important discussion about maintaining essential supply lines and the movement of essential workers back and forth across the border. From that first conversation when we reached out to the United States, until the Prime Minister and the President of the United States announced it, it was less than 24 hours.

I believe we moved with incredible alacrity and speed to do that. It is the largest undefended border in the world—some 6,000 kilometres. As well, there are very many points of entry. Our officials were able to respond with remarkable speed in essentially shutting that border down very effectively to non-essential travel. It was done with I think remarkable speed. If one looks at the timing of that and compares it with actions that were taking place in other parts of the world with respect to border closures, you will see that Canada and the United States were at the forefront of that effort.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: I remember that the national president of the Customs and Immigration Union, Mr. Jean-Pierre Fortin, was a bit exasperated by the situation. He said that Canada Border Services Agency officers were being left to their own devices and that they were obviously not consulted before orders in council were issued, including this famous order in council that has been renewed every month since March 2020.

Why not be transparent and inform us of your long-term plan on border closures, instead of renewing this decree every time at the last minute?

The Premier of Quebec, Mr. Legault, said just this week that it was important to keep the border closed. The burden is quite heavy for provinces that receive a lot of migrants through official ports of entry.

What is the long-term plan? Are you going to keep the border closed for several more months? I think it would be necessary to do so. Canadians and Quebecers would also need to know a little more about it.

• (1900)

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: The border will remain closed as long as it is necessary to restrict non-essential travel from the United States or from other places of the world. We put those restrictions in place to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

I communicate regularly, and I know the president of CBSA communicates regularly, with the union representing CBSA officers.

As I noted in my opening remarks, I think they've done an extraordinary job in implementing very significant new restrictions in the exercise of their discretion to keep us safe, and I think we all owe them a debt of gratitude for the work they've done.

I engage very regularly with my counterparts in the Province of Quebec and right across Canada in our provincial and territorial discussions. We work very closely. The order in council that closes the border is for 30 days.

We continually assess conditions on both sides of the border and the effectiveness of the measures we put in place and will continue to keep that border closed until the circumstances change significantly enough to facilitate a change at the border border that would not compromise the health and safety of Canadians.

I know everybody wants to know for how long it will remain, and I think this is reasonable, especially when we see the conditions in the United States, and the very significant surge in the virus that's taking place right across that country. I believe it's very much in Canada's interest to maintain those border restrictions, and we will do that as long as it is necessary to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Michaud.

Mr. Harris, you have six minutes.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Blair and your fellow witnesses who came with you, for your presence tonight. You have a lot on your plate, so I'll get right down to business, starting with the RCMP and the mass murder in Nova Scotia back in April, which was a great tragedy.

Everyone was expecting an immediate public inquiry to be called, and in fact there were noises about that in the days following the tragedy, and of course there were questions and suspicions about the history of the perpetrator's connections with the RCMP. People wanted to get to the bottom of all that, as well as the response that took place in the communities.

It took a very long time and then eventually there was going to be a review and no inquiry. The suspicion was that the government, particularly the federal government, was interested in avoiding too much scrutiny of the RCMP, and the public of course, the victims, wanted to get to the truth and thought that a public inquiry was the best way to do that.

Why did it take so long to make a decision and why did you do a review and not an inquiry? Was there any hint of trying to protect the RCMP from scrutiny in that decision-making process?

Hon. Bill Blair: I understand the question.

Let me take this opportunity to assure you and the people of Nova Scotia, and particularly the families of those victims, that there's absolutely no intention whatsoever to hide anything.

Even in the immediate hours of the aftermath while the criminal investigation was still ongoing, I had already reached out to the Province of Nova Scotia—and of course they have inquiry authorities, as does the federal government. There were other circumstances where reviews had taken place, where the work can be done.

We reached out, for example, to retired Chief Justice MacDonald to head that up. That work began right from the outset, and the full intention was to make sure that we got all of the answers the families needed, and we also sought advice and recommendations so that the response could be improved—

● (1905)

Mr. Jack Harris: If I may interrupt, that was the whole point of a public inquiry, where witnesses would be giving evidence under oath and all of the information would be made public. That didn't happen, and it took a long time for the federal government to make up its mind.

Can you give me a direct answer to the question: Was there any attempt by the Government of Canada to avoid direct scrutiny of the RCMP?

Hon. Bill Blair: No, it was absolutely to the contrary, Jack. The intention was to answer all of the questions that arose from that terrible, tragic event, and to examine everyone's involvement, including the RCMP's. There was no intention to hide anything.

I will tell you that it is also important that a serious, significant criminal investigation was taking place. I know there was a lot of speculation and, actually, some false information put out that raised the level of anxiety. We listened very carefully to those families. It was clear that they really needed to hear and see a full public inquiry. We responded to that, and we've taken the steps. I do understand that it did take some time, after one of the panellists stepped away, to replace them.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Minister.

We hope that the public and the victims' families get the answers they need as quickly as possible, but also as thoroughly as possible, too.

Still in Nova Scotia, there were recent incidents with the Mi'kmaq lobster fishermen being attacked, harassed, beaten and their property being damaged. There was a warning from the chiefs in the Atlantic provinces to the government that there were threats happening and that this was expected, yet there was no proper RCMP response.

Why was that?

Hon. Bill Blair: Well, Jack, let me be clear. First of all, as you well know, the police jurisdiction in Nova Scotia is the responsibility of the Nova Scotia government. Seeing the level of conflict and concern that was arising there, I actually reached out to the Nova Scotia government and discussed with the Attorney General the resources required to keep the peace there and to enforce the law.

Mr. Jack Harris: But there was a failure of presence, even knowing that this was being threatened and about to happen, and even when the RCMP was present there and watching it happen, instead of intervening and protecting the peace.

Why was that?

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, I think it's important to understand that the role of the police there is primarily to maintain the peace and to prevent offences from taking place, and, when these do take place, to conduct investigations and lay charges. Jack, that has actually happened. The person responsible for assaulting Chief Sack has now been charged. The person responsible for setting fire to that van has now been charged.

Frankly, I think there was an issue of adequate resources on the scene to make sure that the police were able to do their job of keeping the peace while others worked to resolve the issues in dispute; making sure that the law was upheld; and, when people committed offences—as they did—making sure that they be held to account. We saw that the night of that terrible, tragic fire. The police have obviously now identified a person of interest. They are conducting other investigations. I'm very confident that people will be held to account for the crimes that were committed.

The Chair: Mr. Harris, you only have about 20 seconds left. Maybe we can add it to your two and half minutes in the next round.

That completes the first round. Our second round starts with Mr. Motz, for five minutes. Then we have five minutes for Madam Damoff, two and half minutes for Madame Michaud, two and half minutes for Mr. Harris, five minutes for Mr. Kurek and five minutes for Madam Khera.

Mr. Motz, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister for being here.

Minister, the Eglinton West Crips were taken down recently by a joint police investigation. They seized 31 firearms; seven kilograms of cocaine; two kilograms of fentanyl; two kilograms of meth; other drugs including heroine, oxycodone, Percocet and MDA; along with \$300,000 in cash.

How many of those arrested were licensed firearms owners, and how many of the firearms were legal in Canada?

Minister, no, I'm not going to ask you to answer that because we already know the answer. You and I, as well as all Canadians, know that the answer to that question is “none”. None of those arrested were licensed firearms owners, and none of those firearms were legal in this country.

Since coming into government in the last five years, your government has spent over \$4 billion more on public safety departments and agencies than in the previous five years, yet with all that extra funding, since 2015, every crime statistic tracked by Statistics Canada has increased. The crime rate is up. The crime severity index is up. Gang shootings are up. Gang homicides are up. Domestic violence is up. Drug use, drug addiction and drug overdoses are up. Police resource challenges are up. Border security concerns are up. Cybercrimes are up; and I could go on.

Canadians have lost trust in you and your party to protect them, regardless of the huge sums of taxpayer money that you continue to pour on the problems. Your plan is obviously failing, Minister.

Why is your massive spending failing to protect Canadians and reduce crime, as they expect their governments to do for them?

• (1910)

Hon. Bill Blair: One thing I would point out, because you began talking about some of the outstanding work that was done by the police in Ontario to deal with guns and gangs in their jurisdiction, is that we committed \$327 million to that effort, including \$65 million in the province of Ontario.

I would contrast that, Glen, with the investment that the Conservative government, in 10 years, made in dealing with gun and gang violence in Canada. In comparison to the \$327 million that we invested in a robust police response to deal with those criminals and that violence, in 10 years of Conservative government, it was not a nickel: Not a single dollar was allocated to support those police efforts.

I appreciate that you don't think we should make investments in policing, but we do, and that's—

Mr. Glen Motz: Minister, that's not at all what I said and that's not at all what I asked.

I'll move on to the next question for you.

Angus Reid's poll, before the pandemic, suggested that half of Canadians said crime has risen in their neighbourhood in the last five years. Two in three Canadians don't have faith in the criminal courts. There is a 30% increase in people reporting that they were victims of crime. Recent reports and news show that Canadians in downtown Vancouver no longer consider it a safe place to live. They're asking where their public leaders are and why they aren't doing more.

In Toronto this year, there have been well over 400 shootings and nearly 200 people killed or injured. So far this year, shootings are up 10%, alongside a 20% increase in shooting deaths. Clearly your policies are not working, as I said previously, and your plan is failing Canadians across the board.

Given that fact, what new plans are you and your government proposing that will finally address the issues around rising violent crime rates, gang crime, gang violence and the killings that plague our communities? Minister, what is a plan that will actually improve public safety across this country?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Glen.

These are very important questions, and I really appreciate your giving me an opportunity to speak to them.

First of all, I believe that financing and supporting an effective police response to deal with guns and gangs in our community is important. You didn't, but we do. We made that investment.

We also said that we were going to strengthen gun control in this country. By the way, if you want to quote various public opinion polls, Canadians overwhelmingly support strengthening gun control. We have taken some fairly significant steps to remove weapons from our society that have no place here.

We're going to do more, Glen. We're going to bring forward new legislation that will strengthen our response at the border, for example. That doesn't just mean new offences, new authorities and new penalties. It's new investments, \$89 million, that we've invested and continue to invest in the RCMP and our border services officers to make them more effective in countering the firearms smuggling into this country. These are offences that you, on the committee a couple of years ago, referred to as paper crimes that shouldn't have a penalty. I disagree.

We're also going to make it more difficult for people to gain access to firearms through criminal diversion and theft. We're taking steps to strengthen our gun control in this country to make it more difficult for criminals to get access to guns. I believe that effective gun control is an important element—

Mr. Glen Motz: Well, Minister, your plan really isn't working today, that's for sure.

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave it there.

We have Madame Damoff, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here.

Minister, the numbers coming out of the correctional services are dismal. There are rising numbers of indigenous and black Canadians in prison. SIUs are not functioning as they were legislated and intended. Dr. Doob presented absolutely horrific stats on the SIUs. The correctional investigator highlighted a number of issues that continue to need attention: employment training programs, patient advocates, the use of dry cells and more.

Having been on this committee for five years, I too find it frustrating to ask CSC the same questions time and time again, without change. Earlier today, I asked Dr. Zinger about implementing targets and mandatory reporting for CSC. He responded that the mandate letter provided to the commissioner was good but that it needs timelines and further refinement.

I'm wondering, Minister, if you would consider updating her mandate letter to provide those timelines and put targets in place.

• (1915)

Hon. Bill Blair: Pam, these are really important questions.

Commissioner Kelly is on the line. I'm reminded that I have all of the agency heads here with us today. I don't want to take their opportunity to respond, but I am in agreement with you that it's important. I think if you want to achieve something, what's measured is what's achieved. I think there needs to be clear transparency so that people can see....

I want to also commend the work of Dr. Zinger. I work very closely with Dr. Zinger. I've known him and worked with him for a number of years. I think his advice and his observations are very

important and very helpful. I listen very carefully to what he has to say.

Very clear expectations need to be defined in a number of different areas, and not just in corrections but right across the entire public safety portfolio. I think we need to have timelines clearly defined. We're working through that, Pam. I'm in agreement with that. I think it needs to be open and transparent.

I believe, by the way, that the commissioners do as well. They want to be effective. They see the challenges, frankly, of many of our systems within the criminal justice system producing really bad results for indigenous people and racialized people. We know we need to do better.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Minister.

Commissioner Lucki, Colten Boushie died in 2016. His family filed a complaint in 2016. When the RCMP ruled that officers had acted properly, the family filed another complaint to the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission.

At your last appearance before this committee, during the summer, I asked you about the report on the Colten Boushie case. At the time you said, "I can't emphasize enough the importance of such a review." As well, "The CRCC has done extensive research and a great job on the review. We need to give the same consideration to the review. I'm planning to have that review done by the fall of this year."

It's now November 2020. When can we expect your response?

Commissioner Brenda Lucki (Commissioner, Royal Canadian Mounted Police): The CRCC completed their public interest investigation in January 2020 and provided us thereafter with the interim report. Obviously, we're in the process of reviewing the high volume of relevant material. Given the complexities of the recommendations and findings by the CRCC, a bit of time is required to prepare a thorough and well-founded response.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Commissioner, with all due respect, one of the reasons that report didn't get you until January 2020 is that there was a delay in the RCMP providing the CRCC with information. Is the family going to see the report anytime soon?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Yes. As promised previously, as you mentioned, I intend on having that response completed by the end of this fall.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay. Thank you.

Commissioner Kelly, we allocated \$500 million to implement SIUs. This was a piece of legislation that I was proud to pass, but as we've learned, things have not gone as they should have. I'm wondering if you could let us know how this \$500 million has been spent and how much has been spent creating these new mental health isolation units or whatever they're called. Originally, my understanding was that the money was going to programming and additional costs needed for staffing.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Ms. Anne Kelly (Commissioner, Correctional Service of Canada): Okay.

Actually, I'd really like to be able to go back to Dr. Doob and tell a bit of the story, because there is more to the story. In terms of the money allocated, for the first year, 2019-20, it was around \$48.5 million. Some monies went to health, some to human resources, and some to SIUs. We had to hire correctional officers, program officers, parole officers and nurses. We had to train the staff, which included the correctional training program for CX—

Ms. Pam Damoff: Commissioner, could we get a breakdown sent to the committee of how much was spent on infrastructure and how much was spent on everything else?

The Chair: It would be very helpful, Commissioner, if that could be done. Then we could do some follow-up.

Unfortunately, I have to move on.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Minister, allow me to return to the issue of borders, particularly official entry points, such as Roxham Road, which is still open although the borders were closed. You will understand that it was completely unacceptable that asylum seekers could continue to enter the country while the pandemic was well underway here.

It was the perfect opportunity to permanently suspend the Safe Third Country Agreement, which makes it more advantageous for migrants to cross the border illegally than legally.

The agreement may be suspended unilaterally if six months' notice is given. It is also possible to suspend it for three months, and it is renewable without restriction. Instead, your government preferred to rely on the July Federal Court decision, which struck down the agreement on individual rights grounds. You asked the court to extend the agreement or else immigration delays and backlogs would occur. The asylum seekers responded that this was speculation, as their numbers had decreased significantly due to the pandemic.

Can you confirm that this number has decreased? If so, why did you invoke the court's decision?

• (1920)

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: If I may, let me just clarify. The movement of people across our borders, not at points of entry but through irregular migration such as at Roxham Road, we believed could not be managed safely in the circumstances of the restrictions we put in

place for non-essential travel. So we did restrict the irregular migration at the non-border point of entry. We put those restrictions in place as part of our COVID measures.

I think you're also referring to the fact that we continue to operate the safe third country agreement at the point of entry. I can confirm with you that there's been a significant reduction in the people crossing from the United States into Canada. Some people have been able to meet the exemptions under the safe third country agreement. As I'm certain you are also aware, a Federal Court decision vacated the safe third country agreement, but left it in place for six months to allow us to seek clarity from a higher court on their decision on the agreement. The justice department is seeking that greater clarity and defending that agreement. Just on Friday, we received a court decision that keeps it in place until the superior court has an opportunity to review that decision.

Finally, I can advise this committee that we've been working very closely with the United States in bilateral discussions on how that agreement might be modernized. That work has continued in parallel to the determinations that are being made in court.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Michaud.

Mr. Harris, you have two and a half minutes plus a few seconds.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to ask Commissioner Lucki a question. It arises, obviously, from the last few months of activity in relation to a study being done by our committee on systemic racism in policing, in particular in the RCMP, and the recent call by the Assembly of First Nations that you resign as commissioner because of your failure to adequately understand and deal with that issue within the RCMP.

I take no pleasure in saying this from a personal point of view, but I do want to know, in the face of a lack of confidence by one of the significant victim groups of systemic racism—the indigenous people of Canada—how can they expect you to deal effectively with that in the police force? Have you learned anything more about systemic racism since your last appearance before this committee? How can we and the public expect that you can be an effective leader in dealing with this problem?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Thank you very much for your question.

As I shared with my management team, when I talk about systemic racism in the RCMP, obviously I've learned a lot since that day when we first talked and when I did an interview. When I think about systemic racism in general terms in the police and how it occurs, there are a couple things that come to mind. Since that time, I've been listening, I've been learning, and I've been consulting with all kinds of groups, including indigenous leaders such as the former MMIWG commissioner, Marion Buller; the AFN national chief; Senator Murray Sinclair, the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Inuit women's association—

• (1925)

Mr. Jack Harris: Can I ask you directly, though, how do you intend to be able to fix it given a lack of confidence in you as a result of the statements by the indigenous leaders?

Commr Brenda Lucki: In the days and weeks following that appearance, I led the development of an action plan to address systemic racism and discrimination. The plan has been developed in co-operation with a range of stakeholders that I mentioned, and we have a total of 17 initiatives that have been under development and are being implemented. The objective—

Mr. Jack Harris: Are you prepared to make that public? Does it have timelines and targets? Is that something that is of practical effectiveness? Can you make that public?

Commr Brenda Lucki: Absolutely. It's on our website as we speak at www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca. All of the initiatives and implementation dates so far have been put on there, and it's all about—

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave it there. Mr. Harris has stretched his time.

We have Mr. Kurek for five minutes, please.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Thank you very much, and thank you, Minister, for coming before the committee today.

I'd like to give you an opportunity to correct the record. You mentioned Hansard and its being a very profound record of all things to do with parliamentary discourse. It's interesting, because on January 27, Conservatives started asking questions about COVID-19, including the borders and the various aspects of what a government response would look like. All the way up until March 12, interestingly enough, the last flight from Italy to Toronto arrived with zero officials there on arrival to inspect the passengers getting off the plane. Would you like to clarify the record on how you responded earlier to your government's supposed inaction in the beginning days of the COVID pandemic?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, I'm happy to, because, as I've mentioned, we took the very first steps of enhanced screening for border measures at the four major international airports on January 22—

Mr. Damien Kurek: Let me correct you there. Excuse me, Minister, but a major screening? Is that a check box at the end of the immigration screening line?

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, I compliment you on the clarity of your hindsight, but your memory's faulty, Mr. Kurek. And I—

Mr. Damien Kurek: I'm only referring to Hansard, Mr. Blair.

Hon. Bill Blair: Well, in Hansard, I recall very vividly the questions that were being asked at the time, and it was, as you may now

recall.... I'll remind you that in January, there was a concern about an illness that had begun to spread in Wuhan in the Hubei province in China, so we took a number of measures to screen people coming from that location. We took a progressive path to significantly increasing and enhancing border secure measures directly in a response to an evolving situation and in response to the advice that we received—

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Minister. I think the record speaks for itself, so I'll leave it to your staff to go back to Hansard to look specifically at what exactly did happen, because it's very, very revealing.

Now, it's interesting that in August, an American CEO received an exemption from quarantine, and you said that you would take care of that issue. That's a paraphrase, but it's basically what you said. Then it happened a month later with the CEO of Costco, and there have been a number of executives who have received these exemptions. Now Minister, it's interesting, in that these CEOs get exemptions, yet I hear from constituents who are looking for compassionate exemptions for medical treatment in various jurisdictions that they have to jump through every hoop imaginable. How can you defend the actions of your department when, clearly, you did not address those exemptions in the early days when they were first brought up?

Hon. Bill Blair: Let me be very clear that the restrictions that we put in place were intended to protect, and have been extremely effective in protecting, the health and safety of Canadians. As I've mentioned, our border services officers have also been extremely effective in implementing the orders in council and the regulations that have been put in place. We've also been dealing on an individual, case-by-case basis, as MPs from across the country and others have brought through cases. We've also put in place, and you mentioned some of these compassionate cases.... We've created a process that allows people to make application before they show up at the border so they can verify—

Mr. Damien Kurek: Thank you very much, Minister. I find it troubling how few applications that process was able to get through in the early days. Let's move on to another question.

Counterfeiting and smuggling are growing problems in this country. Fentanyl overdoses traced to China have continued and, in fact, exploded in the midst of COVID-19. Most guns used in shootings are from the United States, and you brag about your millions of dollars spent on border securing, security and whatnot, but we just simply haven't seen the results. How can you defend the supposed massive investments you're making when, clearly, they're not working?

Okay, I'll ask another question if you're not interested.

• (1930)

Hon. Bill Blair: Do you want me to answer the question or do you just want to make a speech?

Mr. Damien Kurek: Well, certainly, Canadians are wondering about the results of these supposedly massive investments.

I have one final question for you, Minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair? Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Bill Blair: May I have a point of order?

I'm now getting a French translation over the top of this thing.

The Chair: I'm having the same thing, so we'll just stop the clock for a second. Mr. Kurek asked a question; Minister Blair tried to respond, and then we had some overlay of the translation. I'm going to go back one minute and allow Minister Blair to respond to Mr. Kurek's question.

You have a minute, sir.

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much.

We've been restoring a lot of the cuts that were made by a previous government and we've been making investments and ensuring that our border service officers and the police have the resources and the tools they need to interdict the illicit supply of drugs, guns and other contraband material that's coming in.

You talked about counterfeit, and related to it is money laundering, Mr. Kurek. As I think you should be aware, we used to have 12 integrated proceeds of crime units with RCMP officers with extraordinary expertise. I used to work with them. Economic crime investigators.... Unfortunately, in 2013, a decision was made to close all 12 of those offices. I've been working very closely with the commissioner to restore their federal policing capacity, but it takes time to bring that expertise back after it was slashed.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Sure. Okay—

The Chair: Mr. Kurek, that exhausts your time. I'm sorry.

Mr. Damien Kurek: I had a great last question, but I'll save it for another round.

The Chair: You're just going to have to add that zinger somewhere else.

Madam Khera, you have the final five minutes.

I propose that we then take a two-minute break and then have another several rounds of questions with the minister.

Madam Khera, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Kamal Khera (Brampton West, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here. I have two quick questions.

Minister, if I may ask, the last time you were here we were talking about our study on systemic racism and policing, particularly within the RCMP. You certainly acknowledged that there is systemic racism within the RCMP and things that needed to be addressed, yet we continue to see disappointing situations involving the RCMP's involvement with indigenous communities.

Can you comment on tangible measures being taken within your mandate since our last meeting to address these ongoing shortcomings of the RCMP?

Hon. Bill Blair: Certainly, we've been working very closely with the commissioner on a number of things that the commissioner and the RCMP have been doing directly in response.

Actually, if I may, Mr. Chair, I'm going to ask the commissioner to talk about some of the steps that she's been taking, because the RCMP have been working to address concerns that were raised by the committee in our last meeting.

Commr Brenda Lucki: Thank you, Minister.

Some of the things that we've been looking at, obviously, have been to update our de-escalation and crisis intervention training and recertifying that training annually. I've been leading a discussion with the various police chiefs across the country on our intervention model.

We've created two task forces. One will be looking at a standardized framework for intervention. The second one is in response to mental health or wellness calls. That is, again, to share best practices and to find the best ways to deal with such calls, because they are obviously on the increase. We are looking at our datasets. We've recently put many of those statistics on our website, such as the use of physical intervention on our calls for service, and we added employee diversity.

We're looking at anti-racism training—to be mandatory—but it will be slightly delayed because we are going to co-develop that anti-racism training with the people who are most impacted by that and getting a lot of input to create that training. But in the meantime, we have rolled out cultural and humility training, and all senior managers have taken it. It's rolled out to all employees, and it will be mandatory for each and every employee.

We are looking at race-based data and, of course, you've heard of our rollout looking at body-worn cameras. Right now, we are implementing those body-worn cameras in Nunavut. We're testing them, and they will be out soon in Nunavut, but we are doing a request for information so that we can get the most modern technology in those cameras across the country.

We have established an Office for RCMP-Indigenous Co-Development, Collaboration and Accountability that will reach into the communities.

Of course, we're continuing to implement our national and divisional reconciliation strategies. We want to increase the use of restorative justice, especially with a focus on pre-charge restorative justice. We want to advance equity, diversity and inclusion within our organization as well, and we've completed an equity and diversity inclusion strategy.

We also are looking at strengthening timelines for public complaint processes and updating our cadet training program to reflect all of these changes, including adding in the “blanket exercise”, as well as a trauma-informed approach to dealing with victims.

We've created a missing persons module that is specifically targeted at the subject of the missing indigenous women file, so the cadets will learn not only about the actual file and how to investigate, but also about the cultural sensitivities that go with those people most impacted by such crimes.

● (1935)

Ms. Kamal Khara: Thank you, Commissioner.

Minister, if I may, I know that we've recently extended the Canada-U.S. border closure until November 30, and I think that's the right thing to do, as I've certainly heard from my constituents. As well, there's a need for it to be closed, since we're in the midst of a second way of this pandemic. Can you perhaps update us on the situation as it stands? What you can forecast for border closures, with winter and the holidays approaching, to keep Canadians safe?

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, very briefly, but it's a very important question.

I'm happy to be able to report to the committee we have now returned to a 2019 level of commercial traffic. I think that's a strong indicator of a rebounding economy, but it was also a very important part of the border restrictions that we put in place to maintain the flow of essential goods and services and essential workers back and forth across that border.

However, on the restrictions that we have put in place for non-essential travel, given the situation particularly in the United States, but even with the surge we're experiencing in many parts of Canada, we believe that those border restrictions on non-essential travel have been effective in slowing down the spread of COVID, and they will remain in place as long as necessary to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Khara.

I'm going to suspend for two minutes while people take various forms of a health break. We are going to recommence in two minutes with Mr. Van Popta for five minutes.

I have yet to be advised as to the next Liberal questioner, so if somebody could communicate with the clerk, the clerk in turn will communicate with me and then we'll know who the next Liberal questioner is.

With that, the meeting is suspended for two minutes.

● (1935)

(Pause)

● (1940)

The Chair: We're back with Mr. Van Popta, for five minutes.

An hon. member: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm having a hard time hearing you. I don't know if anyone else is as well.

A voice: I think it's because he doesn't have his headphones on.

The Chair: That could be. It's always a better thing to have your headphones on than not and also better to be able to press the mute button than not.

What has happened to Mr. Van Popta?

Mr. Tako Van Popta (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): I'm ready to go. I'm sorry. I just forgot to turn my mike on.

The Chair: Okay. We're getting technologically challenged here.

You have five minutes, Mr. Van Popta.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister Blair, for joining us, and thank you to all of the other witnesses for taking the time to join us this evening.

Mr. Minister, you said in your opening remarks that your ministry pivoted to a COVID response when the World Health Organization declared this to be a pandemic. I want to ask you a question related to that. Were you made aware of the cancellation of the health pandemic early warning system that had been in place in Canada since the 1990s and had put Canada in a good position to defend against the SARS and the H1N1 outbreaks?

Sadly, it was cancelled six months before the COVID-19 pandemic. Was that your decision, Minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: No, it wasn't, Mr. Van Popta. In fact, that is not part of my ministerial responsibilities.

But I can tell you that there was a lot of information that we were receiving and we were tracking very carefully, beginning even in December with the emergence of that illness in China at the time. We continue to receive regular updates, but I don't have any direct knowledge of that organization you referenced.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Well, certainly, Mr. Minister, that would seem to fall within your mandate, which I'm reading from your mandate letter: “As Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, you will lead the Government's work in ensuring that Canadians are kept safe from a range of threats”.

Certainly, a worldwide pandemic, the worst in a hundred years, would seem to fit that. Surely the Minister of Health consulted with you.

Hon. Bill Blair: I work very closely with the Minister of Health on a number of issues, but my responsibility is overseeing the national security establishment in Canada, and of course public health is the responsibility of the Minister of Health. I might suggest that you would direct your questions in that regard to her.

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Thank you.

Mr. Minister, were you aware that the Chinese Communist Party was using the United Front workers to siphon medical supplies out of Canada into China? Certainly, if we had had the global warning system, we would have detected that and would have been in a better position.

Hon. Bill Blair: What I can tell you is that we recognize and monitor very carefully all activities of what can sometimes be referred to as “hostile state actors” as they pertain to the safety and the security of Canadian interests. The national security establishment is absolutely diligent in their responsibility to monitor that information and to take the steps necessary to protect Canadian interests.

I'm privileged to be joined today by our director of CSIS, who might be able to provide you with additional information as to the activities they undertake to keep Canadians safe.

Mr. David Vigneault (Director, Canadian Security Intelligence Service): Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Van Popta, for your question. This is a very important item when we talk about the safety and security of Canadians. At CSIS, we do investigate the threats posed by different actors. We advise government and we take measures to reduce the threats.

You mentioned specifically the United Front Work Department, the UFWD. This is an organization that we're very familiar with. We are concerned about the activities of the UFWD. A number of these actions will be contrary to Canada's national security, and we are taking measures. You will understand that I cannot go into the details of these measures, but this is a threat that we are seized with.

• (1945)

Mr. Tako Van Popta: Let me ask you this question then, sir. Would the early warning system have put us in a better position to have detected what was going on with the united front?

Mr. David Vigneault: My understanding of the early warning system, the Global Public Health Information Network housed at the Public Health Agency, is that it was to do open-source research to determine what we call “low signal” potential pandemic issues. This was an organization that was very much looking at early warning from an open-source perspective. As for your question specifically regarding PPE and the use of UFWD maybe to obscure the sourcing and procurement of some of the PPE in Canada to export back to China, this would not have been in the remit of the Global Public Health Information Network.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Van Popta.

One of either Mr. Anandasangaree, Madam Khera or Madam Damoff, you have five minutes

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and your colleagues, for joining us today. It is good to see you again.

Minister, I wanted to start with you and ask you a very direct question about hostile state actors. I know it's an issue that's confounding many countries, including the United States. There was a significant report last week by the FBI—and I know in Canada, it's becoming an increasingly worrisome issue. Can you comment on the steps the government is taking towards ensuring that hostile state actors don't harm Canadians, and that their role here is quite limited?

Hon. Bill Blair: A number of my agencies and departments, in particular CSIS, are seized with this. As part of the national security establishment, we monitor very carefully the hostile activities of a number of different state actors. I would also direct you, Gary, to a report that was issued earlier by NSICOP, a committee of parliamentarians that also identifies the growing risk of the activities of certain countries. For example, NSICOP did point specifically to the activities of the Government of China as an example of a state actor whose actions that can be contrary to the interest of Canadians.

I want to be very clear, Gary, that we remain vigilant and are taking the steps necessary to protect Canadians' interest against undue influence and intimidation of Canadians at home and abroad. We recognize that activities are undertaken by a number of state actors contrary to Canada's interests with respect to the misappropriation of intellectual property and influencing various economic decisions. I want to assure you and this committee that we remain vigilant and that we are very thoughtful and mindful of our responsibilities to protect Canadian interests.

I would leave it at that. I don't know whether the director wants to add further to it. I think in fairness, we can't and shouldn't get into specifics of that work, but I believe Canadians need to be reassured that we remain vigilant and are prepared to act to protect their interests.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Minister, for the answer.

Commissioner Lucki, I think that within the last six months and since your last appearance, we've seen a continuing issue with racism permeating the RCMP. One of the conversations that I've had over the last several weeks is about why is there one set of rules for people who are racialized, indigenous or black, and a certain other set of rules for others. We saw that clearly in the way the RCMP handled the issue of the fisheries in Nova Scotia.

Madam Commissioner, we need a direct action plan. I know you've outlined several things the RCMP is doing. However, as I indicated the last time I spoke, the situation is urgent. We have seen extraordinary work; for example, the chief of police in Peel just signed up with the Ontario Human Rights Commission—a significant game-changer in the way policing is going to be undertaken in Peel. I think there are very concrete steps available for the RCMP to take in Canada.

When can we expect direct and concrete action on racism? This is the issue of our time in my opinion, even more so than the pandemic. I think it's one where relative silence is problematic. Can you give us some specific timelines, please?

• (1950)

Commr Brenda Lucki: I mentioned before that we're looking at our organization as a whole. We're looking at those systems and those processes, those policies and procedures, that will eliminate systemic racism, including, which I haven't mentioned yet, our whole recruiting process. We're looking at the way in which we recruit. We want to make sure we are in fact reflective of the communities we serve. We want to make sure our proactive recruiters are reflective of that and we also bring in, within the recruiting systems, the right people. We will be testing for those types of behaviours that could negatively impact their interactions. We will be sure to bring in the best people through character-based leadership.

Again, once they get in, we need to make sure the training continues. We've introduced a number of training initiatives at our academy. That will continue until the full set of leadership training that we brought in during the last six to eight months, or actually in the last year—

The Chair: Unfortunately, we have to leave the answer there.

I'm sorry to be interrupting people continuously, but we are under a clock.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michaud, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the October announcement on easing family reunification measures, the minister emphasized the need for the Canada Border Services Agency to work with the Public Health Agency of Canada and with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

The Canada Border Services Agency is part of the Department of Public Safety, right?

You can answer me with yes or no, given the time constraints.

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, it does.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: In this case, it is particularly important to know where the direction and leadership comes from, because it is clear that decisions made at the border by border services officers are extremely arbitrary.

I'll give you an example of a case I worked on concerning a citizen who wanted to bring her spouse from abroad. People used words like “probably”, and I was told that the final decision would be made by the person who would be at the port of entry at that time, without giving me any specific indications about the cases in advance.

As you mentioned earlier, your government does a lot of work on a case-by-case basis. However, it must be understood that our citizens do not necessarily have the reflex to call their member of Parliament when they are turned back at the border. My colleague gave the example of people who were granted an exemption and were able to enter Canada without having to quarantine.

So why is it that the Canada Border Services Agency's actions are not clear and predefined, and that each case depends on the judgment of individual border services officers?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: You raise a couple of very important points. I'll try to answer them very quickly.

First of all, you refer to the business executives coming in at the border. Business executives are not exempt unless they are engaged in, first of all, essential work. We've actually defined for the entire country, all the provinces and territories, what constitutes essential work. It's based on the 10 critical infrastructure sectors that have been identified in the economy. They must be engaged in essential work. As well, the purpose of their travel must be essential. So they must be qualified for entry by being on that list, but then it's up to the border service officers to determine the essential nature of their transit into Canada.

Now, with respect to compassionate cases, it often involves such things as attestations, doctors' reports, and other evidence that frankly is not able to be evaluated by the border service officers, some of it for privacy reasons. So we've established a process. This is very important. If it's for qualification under a family reunification, those processes are managed by the immigration department, the IRCC. If it is a compassionate reason, for not family related but rather for other types of relationships, such as somebody coming to visit a relative who may be dying of a terminal illness, then that's managed by the Public Health Agency of Canada. That process enables officials to determine the eligibility of that person for exemption. That eligibility is predetermined and presented to the border service officer, who then can allow that individual in. It's actually a very robust system that we've put in place.

• (1955)

The Chair: Unfortunately, we will have to leave that answer there.

Mr. Harris, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Chair.

We talked about systemic racism in policing, but there's also, of course, well-known systemic racism in the prison system in our country under the Correctional Service of Canada. Tom Cardoso's story in *The Globe and Mail's* last weekend identified clear racial discrimination in risk assessments, leading to longer sentences, fewer rehabilitation programs, less access to programs and harsher treatment within prison.

We also had Anthony Doob's report a couple of days ago that underscored the systemic discrimination and gross failure to meet our obligations under the Charter of Rights in the use of solitary confinement, now called SIUs. These things continue to be discovered, layer after layer, and upended. When are we going to see actual changes that will reduce the prison population of indigenous people and people of colour? When are we going to see these fixes being done?

I want to ask the minister that, not the representatives of the CSC. They have 19,000 employees for 12,500 inmates, down from 14,000 a few years ago. Why is there not action taken? Why are we waiting for oversight after oversight to reiterate the problem without a solution?

The Chair: Unfortunately, you only have less than a minute.

Hon. Bill Blair: Jack, we're not waiting. As a matter of fact, we brought in Professor Anthony Doob to oversee and comment and assist us with the implementation of the SIUs. We take these issues very seriously, and I want to demonstrate to you how seriously.

In the throne speech, Jack, the government made a very strong commitment. We said that we would introduce legislation and make investments to address systemic inequities in all phases of the criminal justice system, from diversion to sentencing, from rehabilitation to records. We've undertaken, and will move forward with, enhanced civilian oversight of all of our law enforcement agencies, including the RCMP. We're modernizing training for law enforcement, including dealing with standards of use of force, de-escalation, dealing with people in crisis and with training for anti-racism. We've also undertaken to co-develop, with indigenous nations, a new legislative framework for first nations policing as an essential service.

Jack, there's much more to do, but we've made real commitments. I look forward to having your support in—

Mr. Jack Harris: When is it going to happen? That is the question.

The Chair: It is a bit of a challenge for the chair to get two Irishmen to stop talking at each other.

With that, we're going to move to Mr. Motz for five minutes, please.

Mr. Glen Motz: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, your government keeps telling Canadians that you are committed to evidence-based decision-making. In fact, your mandate letter even contains that same statement. Yet, without any evidence to support the following decision, you told Canadians on May 1, through an order in council, that you were banning military-style assault rifles under the guise of improving public safety. You and your government invented the term “military-style assault” rifle to deliberately mislead Canadians not familiar with Canada's already vigorous gun laws into believing that we have a problem where none exists. In fact, military and assault rifles are already prohibited in Canada—you know this already—and have been for over 40 years. Everyone knows that taking the lazy approach and attacking Canada's law-abiding firearm owners will do nothing to improve public safety. Most Canadians are left to wonder what the real motive is behind the Liberal's misguided gun ban plan.

As I said, on May 1 you banned 1,500 types and models of firearms. These firearms, up to that point in time, had been approved by the RCMP as safe and legal to own. Since then nearly 500 more firearms and numerous variants have been added to that banned list—almost 2,000 now. Is that number fairly accurate?

Hon. Bill Blair: Glen, though you and I could debate it, I think it's important to hear what the people responsible for keeping our communities said.

The Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police said, “Ontario's police leaders support a prohibition on all military-designed assault rifles. In our view, these weapons have no place in our communities and should be reserved for use by Canada's military”.

The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police declared that there should be a ban on the importation of these weapons. They said that, “Military assault rifles”—their language—“were produced for the sole purpose of killing people in large numbers.”

The current president of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police said, in response to the prohibition we introduced May 1, that the association believe that the measure taken by the government were balanced and ensured the safety of their members when they respond to calls for service.

I think the evidence is overwhelming—

• (2000)

Mr. Glen Motz: Minister, you and I both know there is no such thing as military-style assault weapons in this country. They've been banned for 40 years. To misguide and mislead Canadians is disingenuous on your part.

You didn't answer my question about how many are actually banned, because either you don't know... If you don't know the answer to that question, then how are Canadians supposed to know, given that the firearms reference table is not even available to them, but only to law enforcement and retailers.

I want to move on to the next question.

In June, in the House, I asked you how many times you had changed the list of banned firearms. You told me that it was none. Clearly, that was untrue. I asked you how many .22-calibre firearms you had banned. You didn't answer the question. I then asked you how many shotguns you had banned. You said, "we did not prohibit any shotguns". Again, that was clearly untrue. In fact, the May 1 firearms ban now includes over 80 .22 low-calibre rifles and over 60 shotguns. Additionally, you've banned over 300 single-shot rifles used for hunting and target shooting.

Minister, you have made numerous statements that you know are factually inaccurate. This entire debate requires truth, honesty and to be fact-based, not deliberate misguided or misleading statements and fearmongering.

Can you please explain to the Canadian public how .22-calibre rifles, pump-action rifles, break-open single-shot rifles and shotguns can possibly be categorized as military-style fully-automatic rifles? Why mislead the House, the committee and Canadians, Minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: Just to be very clear, Glen, we're not misleading anyone. We're taking the necessary action to strengthen gun control and to protect Canadians. Although I appreciate your advocacy on behalf of the gun lobby, our advocacy and our work is on behalf of Canadians and keeping them safe.

Let me be very clear. On May 1, we issued by order in council a prohibition, and nothing has been added to that except.... I would just point out to you that firearms that were prohibited in that list included designs, receivers or other variants of rifles such as the AR-10 and the AR-15, which made them prohibited. Then it is the responsibility of the RCMP and the Canadian firearms program to identify additional weapons that contain those variants and receivers as prohibited, and that's the work they've done.

Mr. Glen Motz: You can't blame the RCMP for this.

Hon. Bill Blair: Glen, I'm not blaming anyone; I'm just trying to explain to you that's what—

Mr. Glen Motz: These are not military-style assault rifles. You and I both know that.

The Chair: Okay. I appreciate that vigorous exchange.

With that, we're going to move on to Madam Damoff, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair. My turn has come up sooner than I thought.

Minister, I think I'll direct this one to you.

I've been made aware of a few older studies from 2010 to 2015 on body-worn cameras. I had a group from my riding meet with your staff last week and they had some more recent data, in particular a 2019 study from the Metro DC police. It's the largest scale randomized study of body-worn cameras to date. The conclusion was that body-worn cameras "have very small and statistically insignificant effects on police use of force in civilian complaints".

I know there's a pilot project happening right now in Iqaluit. I'm concerned that we could be spending money on something that could be better spent on actually transforming policing, things like

enhancing indigenous policing. Here I'm thinking of the pilots like the one in Toronto at Native Family and Child Services—which is based on the one at Kwanlin Dün—to deal with urban indigenous policing issues, or mental health support.

Are we treating Iqaluit as a pilot and actually looking at the data, or have we made a commitment to body cameras for all of the RCMP?

● (2005)

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much. It's an important question.

Pam, I want to be really clear. We're not talking about body cameras as a panacea and a response to the myriad of issues and concerns that have been identified. One of the concerns that we heard very clearly is the need for accountability. There is a very strongly held belief, and I believe there is evidence for it, that the best evidence of a transaction or an interaction between the police and any citizen is video evidence. We've seen the value of that video evidence. It has revealed cases that otherwise would never have come to light. Ensuring that there is an accurate record of that interaction is an important element of accountability.

However, the camera in and of itself doesn't do anything unless we also have regimes of fulsome accountability that are transparent, fair and timely. In earlier discussions, we talked about the importance of putting those systems in place. We're absolutely committed to putting in a far more robust system of oversight and accountability, and making sure there is the best evidence of those transactions is also an element of that.

There is also some suggestion I believe that when there is an accurate record of the interaction between the police and the public, people tend to behave a little better—ideally. I think that's hopeful.

We saw some of those terrible tragedies in the United States. For example, the George Floyd incident likely would not have come to the public's attention without the video evidence that was available. That, quite frankly, has changed the world and changed our society. Video evidence is compelling, and I believe it is the basis for very strong reform.

I want to assure you that we've been working with Iqaluit, with the territories and the provinces. I believe there are a number of measures that we can take.

I also want to assure you that although body cameras are one element of improving accountability, they do not take the place of all of the other important work—of improving training, hiring, and the relationship building and the work we must do in communities to connect with people. That involves a number of different policing models, and, as I mentioned, a new legislative framework for dealing with indigenous policing. There's a great deal of work to do.

Although it's one element, I think there's value in the body-cam rollout. We're seeing that in police jurisdictions right across Canada, and it will include the RCMP. However, it's not all that we need to do. Certainly, it's not in any way an alternative, but in addition to the things that need to happen.

The Chair: You have a little less than a minute.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thanks, Minister.

I guess I go back to my question about Colten Boushie, though, because if we can't get reports back when there are issues and complaints that come forward.... I know you're as frustrated with that as I am, Minister.

I'll turn the rest of my time over to Ms. May.

Hon. Bill Blair: Pam, if I can respond very quickly to that, I agree. For complaint systems to be fair and actually serve people, they have to be objective; they have to be fair and timely. It's not fair to the complainant and it's not fair to the police officer to have these matters unresolved for an almost indefinite period of time.

We'll bring forward.... I know that the commissioner and the CR-CC chair are working on new timelines, but I believe we may require legislative and regulatory amendment that compels people to get that done on time.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff

Ms. Stubbs, you have five minutes, and I hoped to squeeze a question in from Ms. May towards the end of this final round.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Thanks, Chair. I'll try to speak speedily, although I know it's a lot worse for the translators.

Minister, I have a quick question, because corrections is under your mandate.

In the latest correctional investigator's report, he raised serious concerns about euthanasia in prisons. He called on the government to stop the practice altogether. Today he was at the committee and said he is deeply disturbed by three instances that he said should never have happened.

You responded to the report, but you didn't make a commitment on that exact recommendation. I just wonder, yes or no, if you plan to implement it.

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, to be clear, the correctional investigator pointed out very serious concerns with medical assistance in dying that took place within the institution. He believed that it wasn't appropriate. I agree with him, and we'll together take steps to ensure that people who require that assistance receive it in a health facility and not inside a prison.

• (2010)

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: Following-up some of the questions by our colleague Ms. Michaud, you answered in part about declarations of workers who are essential.... I want to tell you from the ground that there is confusion and inconsistency, even about those decisions.

For example, I have a constituent who is a pilot. He came with another pilot from exactly the same conference, from exactly the same state. They came to the border. One was arbitrarily determined to be essential, and the other wasn't. They literally travelled together. There still seem to be problems even in that area.

In addition, when billionaire Uline executives were granted access to Canada and exempted from the quarantine restrictions in August, you said that the CBSA had made a mistake. You said, "A decision was made by officers based on the information provided. Entry should not have been permitted."

Could you tell us what specific direction or guidance you subsequently gave CBSA to prevent decisions that you said were mistakes?

Hon. Bill Blair: Unfortunately, it was incorrectly reported. When you asked me the question, suggesting that a national interest exemption had been granted in that case, it wasn't true. It was, in fact, a decision made by the border services officer. I wonder if the president of CBSA, John Ossowski, can talk a bit about the direction he gave to his officers in response to that case.

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs: That's okay, Minister. I'll move on to a couple more questions for you. Because you had said it was a mistake, I had wondered what directions you had given.

For more clarity, last week, when I asked about the UPS executive coming to Canada, your colleague, Minister Champagne, said that exemptions are granted after extensive consultations with Global Affairs, along with public health agencies, the provinces and territories.

On the one hand, there seems to be an assertion that decisions are made individually by CBSA agents on a case-by-case basis. The other minister, however, says they are made after extensive consultations with multiple groups. I guess it's fair for Canadians to be confused.

I have questions about Canadian citizens themselves, and a couple of examples. Canadians who make a wrong turn and end up at the border are being forced to quarantine when they turn around and go home. Canadians who simply need to deal with a visa issue are given papers saying that they were never in the U.S.A, but CBSA still instructs them to put their plans on hold and quarantine for 14 days.

A colleague told me about an elderly man who went too far and ended up at a border crossing by mistake. The U.S. border officials politely told him to turn around. He didn't leave his car, but when he came to the CBSA officials, he was told to go home and quarantine for 14 days.

It's fair for Canadians to be asking specifically for clarity about the double standard and the inconsistency. Why are elite American billionaires granted quarantine exemptions and are able to travel the country freely, yet Canadian citizens, in a variety of situations, are being told to put their lives on hold and to quarantine in their homes?

Hon. Bill Blair: First of all, there are no billionaires that are given carte blanche exemptions. In the vast majority of cases, whenever there is a national interest exemption... I'll give you an example of one I granted. There was an American citizen who had to come to Canada. She was the victim of a very serious sexual assault and had to come here to testify against her accuser; otherwise, the court was going to lose jurisdiction. That was an Alberta case. I issued a national interest exemption for that person to come into the country. We put in place, with the regional and provincial health authority and the Public Health Agency of Canada, a very rigorous regime for that individual to follow to make sure that Canadians were not put at risk.

I also want to assure you that, with respect to those individuals who left Canada and were then turned back, we resolved the issue by an order in council that was effective October 31, two days ago, and now those individuals will be able to return without going into quarantine, unless they got out and were exposed on the American side, in which case we'll take whatever steps are necessary to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

The Chair: We'll have to leave it there.

Ms. Khera, you have five minutes.

Ms. Kamal Khera: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question is for Commissioner Kelly.

We had Dr. Zinger before this committee just an hour ago testifying on his annual report. His report was quite appalling in showcasing the unfortunate reality of correctional services. He was very critical of inmates' lack of access to credible educational and vocational resources, as it impedes their ability to find meaningful work upon completion of their sentences.

Can you talk about the educational and vocational opportunities that are currently provided? What is your plan to incorporate some of his recommendations?

• (2015)

The Chair: Commissioner Kelly.

Ms. Anne Kelly: For us, obviously, education, vocational training and employment are key factors for the safe and successful reintegration of offenders.

I just want to share with you that, of the offenders who have an identified need for an upgrade to their education, when we look at 2017-2018 and up to now, the percentage has actually been increasing. It's the same for the offenders with an identified need for vocational training. Our percentages have been increasing.

The other good thing is that when we look at the results related to an upgrade in education prior to the end of the sentence for indigenous offenders, that also has been increasing. For indigenous offenders it's actually 74%, compared to 65% for non-indigenous offenders. This is certainly an increase. The same applies to women. There's been an increase from 64.7% to 80%.

I heard what the OCI had to say. Definitely we offer a number of kinds of vocational training, with third party certification. I do want to stress that in 2019-20, it was probably the most we've offered. Almost 18,000 certifications were earned by male offenders, of which 5,000 were for indigenous men. There were 2,500 for women, of which 1,000 were for indigenous women.

Our vocational certifications cover a significant breadth of types of employment. There are certifications for safety, construction, horticulture and manufacturing. Definitely CORCAN is working very hard to expand the breadth of services we can offer.

There's another thing we're looking at and are quite excited about. We discussed it at our executive committee just two weeks ago. It's to establish a virtual approach to deliver critical CSC correctional programs digitally. Certainly COVID-19 has shown us that we need to move more into digital services. Definitely CSC has its challenges, but this is where we're moving to.

We're also ready to launch a digital education pilot at one of our Ontario institutions. I will admit that it's been in the works for quite some time, but now it's going to be launched. I'm looking forward to the results, because this is something we're going to be looking at expanding.

Ms. Kamal Khera: Thank you.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Kamal Khera: My next question is for Commissioner Lucki.

Commissioner, perhaps I alluded to this the last time you were here, but we've had a significant number of witnesses who talked about this.

There have been many calls for the reconstruction of the RCMP to remove contract policing. We've certainly heard this call from numerous witnesses, who mentioned that the RCMP is too big, that it has too many roles, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to govern, and that the RCMP needs to get out of contract policing.

We have seen disappointing shortcomings in this, even just recently in the RCMP's failed approach to advancing indigenous reconciliation. In fact, we have seen quite the opposite.

Could you comment on whether you think the current RCMP contracting model is a good idea, considering your mandate to advance indigenous reconciliation, or whether you think it should be removed?

The Chair: Unfortunately, that question took us down to about three seconds for the answer, which probably would mean an unsatisfactory response. We'll have to ask that question at some other point.

Madame Michaud, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Harris, you have two and a half minutes. I'm going to try to get Madam May in for two and a half minutes, as well. That should pretty well do it.

Madame Michaud.

• (2020)

[Translation]

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I agree less with my Conservative colleagues on your commitment to firearms. You promised to ban assault weapons, but we see that some models are still on sale. I am thinking, for example, of the Remington ACR, which has aspects quite similar to the AR-15. There's also the SKS, which looks a lot like the AK-47, except that it has a fixed magazine. These weapons are still unrestricted at the moment, and many others fall between the regulatory cracks.

The problem is that your government has chosen to legislate on the most popular or frequently used weapons, instead of clearly defining what assault weapons are and banning them all at once. You are reacting to tragedies, such as the one that occurred in Nova Scotia, instead of acting preventatively and taking the time to do the right thing.

By banning the most frequently used models, people may turn to other models that can do the job just as well. Don't you think this makes your measure completely useless?

[English]

The Chair: Minister, your mute button is on.

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you.

I believe that the measures we've put in place have been very effective, and we've essentially stopped the market for those weapons. I will also tell you that the criteria that we applied—for example, with respect to the SKS carbine—was that they'd be of modern design. Of course, the SKS carbine's origins were back during the Second World War, so it was not included on this list.

I also want to assure you, Ms. Michaud, that in addition to the legislation that I talked about bringing forward, we're also looking at establishing an evergreening process so that the Canadian firearms program will continue to evaluate weapons that represent a risk. This will enable us to make sure that weapons that should not be available in Canada won't be available in Canada because we know that the gun industry is agile and adept at bringing forward new models and variants in order to try to get around the rules. We've seen evidence of that quite vigorously over the past several years, so we'll have a system that maintains an evergreening process of classification, but it will be necessary to keep Canadians safe.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Harris, you have two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Jack Harris: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Blair, you quoted the throne speech to me in response to my question about action, yet you had a recommendation back in June from Ivan Zinger about legislation related to fixing the issue of sexually coercive violence in prisons. Mr. Zinger said something today that struck me as very remarkable: that the CSC has a history of being dismissive and unresponsive to his recommendations.

I have two questions for you. Why are you passing the buck to this committee to look at legislation instead of sending it off to the justice department to go ahead and draft something, because there's a great set of recommendations and plans set out by Dr. Zinger?

Second, are you going to fix this business of the CSC's being unresponsive and dismissive of recommendations by the correctional investigator?

Hon. Bill Blair: Jack, these are important questions.

First of all, with respect to Dr. Zinger's report on sexual violence and sexual coercion in our institutions, that's completely unacceptable. He did make recommendations for us to consider legislation, and I actually thought that the public safety committee, all of you, might find the opportunity to really contribute to that discussion, to make sure that we take an appropriate and comprehensive response to that. It's entirely up to the committee, by the way. I'll leave it to all of your good judgment whether or not you think that's an effective use of your time. We're still quite prepared to deal with the issue. There are a number of other ways, as you've suggested. I actually have a great deal of respect for the input and the contribution that parliamentarians can make to this, and I thought it might be something worthy of your response.

I also don't agree that the CSC has been non-responsive, but at the same time, I really value the work of the correctional investigator. He and I speak quite frequently, and I'm absolutely committed to ensuring that we do the things that are necessary to produce better outcomes for people in our correctional institutions and that we fulfill our duty of care to keep them safe while they are incarcerated in our federal institutions. I work very closely with the federal investigator. I very much value his advice and his work. I will also tell you that from my work with the Correctional Service of Canada and Commissioner Kelly, I believe them to be very sincere in their desire and in their effort to produce better outcomes. I cited earlier in the discussion the extraordinary work that they did in the pandemic to keep their inmates safe. I believe that they are making progress, and I am prepared to support them in that work based on the excellent advice we receive from the correctional investigator and, hopefully, with good advice and input from the public safety committee as well.

• (2025)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Harris and Minister Blair.

Why is it that, with Minister Blair and Mr. Harris, I am forever struggling to stay within the time frame? I guess it's just coincidental.

Next we'll go to Madam May, who will of course never stray beyond the time frame that is allocated to her, which in this case is two and a half minutes.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Chair, I'm extremely grateful for this opportunity.

Minister Blair, regarding the language in the mandate letter, I had to search for it to figure out whether this is really speaking to racism, but the idea that you have been mandated to address "unconscious bias and cultural competency training" seems to coalesce around the idea that Superintendent Lucki has told us that we're going to see anti-racism training.

I want to put something to you and ask whether you don't think this would be more productive. In the United States, in 2006, the FBI reported that white supremacist groups were deliberately infiltrating law enforcement and the U.S. military. Are you willing to take this on and ask your CBSA and RCMP directors to do a complete screen of the social media content of all their employees and find the ones who belong to Proud Boys, find the ones who were white supremacists, who don't have unconscious bias but have overt racism, and remove those people from service?

Hon. Bill Blair: Elizabeth, I agree that there's absolutely no place in policing, in law enforcement or in any element of public service for racists, white supremacists, anti-Semites and Islamophobes. I think we have a responsibility to purge those influences and those individuals from the public service, and most certainly from policing.

I believe that the overwhelming majority of police officers do their job with integrity, professionalism and very sincere respect for all people in Canada, but we also know that ideologically motivated extremism—white supremacy—is unfortunately and tragically pervasive in certain elements of our society. I am in complete agreement that there needs to be absolute vigilance among those responsible for policing and our military, and any other element of public service, to make sure that there is no place for it there. I will also assure you that we are pretty vigorous in the national security establishment. We started to clearly identify the threat of ideologically motivated extremism, and in particular, white supremacists, neo-Nazis and others. We're tracking them down and making sure that we take effective action to prevent their influence in our society.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Are you looking for them within the forces?

The Chair: Ms. May, I'm sorry to cut you off there.

Minister, the question was whether you were actually looking for them. Anyway, you can respond directly.

I believe my Conservative colleagues have a minute or two.

Mr. Kurek, is that correct?

Mr. Damien Kurek: That is correct. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister. It has been a very enlightening evening.

I have a couple of quick questions.

Can you share with the committee what percentage of rail cars are inspected as they come across our borders?

Hon. Bill Blair: I would refer that question to the person responsible for the inspection of rail cars crossing the border, who would be the president of CBSA.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Okay. If I could get a quick answer on that, it would be fantastic.

Hon. Bill Blair: Why don't I undertake to get you that information and I will make sure that we send it to you?

The CBSA does an extraordinary job of collecting data. I have a ton of it that I'm happy to share with you.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Sure. I appreciate that.

As a final statement, I would just say that a number of rail workers and border enforcement officers have brought forward significant concerns to me, saying that the percentage is very low and that there's an inadequate regime when it comes to follow-through in ensuring that contraband and illegal goods crossing our borders in rail cars are well taken care of.

I will cede the rest of my time to my colleague Mr. Motz, if there is any.

• (2030)

The Chair: There's one minute left for Mr. Motz.

Mr. Glen Motz: Perfect.

Minister, as you know, crime or evidence labs are a significant part of the landscape for law enforcement in this country. As a result, we see that currently the RCMP provides nationally mandated lab services for those law enforcement agencies that don't have their own lab or can't afford to use private labs. We know there are huge delays and certain amounts of evidence are being rejected. I'm told by crime technicians from the RCMP lab that they're restricting capacity, limiting capacity, and even limiting the outsourcing of evidence currently to private labs, which adds even further to those backlogs. We know we're losing convictions on serious crimes, such as sexual assaults, across this land because of that.

I wonder whether you would commit today to ensuring that we address those backlogs to make sure that those who commit these crimes are held responsible based on the evidence that has been gathered and that we don't lose them because we can't get the lab results back in a timely manner.

The Chair: Respond very briefly, please.

Hon. Bill Blair: Glen, it's a very important question.

I agree that the National Police Services of the RCMP and the labs they oversee provide a very important service not just to the RCMP but also to police services across the country.

I don't want to get back into the impact of all of the cuts that the RCMP experienced, but we've been significantly reinvesting in their capacity to deliver those services, because we recognize how important they are as well.

The Chair: That brings our evening to a close.

I want to thank Minister Blair and all of his officials for spending these last two hours with us.

I particularly appreciate the change in the threat posture with respect to the Government of China. I have long taken a public position that we have to treat China differently, so it was encouraging to hear the minister's comment.

Colleagues, you also know that we don't have Jean-Marie David as our clerk tonight. Jean-Marie has been reassigned away from this committee, and we now have a new clerk, Mike MacPherson.

Welcome, Mike, to the committee and thank you for keeping us on track.

Finally, colleagues, I just want to say that we keep getting all of these assignments and work piling up. Unless I hear otherwise, I'm going to see if I can squeeze out two hours next week for a virtual meeting even though the House is not sitting, just to try to work into the backlog.

With that thank you, colleagues, and Minister, and your officials. Good evening.

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