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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 17 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, October 28, 2020, the committee will commence its study of the review of the employment insurance program.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion with five minutes of opening remarks, followed by questions. We have with us, from the Department of Employment and Social Development, Benoît Long, chief transformation officer; Andrew Brown, director general; and Michael MacPhee, director general.

I'm not sure if this is necessary, but for the benefit of the witnesses, I will offer a few additional comments.

Interpretation of the video conference will work very much like an in-person committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

Mr. Long, you have the floor for five minutes. Welcome to the committee.

[Translation]

Mr. Benoît Long (Chief Transformation Officer, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Government of Canada's legacy systems that support the delivery of our key income support programs are among the oldest IT systems in Canada still in use today. The EI system is nearly 50 years old. The CPP one is 20, and the OAS system is nearly 60. The age and condition of these systems are a continual concern for ESDC. Building and maintaining enterprise IT systems is a high-risk item for governments with low public visibility. Canadians do not think about the benefits of delivery systems until they fail.

The 2010 OAG report provides a full measure of the risks that we manage every day to deliver the benefits that over nine million people depend on every day to live. As a result of a succession of budget investments, ESDC has made progress in addressing technical debt on EI, CPP and OAS, and ensuring that benefit payments continue to flow. There are considerable costs and risks in continuing to extend the life and add on to the aged systems. Some of these include upgrades to reflect new policy changes that are costly and sometimes present significant and unsolvable technological obstacles, given the state of these legacy systems.

Some of the code is in a language that's so archaic it's no longer taught in universities. Critical personnel retire, and their knowledge slowly gets lost. Decision-makers value optionality in EI of course, as governments have always sought optionality in those cases, and it allows targeting of particular groups that need help. This challenge has also led to a complex web of rules and code built out over nearly five decades, and the people who can program this custom system are becoming fewer and harder to find.

As you may recall from last year, there were many stories in the United States about many states unable to reconfigure their UI systems because they couldn't find the right personnel to do the work. The complex application and processing requirements that underpin these legacy systems lead to higher rates of error, mistakes, missed payments and fraud. They cost money and shake citizens' trust in our systems. These systems were never intended for today's needs—both the needs of public servants supporting the government and Canadian citizens alike.

Finally, applying for benefits on these old systems can be complicated and confusing. The number of unclaimed benefits is high, particularly in the pension piece, and those unpaid are almost always our country's most vulnerable, including low-income seniors, indigenous people and persons with disabilities.

Of course, we do have a plan. Our goal is to build on the EI service quality review that was done a couple of years ago, which showed that many Canadians feel they're waiting too long for the benefits they need. The panel's recommendations at the time were for improvements to the EI program, including replacing outdated technology systems. In 2020, the Government of Canada announced in its Speech from the Throne that the government will make generational investments in updating outdated IT systems to modernize the way the government serves Canadians, from the elderly to the young, from people who are looking for work to those living with a disability.

Moreover, over the coming months, the EI system will become the sole delivery mechanism for employment benefits, including for Canadians who did not qualify for EI before the pandemic. The pandemic has shown that Canada needs an EI system for the 21st century, including for the self-employed and those in the gig economy.

Replacing our legacy system is no longer an option to consider. It's critical to continue to do that in order to allow the government to continue to function. The government has some solid lessons learned in terms of what to do and not to do. On the do list is to avoid big bang approaches, which is even more important when people's pay is at risk, and to apply agile project management techniques. That means iterative incremental progressive builds as the best way to solve problems and to channel innovation.

On the don't list—it may be a bit longer—is to avoid having the government assume all of the risk in building big IT systems. The private sector spent billions producing commercial off-the-shelf systems. Governments around the world are partnering with the private sector to avoid the expense, difficulty and uncertainty of designing and implementing custom systems. Canada continues to be well-advised to do the same. We should never let planning be the enemy of doing. Big IT systems are expensive and complex, take a long time to build, and benefit from numerous checks. Traditional project management approaches may not be sufficient or adequate for today's world, and the government has adopted some internationally well-known best practices in this context.

Finally, we're introducing BDM, which is an acronym for benefits delivery modernization. It's been three years in the making. We've been doing a lot of planning, and we're poised to start implementing it in the next few months. That's our goal for sure. Working with Treasury Board and ESDC, we've designed a mission-critical transformation program to meet and succeed in delivering this historic mandate.

It's going to require tailored governance, iterative and incremental building, the best talent that the public service can bring together, as well as people from across the world who we've been recruiting to help us out.

We're going to build a BDM platform over a number of years in a series of tranches—phases, if you prefer—and frankly, we're going to start this year with putting in the foundations as soon as all the approvals have been obtained. The new BDM foundation will be very agile and provide a set of capabilities that will allow future benefits to be deployed on that platform, similar to what the private sector does.

We're procuring commercial off-the-shelf technology—that's our goal—that's already useful and also successfully used across the world in many jurisdictions, some in national government, which has been tested often and deployed on complex benefits like the ones we have.

We've put in place an “equi-system”—that's our word—a series of qualified suppliers that are going to help us, and they're all world-class organizations that are meant to come together and work in partnership with us to deliver as quickly as possible the best possible systems the government can put in place.

Finally, the BDM platform—and I'll close on this—is going to expedite the onboarding of many benefits. I think it has been the goal of many ministers and deputy ministers of our department to be able to respond much more quickly to policies, policies that governments want to introduce and generally start [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We would love to be able to do it, but it's very difficult, and frankly, our systems may not be able to support it. We would like to change that as quickly as possible.

We definitely want to personalize and tailor the system to the benefits and the needs of clients. We want digital-by-design approaches and omni-channel and multi-channel experiences where people can apply on one channel and complete an application in another, and obviously bring client experiences up to par with what people would expect from the private sector.

I'll close on this point, Mr. Chair. My two colleagues are here to not only answer questions about the current state of EI but also about what we're trying to do in the future. We look forward to your questions.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long.

We are going to begin with questions now, starting with the Conservatives.

Ms. Dancho, please, you have six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Long, for your opening remarks. We greatly appreciate your being here with us today.

I'm wondering if your department is considering an extension of the CRB, given the substantial number of Canadians who are about to reach their 26-week maximum benefit next month.

Mr. Benoît Long: I'll defer the question to Andrew Brown, if that's possible. He is our lead in policy.

Mr. Andrew Brown (Director General, Employment Insurance Policy, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Employment and Social Development): Thank you, Benoît.

Thanks for the question.

I'm Andrew Brown, the director general for employment insurance policy. That also includes policy for the Canada recovery benefit.

What I can tell you right now is that we are monitoring very closely the use of those benefits. We know that, since the end of September, when people moved from the CERB to EI regular benefits and others would have started to receive the Canada recovery benefit, they could use up the 26 weeks of benefits available as early as the end of March, so we are continuing to monitor use.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Are you looking to extend it? That must be something you're modelling.

Mr. Andrew Brown: We're trying to understand the number of people who could be running out of benefits so that we could provide options.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We know the Canadian Labour Congress has come out today suggesting or asking that you extend it, so I would be surprised if you weren't modelling it already.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Exactly, we're looking at the numbers, trying to understand how many people may run out at the end of March.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: How much has been spent to date on the three CRB benefits?

Mr. Andrew Brown: In terms of the three benefits to date, we've seen now more than 1.7 million Canadians make use of the Canada recovery benefit, about 300,000 who have made use of the recovery sickness benefit, and I believe a slightly higher number—not in front of me right now—who have used the Canada recovery caregiving benefit.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Do you know how much that has cost? What has been the total payout?

Mr. Andrew Brown: I should be able to get that within a few minutes. I don't have that right in front of me at the moment.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: We can come back to it at the end.

I know that the CERB, as mentioned by Mr. Long and elsewhere, is not coming out of EI and that it's going to come out of general revenue or deficit finance. Is it the same plan for CRB, or will the CRB come out of the EI account?

Mr. Andrew Brown: The CRB is not coming from the EI account. It is coming from the consolidated revenue fund.

I actually have the numbers here now.

• (1545)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Great.

Mr. Andrew Brown: In terms of the Canada recovery benefit, it's now just under \$10 billion, \$9.6 billion to date. In terms of the Canada recovery sickness benefit, it's \$328 million to date, and in terms of the Canada recovery caregiving benefit, it's \$1.34 billion to date. Those are the latest figures we have available.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Regarding the EI that's been paid out to date, have you seen a jump in how much EI there's been from the EI account itself, not CERB and not CRB. Do you anticipate an increase for what that will cost for 2020 versus 2019, as well as 2021? Will there be more than normal for 2020-21?

Mr. Andrew Brown: There would certainly be more than normal paid out from the EI operating account. That really comes from two factors. One is simply that because of the economic conditions of many people having been laid off—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: For sure.

Mr. Andrew Brown: There's that. There's also the impact of the temporary measures providing greater access and greater generosity—that minimum \$500 per week benefit rate.

Roughly speaking, we estimate that this would be, over the course of the year, about \$10 billion additional.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It's \$10 billion additional. That's quite substantial, and as you're aware, as I'm aware, EI premiums have been frozen until 2023 when they can go up again. Have you modelled the maximum increase?

Do you believe the maximum increase for premiums, which is 5¢ a year, will be required starting in 2023 to ensure the balance in the account over the seven years? Do you anticipate that this will be required?

Mr. Andrew Brown: Right now, the challenge is understanding where the economics will go over the next, in fact, seven years to determine what the increase is. Certainly there's upward pressure in terms of increased benefits, which could push premium rates up.

I think one of the things that's important to recognize is that—as was also done with the CERB, which was of course very substantial spending—the CRB will not be charged to the EI operating account.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Right, which would really push it over the limit, I'm sure, which is why it was not done that way. However, it sounds like there's going to be, as you said, \$10 billion more for EI being paid out, so I would anticipate that there would be considerable pressure as soon as the freeze on those premiums is alleviated in 2023 to ensure that balance over seven years. I think that's a correct assumption.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Indeed that's correct. Normally—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm sorry. If I may ask, are you considering changing legislation to that seven-year balance? That's my first question.

My second one, my last one, is this: Are you considering changing the increase of only 5¢ maximum, maybe to 10¢ or 15¢? Are you modelling that seven years and the yearly maximum increase?

Mr. Andrew Brown: I can certainly say we're taking a look at what the impact would be in terms of the premium rate. In terms of changes to rate-setting policy, that's something the government would need to bring forward legislation to change the parameters on, because right now there is a 5¢ legislated limit in terms of the change from year to year.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It is something that you're obviously looking at, considering the pressure that we're seeing this year and, as you said, next year as well.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Certainly whenever we take a look at a policy change, we're looking as well at what the impact would be on EI premiums.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Brown. Thank you Mr. Long.

Mr. Chair, I believe that's all the time I have.

The Chair: You are correct. Thank you for recognizing that.

Mr. Long, please, you have six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rochester, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon to my colleagues.

Thank you to Mr. Long—I like that last name—for your presentation to us this afternoon.

I'll state the obvious. EI benefits are there to catch people who lose work through no fault of their own. They're there to support Canadians, and I think all of us have seen first-hand and are so thankful for the EI program. Millions of Canadians needed that program through this pandemic. I wonder where we would be as a country without that program.

Mr. Long, I do have some questions for you. In 2017-18 EI sickness benefits provided \$1.7 billion in support to 412,000 claimants. The average duration of sickness benefits was 10 weeks. However, 36% of claimants exhausted EI benefits before they were able to return to work. One of the government's commitments is to increase EI sickness benefits from 15 to 26 weeks.

Can you please explain for the committee as to how many people would benefit as a result of expanding the duration of this benefit?

• (1550)

Mr. Benoît Long: Thank you, Mr. Long.

I'll pass the question over to our policy colleague as well.

Mr. Wayne Long: Sure, no problem.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Thanks for the question, Mr. Long.

As you pointed out, the EI sickness benefit right now provides support, I would say, to just over 400,000 people annually, with about 35% or 36% of them making use of all 15 weeks of the benefits that are available. The relatively simple math there is that per-

haps 120,000 people might benefit from that extension from 15 weeks to 26 weeks.

It's important to recognize that whenever we make adjustments to the EI sickness benefit, there are other things that are attached to that. There are some employers who provide different kinds of top-ups to sickness benefits. There are also employers who take part in what's called the premium reduction program. This is something that provides them and employees with a reduction on EI premiums in exchange for the fact that they have sickness plans that meet certain standards.

If it were extended, we might also provide some additional support to that group as well. We'd have to do some more detailed modelling to get you a more precise figure.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thanks for that.

To anyone who wants to take this, do you have any additional improvements you recommend we could make to bridge the gap between EI sickness and long-term disability, such as the CPP disability? We are asked that a lot in the office.

Mr. Andrew Brown: That's another great question. It is also a challenging one, I would say, in that the two programs have.... While it's true that one seems to be more short term and one longer term, they really do have different objectives.

In the case of EI, it is providing some temporary income support for people who are expected to return to work, in fact even to their own job, versus Canada pension plan disability, which is focused on people with a severe and prolonged disability of some kind, essentially, people who are not expected to be able to work again.

I guess what I would say in the short term is that the extension of EI sickness benefits is something that would go quite some way to addressing that gap, but I think it would be important to study and understand that group in the middle, if you will, and help them to provide—

Mr. Wayne Long: There are many in the middle, and that's one of the issues, certainly, that we face here.

I want to switch over to the caregiver benefit.

In opening comments, the EI family caregiver benefit was discussed, which our government introduced in the previous Parliament, and how it provides support to eligible workers who need to take time off work to provide care or support for an adult or child who is critically ill or injured.

Can you share with the committee what impact this benefit has had on families, including what the take-up has been?

Mr. Andrew Brown: I will have to look to see if I have those figures in terms of take-up of the new caregiving benefits.

I would say, first, that these were changes that were brought about at the end of 2017 to create a new family caregiver benefit for adults and for children. This was to lower the bar in terms of—how might I describe it—the condition that the person is in when someone is able to provide care to them and receive caregiving benefits. Prior to that, we had only the compassionate care benefit, and that was for someone—and is still today—at end of life. If somebody has received a medical certificate where the doctor indicates a significant risk of death within 26 weeks, that's the end-of-life care.

Critical illness has a lower bar and allows people to apply to provide care to someone, perhaps after a severe car accident, something that would leave them in a critical illness or injury situation but not necessarily about to die. More people have been taking up the caregiving benefits since then. I would have to get back to you on the specific figures.

● (1555)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long and Mr. Brown.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks as well to the witnesses for being with us.

First of all, I am very pleased that we are undertaking this important study on employment insurance reform.

The Bloc Québécois has long advocated for reforms to our employment insurance program. In its current state, the system is not up to the task. It has not been completely overhauled in 15 years. At best, it covers about 40% of workers.

We were able to see the cracks in the program during the pandemic crisis: almost 9 million workers became unemployed overnight. The program could not keep up with the task, so a suite of emergency measures had to be introduced, such as the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB, and three new benefits.

It seems essential to us that the program be completely reformed in all its aspects: eligibility criteria and periods, benefit rates, and so on. All these considerations must be dealt with together.

Recently, the minister was given a mandate to review and modernize the program to adapt it to 21st-century realities. Our study will therefore be undertaken as part of that mandate. Many groups have expressed an interest in coming forward to share their views on reform.

Mr. Brown, given the minister's mandate and the questions I had the opportunity to ask her here in committee, what exactly are you working on as part of the effort to reform the program?

Mr. Andrew Brown: Thank you for the question, Ms. Chabot.

Obviously, we have a lot of work to do. We're looking at everything we feel is important to workers across the country.

You mentioned that only 40% of workers are eligible for EI benefits. So it's important that we review the program's accessibility policies.

In the Speech from the Throne, the government pointed out that we need to think not only about those who earn a salary, but also people with different types of jobs, such as the self-employed and gig economy workers. We want to design a program that meets the needs of all Canadians.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Am I to understand that work and studies are under way to look into all of these issues? Are you working more specifically on any of them?

Mr. Andrew Brown: We're looking at what can be done for the future. However, since the pandemic is still in full sway, we remain focused on income support programs for workers. We hope that, in the fall or next year, we will be able to move forward with further measures to reform the employment insurance program.

● (1600)

Ms. Louise Chabot: My time is almost up, so I'll end with a comment. We all know that all the temporary measures that have been put in place will end on September 26. By the end of March, some claimants will already have exhausted the 26-week benefit period.

Reforms to the program need to be addressed now so that a new program, not the current one, is in place by the end of September.

Mr. Andrew Brown: You are right. We know that the end of March and the end of September are very important milestones in our strategy for the future and to support the government.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

My question can be answered by Mr. Brown, certainly, and Mr. Long. It might be a shared answer.

We know that the pandemic has caused financial turmoil for many people. Many people, for example, are experiencing being unsheltered for the first time. We're in a crisis.

A report came out through Senator Pate's office, which indicated, "The PBO estimated that providing a [guaranteed livable income] would cost \$76 billion for a typical year. In the extraordinary circumstances of increased unemployment associated with COVID-19, providing the same form of [guaranteed livable income] for six months could cost \$47.5 billion." We know—and economists have certainly demonstrated—that the actual costs would be much lower due to cost savings over time. We know there are higher front-end costs, but we know there are savings over time.

Considering the ongoing issues with EI and the confusion caused through COVID-19, is your department considering moving towards more permanent guaranteed livable income programs in light of the fact that it looks like the pandemic is going to go on and rates of unemployment are increasing?

Mr. Andrew Brown: Thanks for the question, Ms. Gazan.

You are raising very important points about a guaranteed livable income or other ways that we could provide income support to Canadians.

From my perspective and what I am able to speak to in my role, we have been looking at what can be done through the employment insurance program. By its nature, it's focused on income supports for people who are working in some way and currently focused on those in employed work. We would need to then think about how it could be expanded to others. Of course, an element is that people are paying premiums. Beyond that, I—

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm sorry. I asked that because I know Mr. Long pointed to a number of bureaucratic issues within EI that are costly. I am just wondering—and would recommend, actually, as I know it's a study—if exploring the cost to keep people in a system that's not working and moving towards systems that are more inclusive in terms of spreading guaranteed income programs out might be looked into.

I actually have another question. I want to talk a little about temporary foreign workers and seasonal agricultural workers who pay into EI benefits. Since they leave the country when they are done working, they don't actually benefit from the programs they're paying into. This has been raised for a long time.

Why is this still the case? Is there any plan to rectify the situation?

I'm not sure who can answer that.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Maybe I'll begin. Thanks for the question.

To begin with, of course, the EI program does work on the basis of universal coverage. Workers pay in and then, if they are laid off, for example, they are able to access the benefits. In the case of temporary foreign workers, they can do that while they are in Canada in terms of receiving EI regular benefits. If that person then leaves the country they are no longer, at that point, available and looking for work, so they would not be eligible to receive EI regular benefits, in other words, for job loss.

• (1605)

Ms. Leah Gazan: We know this happens. We know people come to work and they leave. They provide essential services for

Canada. They leave and they don't benefit. Don't you think that's problematic?

I am wondering why nothing is being done about it. People are paying into programs. We know they're not going to benefit from the system. To burden people to pay out of their often inadequate salaries for programs they won't even benefit from, I find problematic. Are there any plans to change that?

Mr. Andrew Brown: Again, what I'm trying to make sure the committee is aware of is that there are people who are benefiting who are temporary foreign workers. With an insurance program, you pay the premiums, and then if you meet the conditions, you can receive payment. If you aren't, for example, laid off, you also don't receive any payment from the program.

Those are the rules as they are at the moment. One of the risks if you were to, for example, indicate that temporary foreign workers would not have to pay premiums, would be that you could be making it cheaper for employers to hire temporary foreign workers rather than Canadians or permanent residents. That is just to say that this is an area that needs to be reviewed very carefully before moving.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes. I will leave it at that, but I just want to say that if there's anything COVID has shown us, it's the abuse of temporary and migrant workers. This has been an ongoing issue that has not been addressed.

I would argue that certainly what you have presented is one part. The other part is another way that temporary workers and seasonal workers are exploited in our country.

My last question is about—

The Chair: That was your last question, Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have a million questions, but thank you, Chair.

The Chair: You are going to get another turn.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both of our witnesses for being here today.

I have a quick point of clarification. You called it the legacy system. It's basically an antique. When was the last time our EI system technology was updated?

Mr. Benoît Long: The technology itself has been updated over the last 50 years quite a number of times. I would say that if you were an archaeologist, you would see that every 10 years or so a new investment has been made, but it has made it so complex and difficult that now we're at a point where making changes requires us to test everything going back to 50 years ago, so that's problematic.

There hasn't been a significant overhaul.

Mr. Brad Vis: Wow. That answers my question. I think you guys should get into negotiations with the Canadian Museum of Science and Technology or make a Heritage Minute. When this program is finally changed, we could have a Heritage Minute, and hopefully, we wouldn't have to wait on the line so long to speak with someone about our EI claim. I joke; I did appreciate your opening deck.

The 2019 AG report on call centres recommended that ESDC improve callers' access to live agents. ESDC agreed, stating that their current ability to manage and improve access to a call centre agent was limited by the existing technology, which we just covered, but also by the funding.

Has the funding now been put in place to improve the system?

Mr. Benoît Long: I was going to start by asking if Mike wanted to contribute. Mike has been a long-time manager of capacity in the call centres, so he would know a lot.

The government did make significant investments in the technology as well as the workloads and supports to improve that situation. Of course, the 2020 situation is historically different from anything we have ever lived before, but the government did move and did put funding forward.

Mr. Brad Vis: Is the funding in place now?

Mr. Benoît Long: It is.

Mr. Brad Vis: Good.

A modernization was planned for 2020. Did the pandemic delay that, or has it already begun?

Mr. Benoît Long: No. Part of my presentation was to explain where we are on the modernization program. It has proceeded. Of course, we had to divert 25% of our resources to deal with the emerging emergencies, but we were able to deploy a new system even if temporarily. It dealt with two new benefits last year, so that was quite an achievement during a pandemic. We're very proud of that as well as, of course, the CERB work that was done.

• (1610)

Mr. Brad Vis: Obviously, the previous business risk management plan by the department was woefully inadequate for dealing with the pandemic, because we would have had to switch our major benefits to the Canada Revenue Agency from Employment and Social Development Canada.

Has the department's business risk management plan been updated for a future pandemic?

Mr. Benoît Long: Part of the modernization program is the response to the change in business continuity issues. I would say that part of what we are doing today, obviously, is imagining a different future with better systems and newer systems.

Last year when we were dealing with CERB and the requirements, the system was unable to accommodate a lot of change very quickly, and we were quite nervous about the volume of transactions that would take place. That's why a decision was made to split it.

Mr. Brad Vis: Let's say the South African variant of COVID-19 explodes, we have to shut down our entire country again and millions of Canadians have to go back on employment insurance. Would the system be able to manage that today?

Mr. Benoît Long: Yes, it would.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you. That's reassuring.

In your opening remarks, you expressed confidence in the new BDM process and the gradual rollout. Will the rollout be on a geographic or a benefit-by-benefit basis?

Mr. Benoît Long: It will be on a benefit-by-benefit basis. Part of the reason for this is that other countries have tried different methods such as postal codes, geographic areas or groups of people. In our case, EI in particular is made up of seven core benefits, and we have to go one benefit at a time, because for seven years we will have to run the old system and the new system at the same time. It was too complicated technologically to do it differently.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

Going back to my concerns about telephone services and the frontline interaction that Canadians have with Service Canada on these matters, when can we expect reasonable improvements for Canadians in the live call agent response times?

Mr. Benoît Long: That's a more complicated question. Obviously, more funding has added capacity, and it has helped us in being able to deal with some of the surge issues, but there's no question that these are historic levels of claims and recipients. I think we should expect it to be many months yet before we get to normal results, assuming, of course, that we don't go through multiple new waves of COVID.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

Thank you, Mr. Long.

We're going to go to Mr. Dong, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

First of all, I want to thank the witnesses for coming to committee and answering some very important questions today.

Thank you very much and, through you, thank you to all the public servants at ESDC. I understand and appreciate the challenges and the effort you're making to meet these challenges under these extraordinary circumstances.

First, on behalf of my constituents in Don Valley North, I also want to echo the concern brought forward earlier. On the call centres and the response to individuals, it seems to be that there's a long wait on the call. Sometimes it's just a simple correction of a mistake when people are using the automated system, so any improving you can do on that front would be greatly appreciated. I just want to share that.

I want to talk first about the parental and maternity leave and benefits. We know that the government has improved these benefits in a few ways, first of all by covering 12 weeks prior to the birth for expecting moms and also by allowing parents to choose between the standard parental benefit and the extended parental benefit for 18 months and to share the parental benefit.

With these changes, what kind of impact has there been on young families and parents? Can you share some observations about the feedback you've had on these programs?

Mr. Andrew Brown: Thanks for the question, Mr. Dong.

On the changes to maternity and parental benefits, I think you really hit upon those there. There was the first set in 2017, which allowed parents to choose between either standard or extended parental benefits. That gave them the possibility, along with maternity benefits, to receive benefits over a longer period of time, for up to 18 months rather than 12 months.

What we've seen is that about 15% of families have been choosing the extended duration configuration. We can infer from this that they have found it is preferential for their own circumstances. We don't know the exact reasons for that. We are planning to do some evaluation work to better understand why they're selecting that, but we do believe that in some provinces it helps them in terms of some of the child care responsibilities as well, and that might be the reason they're opting for the longer period.

I should note on that one that there has also been some negative feedback around one aspect, which is that over the longer period of 18 months, people receive a lower benefit rate, of course. Some questions have been raised as to whether it's sufficient. What people receive is effectively the same amount of benefits, but over a longer period of time.

The second thing, just very quickly, is in terms of the new parental sharing benefit that was introduced in 2019 and made available to a second parent some five weeks of benefits that were reserved. In many cases, of course, as we still traditionally see, women and mothers are taking the majority of parental benefits, so this often means that it's for a father, and we have started to see an uptake in terms of the parental benefit by fathers. This is one of the things that we're really keen to keep watching in coming years to see if that grows further.

• (1615)

Mr. Han Dong: Do you have any advice on how these programs can be improved, because we've heard some reports that, with the

COVID years, we're expecting a significant increase in childbirth in the coming years?

Mr. Andrew Brown: There are things to watch out for here. We pay attention to what the academics are talking about in terms of these programs, as well as supports to families and maintaining a connection to work after that period of leave. They've often pushed for a higher replacement rate in that area. The other thing that they have pushed for is easier access in the case of maternity and parental benefits.

One thing that's important to keep in mind right now, in this temporary EI that we're working through, is that the access requirements are much lower at the moment, in order to help people to access the program. As was raised earlier, those temporary measures will be expiring at the end of September.

Mr. Han Dong: This program is very important for gender equality so keep up the good work.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dong.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much.

Last spring, at the height of the crisis, the Honourable Minister Duclos, President of the Treasury Board, said that reform of the employment insurance program was long overdue. Now we have an opportunity to do it. In fact, we will be doing a great deal of work and closely studying this reform until September.

Mr. Brown, are you currently thinking about or working to improve any particular factors?

All the IT and innovation issues are involved, but I'm actually talking about issues related to the current programs.

[*English*]

Mr. Andrew Brown: Again, thank you for the question, Madame Chabot.

I would say that we're looking at a number of things. One thing is that, in our minister's mandate letter, there is quite a list of different commitments that the government has made. We've heard already about the proposal to extend the sickness benefit from 15 weeks to 26 weeks. We're also looking at how we might make progress on the other items in that mandate letter, things that would look at the supports that are provided to workers in seasonal employment and issues that we've heard there about consistent access to benefits. As I mentioned before, one of the things is certainly that 40% and looking at access to the program.

We're trying to look very broadly. Of course, it'll be the government that will need to decide how to take things forward, but I would say that we are really trying to look at what can be put in place in terms of supports for workers. We're also thinking about the connection to what's often called "part two" of the program. These are the labour market transfer agreements with provinces and territories.

• (1620)

[*Translation*]

These agreements therefore support training. The other measures help workers return to work. So we have not only the income support aspect, but also the support to facilitate returning to work.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Next we have Ms. Gazan, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My next question is in regard to gig workers. We know that gig workers have been gutted by COVID. I represent a riding where we have a very dynamic and talented arts community that has just been gutted as a result of COVID. We know that, even during the pandemic, and knowing all of this [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] left behind, even from being included in programs, and I know there have been some exceptions made. It's not good enough. I'm wondering if the ESDC will be taking any steps to expand benefits for gig workers.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Thanks for that question as well, Ms. Gazan.

We are absolutely looking at what can be done for gig workers in the future. This is part of the commitment to take a look at EI for the 21st century and to think about how to provide support to self-employed workers and gig workers. Specifically, we're also trying to understand what has worked or not worked in terms of CERB and the Canada recovery benefit. This was, as you know, really the first time that we've tried to provide support to a different group of workers, people other than those who are receiving a regular paycheque. It's certainly a challenging area.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes. I say this—I have limited time here—because although you're researching it, people need help now. We've been in the pandemic for a year. We've had a year to review programs to ensure that gig workers have what they need to survive. That's clearly not happening.

I'm very concerned with your response, because we need immediate action. Are there any plans for immediate action to protect people working in the gig economy?

Mr. Andrew Brown: Again, I'm able to speak to the sorts of income supports that are available. Somebody who's a gig worker who has met the \$5,000 requirement in terms of income in 2019 or 2020 would be able to access the Canada recovery benefits. In terms of what's happening as they're continuing to work, that's not an area I'd be able to comment on.

Ms. Leah Gazan: That's also concerning, let me add, because there have been all sorts of issues around what that \$5,000 meant and who qualified or not. I'm glad the government is now loosening

the strings on making people pay that back, but moving forward, what will that look like? It's just been very unclear. I know it has caused a lot of stress for many people in my riding.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Mr. Tochor, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I share some of the concerns of MP Gazan about people's lives being at stake here. They're looking for EI benefits that they have earned and have paid for. I'm a little concerned with the direction we're going, doing another study on this, or working on a study, without going back to the last larger study on EI back in June 2016 of the 42 Parliament, entitled "Exploring the Impact of Recent Changes to Employment Insurance and Ways to Improve Access to the Program". That's the study I'd like to talk about.

The number one recommendation—I think it's very fitting that we talk about the first recommendation, which is going to be important during a pandemic—is as follows:

The Committee recommends that the federal government review the eligibility requirement for "valid job separation" to allow employment insurance claimants who find a new job during the benefits period to retain their EI benefits should the employment not be suitable.

In the context, I'm worried about the families and individuals out there who may have lost a job, unfortunately, because of the restrictions out there, or who claim EI, find another job, but then are out of work when maybe another lockdown occurs in their province. I'd like to hear an update on the number one recommendation from that report.

Has the EI program added to the flexibility so that these workers don't fall through the cracks?

• (1625)

Mr. Andrew Brown: Since the last report, there were some adjustments in terms of the job search requirements while people were receiving EI. That was actually to return to an earlier set of rules prior to some measures that were taken in 2013, referred to often as "connecting Canadians with available jobs". There were some adjustments there.

In terms of that specific requirement to make adjustments to what are considered valid job separations, that has not changed. It is true that in a layoff, let's call it, if someone receiving EI regular benefits then finds a new job, takes that new job and then quits that job, they would no longer be eligible for EI benefits. I believe that's the sort of situation this is raising. If that person is laid off, they still are eligible. That's a different sort of situation. Valid job separation is always referring to the nature of the way in which they leave that employment, so—

Mr. Corey Tochor: It's no fault on you, but it's been five years. The number one recommendation out of this report hasn't been acted upon. Now we find ourselves in a pandemic. There have been questions for the Liberal minister over the years on why that recommendation hasn't been fulfilled. There are people falling through the cracks because the recommendation of a study wasn't followed. I'm a little disappointed in that, but once again, that's not on you guys, per se, it's more on, I believe, the policy coming out of the government.

Changing gears a little bit on the people who have fallen through the cracks and the families who've had difficulties during this pandemic, after the initial rush in March of people applying for EI, I understand that the government deployed something like 3,000 Service Canada employees to help get through the call volume. To quote a CBC article from May 7, "Clearly that hasn't been enough".

Was that a failure of simply assigning insufficient resources, or were there technical limitations that kept Service Canada from assigning sufficient staff?

Mr. Benoît Long: I can start, and then perhaps Michael can come in.

I would say, first, that the department responded extraordinarily quickly. We had a few hundred people who could work remotely in the first week of the pandemic. Within about six weeks, we had 28,000 online, working from home. I think what you are seeing is a department that was quickly able to deploy both technology and equipment to its employees. To put 3,000 people quickly into that mode was quite rapid for us. We had never done that before.

Of course, it's not enough, but it's really because of the historical demand and the wave that hit the department. We don't believe that there was anything more...than what we actually did accomplish.

The challenge is how to sustain this. We have people working from home in every part of the country. In the context of call centres, we have to train people. They have to be able to answer questions. People would get extremely aggravated if they were calling and the people they were reaching could not answer their questions. Not everyone is an EI agent nor is everyone a pension agent. I don't mean to say that we have done enough. Certainly, we did our very best, and we also acted quite quickly.

The technology, itself, was deployed relatively rapidly because investments in that specific technology had been made a year or two before. Without modern technology and telephony, we would have been completely unable to respond to this pandemic.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long and Mr. Tochor.

Finally, we will go to Mr. Turnbull, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here. I want to echo the comments of my colleague, Mr. Dong, in terms of thanking you for your hard work. I really appreciate all of the work that you must be putting in at a time when Canadians really need you, so thank you for that.

I want to go back to the conversation about the gig workers and the self-employed. Those individuals surely have challenges accessing EI. I'd like to ask you a very open-ended question. My understanding is that self-employed workers do not pay EI premiums unless they opt in to the EI program. Is that right, Mr. Long?

• (1630)

Mr. Andrew Brown: I will jump in there, Benoît.

With respect to self-employed workers, they may opt in to the EI program to obtain access to special benefits but not to job loss benefits. They are not eligible for those at all.

In terms of opting in to obtain access to special benefits, like maternity and parental sickness benefits, it's a very small proportion of workers who do. About 25,000 self-employed workers have opted in out of about, perhaps, two million to three million self-employed workers across the country. What we've seen is that, given the choice, people prefer not to pay into that insurance scheme, which could be for a number of reasons.

The group, incidentally, that tends to opt in are younger women, and they're opting in because it's the only way they can obtain access to maternity and parental benefits.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thank you.

I recognize that there are probably a lot of challenges. What hurdles would we have to get over in order to fully transition to a system where gig workers and self-employed individuals have full access to the EI benefits regime?

Mr. Andrew Brown: This is where I think, then, you'd need to think about, first off, whether this is something voluntary or mandatory. If you think about employed workers, they don't have an option. They are required to pay in.

The second thing is, really, to think about how you would assess their incomes. The thing is that someone who is a paid worker is receiving a regular paycheque, whether that's weekly or biweekly. There's a clear record of what they're receiving. The challenge, then, with self-employed and gig workers is that this may not be the case. The timing of their incomes can also vary. Sometimes they could be working consistently yet only receive a paycheque—I guess I should I say “income” or “revenue”—once a month or once every, let's say, four months.

Think about a real estate agent, for example. If you get a number of sales, you might get quite a bit of income at once. If you don't, there could be several months between receiving revenue. There's a great diversity among self-employed workers and gig workers. That's where some of the challenge comes from.

Mr. Ryan Turnbull: Thanks for that answer.

I want to address the EI seasonal pilot project and ask you a question about that as well.

What was that pilot project's objective, and how does it help address the so-called black hole, where those seasonal workers' benefits run out before they're back to work?

Mr. Andrew Brown: As people probably know, the *trou noir* refers to, just as you said there, people who are on seasonal employment and qualify for EI benefits but their benefits run out before their seasonal employment returns. I think the quite low unemployment rates that we had for a number of years exacerbated that, because in times of lower unemployment, the number of weeks of benefits available is also lower.

The purpose of the pilot was really to test another way to target additional supports to seasonal workers and it was targeted in two ways. One was that the regions that had a higher proportion of seasonal workers, as well as the regions that had a higher unemployment rate across the country, those two elements, helped identify the 13 regions for the pilot. The second way was that we were trialling how we would define seasonal workers and we were looking at their pattern of employment over the last five years to determine who seemed to be making seasonal EI claims, hence meeting our definition.

Those are the things we wanted to test in terms of the ability to target this better than some of the pilots we've had in the past.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Turnbull.

Colleagues, that completes two rounds of questions. We have some committee business that we need to get to and we've had something referred to us, but before I dismiss the witnesses, I'm going to exercise the chair's prerogative and pose one question, probably for Mr. Brown.

I'm from Prince Edward Island where there are two of the 62 EI zones in Canada. What is the process for the review and revision of those EI zones, and does it include public input?

• (1635)

Mr. Andrew Brown: There would be an opportunity for some public input whenever a change is made, because regulations need to be pre-published before zones can be changed. However, the

process for reviewing the EI zones or boundaries is actually led by the EI commission.

The last review was completed at the end of 2018. There were no changes taken forward subsequent to that. There was a new review launched. We're required to review those boundaries every five years, partly because, of course, they are used to administer the program. Once those results are presented to the commission, they might or might not make recommendations to the minister in terms of changes to the boundaries.

When we review those boundaries, we're looking at whether each of the regions is as homogeneous as possible in terms of labour market conditions and the unemployment rate. Those are the two things that we are chiefly looking at and we're trying to find the boundaries that provide labour market regions that are as consistent as possible, also keeping in mind that we need to be able to administer it, so we probably don't want to create too many different regions.

We are at 62 regions right now. There's a review in place. If there's a proposal to make any changes, that would be subject to a public regulatory review process.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brown, Mr. Long and Mr. MacPhee. You've set the table for the beginning of our work on this study in a very comprehensive way. We greatly appreciate what you do on a day-to-day basis and your being with us here this afternoon. Thank you so much. You are welcome to stay, but you're free to leave.

Colleagues, please hold tight. We have a few things to work through in terms of committee business.

Mr. Benoît Long: Thank you.

Mr. Andrew Brown: Thank you.

The Chair: We have probably five items that I'm hoping we're going to be able to get through. First, you will have received a news release regarding this study that we need you to approve so that we can hit send. Second, a couple of budgets need to be approved. Third, we've had a matter referred to us by the House, a private member's bill, C-220. We need to talk about that. Also, the supplementary estimates (C) have been reported to us. Those are the things I'd like to get through.

We can perhaps start with the news release. I trust you have seen the draft release. By way of background, colleagues, the fact that we are doing an examination of the EI system has prompted some interest from various groups. The clerk of the committee has been contacted. We thought it a good idea to make a public statement so that there is information out there. If people wish to submit briefs, as you can see on the press release, there's a clear public invitation there to do so.

Are there any thoughts or comments on the news release? Are folks comfortable with our doing this? It's generally something we do at the end of a study as opposed to the beginning.

The floor is open. Please use the “raise hand” function.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor.

• (1640)

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have read the news release, and I think it's a good idea. It announces the work and it is generating interest, as you said.

We had a list of witnesses to submit, and I think everyone submitted theirs in a timely manner. However, other people may want to come forward and send us a brief, and it's good to give them the opportunity to do so.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

Are there any other comments?

[*English*]

Mr. Vaughan, please.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): In reviewing the witness submissions within our own caucus, it's a broad topic in terms of the way that employment has changed but clearly the system hasn't, and the computer system hasn't either. There are two challenges. EI was built for an employment structure from a generation ago, and it hasn't evolved as work patterns have changed. You can hear it as each of us describes the regional footprints of employment in our ridings. For me it's tech workers and highly paid jobs, but all on contracts that disappear when you have a bike accident. I think we need to cast the net wide, not necessarily for witnesses—I think that's where the fine tuning comes in—but in terms of the information that's out there. It would be helpful.

The one thing I would stress though is that the previous Parliament did the same study in a broad way. I believe Madame Chabot has tried to scope this a little to get at seasonal workers, in particular, but also some of the challenges that are unique to a particular resource-based dynamic as opposed to just the new ways people work. I think we need to cast that net wide. It will mean a lot of reading for us. Since we have a couple of meetings to sift through those reports, I'd say get the report out there and maybe hold off defining the witness list until we see exactly which direction we want to go.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Ms. Gazan, go ahead please.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have a couple of points, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Long brought up how archaic the technology of the EI system is, but he also mentioned OAS, other income guarantees. I know I'm belabouring this point, but I think if we're going to be looking at income programs, certainly income programs for the gig economy—we know they've been really affected during COVID—I'm hoping this committee considers having at least one witness who can present testimony on a guaranteed livable basic income. It's a concept that's accepted across party lines. I think it warrants

some attention, and I think it's also particularly popular for Canadians, including 60% of Albertans.

I'm hoping that we do spend some time looking at it. I think we'll be in the pandemic for another year. A lot of people are going to run out of EI. How are we going to support Canadians? I think it is a critical discussion.

The Chair: Colleagues, I want to bring you back to the question that I'm hoping we're going to be able to resolve, and that is whether to issue this press release in its present form, to not issue it or to amend it. Can we focus on the press release?

On the time for the breadth of the study, we can deal with that, but could we just deal with the question of the press release for now?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, was that the point you wanted to raise?

Ms. Louise Chabot: With all due respect to my colleague Ms. Gazan, I would say, at the risk of repeating myself, that these are two different things, in my opinion.

I understand what she means. However, the motion is about employment insurance reform. We want to equip ourselves as best we can, either with witnesses—and each party can invite those it wishes to hear—or with briefs. I agree with Mr. Vaughan that this will be helpful to us, given how big the issue is.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Conservatives have no problem with sending the news release.

I just want to confirm that this meeting is in public and not in camera.

• (1645)

The Chair: It is. There was no motion to go in camera. We're in public.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It is in public. Okay. I just wanted to confirm. Thank you.

The Chair: Are there any other interventions with respect to the news release? Do we have consensus to publish the news release as drafted?

I see thumbs-up all around. We'll take that as being adopted by consensus.

On the second item, you will have received two study budgets prepared by the clerk and circulated for approval. One is in connection with the study that we have currently undertaken. It's a study budget of \$3,750. Let's deal with that one first. This, as you know, colleagues, is primarily for the provision of headsets and the like, because nobody is travelling these days. The floor is open with respect to the approval of the budget of \$3,750 for the EI program study. Are there any interventions, questions or comments?

Can we take the budget for this study as approved by consensus? I see consensus. It is adopted.

You have a second budget before you with respect to the rapid housing initiative study. It's the same narrative. Are there any interventions, questions or comments with respect to the budget of \$2,500 for the examination of the rapid housing initiative?

Go ahead, please, Mrs. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I have one question. You mentioned that most of the cost is for headsets. Does that mean that headsets are getting sent out to witnesses? If so, how come they aren't using them when it comes time for a committee and we have interpretation problems?

The Chair: I'll take a run at your question, Ms. Falk, and then I'm going to pass it over to the clerk to fill in whatever I haven't comprehensively answered.

My understanding is that some of the challenges we have with respect to getting headsets to witnesses revolves around the amount of notice we give them before shipping a headset. Sometimes it can be laid at the feet of the witnesses. Sometimes it's just the logistics associated with not giving enough notice to make it happen.

Madam Clerk, do you care to correct or supplement what I've just said?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Danielle Widmer): You were perfect with that response.

It's really a matter of the transportation of the headsets. It takes approximately three days. For places like Iqaluit, it takes up to eight business days. These are business days. Planning ahead is essential in terms of invitations and getting the confirmation organized so that we can send the headsets as soon as possible.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's perfect. Thanks.

I just want to make sure that we're being efficient and effective with taxpayers' dollars. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Falk.

Are there any other discussions, comments or questions with respect to the approval of the budget for the rapid housing initiative study? Can we approve the budget by consensus or do we require a vote? I believe I see consensus in the room, so that budget is adopted.

The third item, colleagues, is that, as you may be aware, private member's bill, Bill C-220, an act to amend the Canada Labour Code regarding compassionate care leave, was referred to the committee by the House yesterday, I believe. It's for us to now do an examina-

tion of that private member's bill and report it back to the House. I know there have been some discussions between the parties and the bill's sponsor, Mr. Jeneroux, who is, as I understand it, available to come to the committee on Thursday.

I open the floor for your thoughts on scheduling, how much time you expect we will need and any other comments you may have with respect to how we dispense with this matter that has been referred to us by the House.

I recognize Mr. Housefather.

• (1650)

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have indeed been in discussion with Mr. Jeneroux, including today. We would both propose that we cover the bill in one hour. I mean one hour of testimony from Mr. Jeneroux and one hour of clause-by-clause afterwards, so that it would be completed in one meeting.

As you had mentioned, Mr. Chair, Mr. Jeneroux is ready to come to the committee as early as next Thursday. Of course, he bows to whatever date the committee wishes to have him here, but given the situation and wanting to get the bill back as quickly as possible to the House, I think it would be ideal if we could have this next Thursday. I think there will be amendments that all members of the committee and all parties will agree to.

Hopefully, Mr. Chairman, you and the committee could agree to that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I had a question, which Mr. Housefather answered. Indeed, I feel we should not take too long to proceed with this bill, which is still fairly straightforward in terms of the principle on which it is based. So, if we can deal with it in a two-hour session, depending on the availability of the bill's sponsor, I would be interested.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis: I believe that we should have at least a little bit of time for some witnesses for MP Jeneroux's private member's bill. Perhaps Mr. Housefather would be able to enlighten us about the friendly amendments to the legislation as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

Are there any further interventions?

Mr. Housefather, do you want to respond?

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I'd be happy to respond.

To the questions Mr. Vis asked, Mr. Jeneroux himself asked that it be one meeting. You can consult with him, but I've had that conversation with him. He wants to get it over with as quickly as possible in terms of getting the bill back to the House. Certainly, if he has witnesses that he wants to appear with him in his one hour, he can always bring them, if the committee agrees.

The second thing is that we've gone over amendments and basically it's one amendment where we would be extending bereavement leave to 10 days from five days. It would apply as well to caregivers. In Matt's original bill, different caregivers, depending on where they were in their caregiving time frame, would get up to three weeks or no bereavement leave, depending on where they were in the process. Now we will propose to the committee—and what we both agreed to—that it would be 10 days of bereavement leave for everybody. Right now it's five days of bereavement leave for those who are immediate family members. It would be extended to 10 days and it would also encompass those who are caregivers. They would also all get 10 days of bereavement leave.

It's a pretty simple amendment to the bill. That's the only substantive amendment.

Again, as soon as Matt and I submit it properly to the clerk, we'll send copies to everybody and discuss it with everybody over the course of the next week.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Housefather, for your feedback. We largely agree, and I am looking forward to discussing your amendment at the meeting.

I have just two comments, Mr. Chair.

I think we should set a deadline for amendments to be submitted, in the event that other opposition parties are also interested in amending the bill. I would suggest Monday, or Tuesday at the very latest, to provide parties with enough time to see them and discuss them, and to ensure that Thursday goes smoothly. I agree with the date being Thursday, and I am happy to have Mr. Jeneroux bring witnesses.

However, I want to confirm whether any of the other opposition parties or the Liberal Party are interested in bringing witnesses. If that's the case, then we should probably discuss what we believe to be an appropriate number, particularly if we have only two hours to do all of it. We're happy to have Mr. Jeneroux and then a Conservative witness in addition to him. I believe that's how that works. Since it is his PMB, he will be coming and then we can put forward a witness, so that would technically be two witnesses.

I am wondering if there is interest from other parties in having witnesses, and if there is, then we may have to squeeze in four plus Mr. Jeneroux in one hour. I just want to make sure that we're aware of the time crunch we may have, if that's the case.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Mr. Housefather, did you want to respond to that, or are there any other interventions?

Mr. Anthony Housefather: I'll only respond by saying that, since we're all in agreement generally with the principle of the bill—I can't speak for everybody—personally I wouldn't see that we'd need to bring in any additional witnesses. He has many groups across the country that support the bill, and I assume he will bring letters of support, as he brought to the House of Commons.

Again, I bow to the will of the committee. At least from my point of view, I don't see that we need to bring in additional witnesses.

The Chair: Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I agree with Mr. Housefather. Mr. Jeneroux brought this bill to the House and each party had an opportunity to vote on it. All were in favour. I don't see why we would need a lot of witnesses. If an amendment is proposed within the time limit, I would leave it up to Mr. Jeneroux to decide whether he wants to be accompanied by a witness, but we at the Bloc Québécois will not propose witnesses for this study.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Chabot.

Colleagues, I think we have a consensus.

I am going to propose, following on Ms. Dancho's recommendation, that any amendments that a member of the committee wishes to have considered should be submitted to the clerk by 5:00 p.m. eastern time on Monday; that the committee consider Bill C-220 one week from today, on Thursday, February 25; that the first witness be the sponsor of the bill and that he be welcome to bring along any witness he wishes; and at the conclusion of witness testimony, which would normally be an hour, that we move to clause-by-clause consideration.

I think that also allows us the flexibility to add witnesses, if that is the will of the sponsor or the committee, but that we start with Mr. Jeneroux and exhaust the witnesses, which it appears will be just him and one other, before we move to clause-by-clause.

Is that acceptable, and if it is, do we need to put it in the form of a motion to be discussed and voted upon? That's what I would propose, based on what I've heard so far.

I see some thumbs up. Is there any discussion on that? If not, can we take that as the consensus?

Ms. Dancho, go ahead.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Mr. Chair, I know you mentioned that the witness list is due on Monday, but I want to confirm that the amendments, if there are any, are due on Monday as well.

The Chair: I meant to say “amendments” for Monday, and—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: All right.

The Chair: —that Mr. Jeneroux can bring a witness with him on Monday and, if there are suggestions for other witnesses, that we exhaust the witness list before going to clause-by-clause, but I anticipate that there won't be a witness list to exhaust. I wanted to leave open the flexibility of that in case that's what people want between now and then.

Do we have a consensus to proceed in that fashion? I think we have that dealt with. Thank you.

Finally, supplementary estimates (C) have been referred to the committee for the last fiscal year. They were referred on Tuesday, February 16. Is it the wish of the committee to consider supplementary estimates (C)? As you know, there's a date set on which they are deemed adopted, which I believe to be sometime at the end of March, depending on when the last opposition day is. The floor is open. Is it the will of the committee to examine and pass supplementary estimates (C), and if so, who would you like to hear from on it?

Madame Chabot.

• (1700)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I would have said no, but it seems to me that I had read that the period extended into April. However, I could be wrong. I will look into it. I wouldn't want this to interfere with the schedule of our ongoing work.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Respectfully, I'll have to strongly disagree with my colleague from the Bloc. I believe that, given the pandemic, it's extremely important that we have the ministers come before this very important committee and discuss the supplementary estimates and the mains, share with the committee some of the challenges they've had and answer our questions accordingly. In fact, I believe that it is critical that we have all four ministers join us for that.

I'm open to discussion about how much time should be allotted to each, but given the extraordinary circumstances we're in, I think it's very important that we have all four ministers come before the committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

I'm not sure whether the supplementary estimates touch on the responsibilities of all four, but I absolutely take your point. Are there any other interventions?

Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Why don't we send the estimates and their request to review them off to the subcommittee to figure out a schedule? Last time, we ran into who should appear with whom. This is one committee that has a lot of ministries attached to it. Just to figure out where perhaps a priority might lie or what the structure should look like, maybe we should refer it to the subcommittee

to work on what that schedule would look like and bring it back to the full committee for a conversation.

There are pros and cons to every direction that's been expressed, including the work in front of us. I know that Madame Chabot has been waiting a long time to get this EI study under way, and I respect the frustration she has. Just as we start, everything else fills the agenda, and that doesn't feel fair.

The Chair: Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I understand and respect where my colleague Mr. Vaughan is coming from, but I feel that if we refer it to the subcommittee it will just take up time from our next committee meeting and take away more time from the EI study, so it's probably best that we just figure this out today.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: The practice has been that we meet away from the committee so that it doesn't lose meetings. We figure out what the compromises need to look like so that we don't skip a meeting talking about it this way. Instead, we do it off-line and resolve the issue so that everybody feels comfortable. It actually saves us time in terms of getting to it.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Externally...? Okay.

Mr. Chair, if I may, given the time constraints we have, I know how very busy the ministers are and how difficult it is to get them. Though they do come, and it's great that they do, it is challenging to schedule one minister, let alone four, so I think it is important that we discuss it. We have some time left—about half an hour. It's probably best that we get that done now while we have the time to establish where each party is coming from and what they hope to see with the ministers.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor.

Ms. Louise Chabot: It's a very good idea to discuss this in subcommittee. We can take the time to review the study. We put the effort we wanted into the Supplementary Estimates (A) and (B). In fact, we have already met with ministers. Does it concern all ministers? Should ministers be there? I believe this is an issue that needs to be looked at in an appropriate manner, given that we have already had an opportunity to question ministers on this committee about certain parts of it. We would have to look at the scope of the Supplementary Estimates (C).

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Gazan.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I wanted to say I do certainly support MP Dancho's recommendation to have the ministers here for questions. I also agree with Adam in terms of scheduling. It goes really fast in a subcommittee meeting outside of here, and we can communicate with people within our party, although it's easy for me, because I'm the only one in the party representing the NDP here. I think if we can communicate that to the representative who is on the subcommittee, it would probably go a lot faster in terms of scheduling and not take away from our meeting time.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Are there any further interventions?

Colleagues, it's pretty clear that we do not have consensus, and there are two issues before us. I think, unless anyone has a better idea, that we're probably going to have to put this to a vote. The first issue—and I'm going to need a motion on this—is whether the committee will, in fact, conduct an examination of supplementary estimates (C). We need to decide that. If that is answered in the affirmative, then the second question would be whether the scheduling of the examination of supplementary estimates (C) would be referred to the subcommittee.

If I may, I'm now calling for a motion that this committee conduct an examination of supplementary estimates (C), including the calling of witnesses. Could someone move the motion for me? Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Is there any discussion on the motion?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Would it be possible to just move a motion to move it all to the subcommittee and to have the subcommittee report back with a proposed schedule that includes what we decide on, as opposed to saying yes?

I don't think we're going to say no. It's a question of saying, let's come back with a firm understanding of what the impact is and where they will be scheduled. We as parliamentary secretaries can try to figure out what the ministers' schedules look like and have a conversation off-line to show how it fits into the EI study, how it fits into the URN study and how it fits into the proposal in front of us with the legislation that's come from the House. It would be just to put it all together into a work plan that makes sense and takes into account things like the parliamentary breaks that are coming up for constituency weeks in March and so on.

Let us take it aside and not say yes or no to it, because I don't think that's the answer to either question. Let's take it to the subcommittee and let the subcommittee come back with a work plan that spells out what the next few weeks look like and includes the concerns that are legitimately being raised by members around wanting to hear from certain ministers and certain officials.

The Chair: If I understood Ms. Chabot's intervention, it was that we not examine this. That's what I heard and I felt that we needed to dispense with that to move to the next step. She's on the list here. Perhaps she feels differently.

Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate and agree with most of what Mr. Vaughan has said, but I'm a bit confused. I know Madame Chabot is very keen to continue on with her study and is concerned about the days. I do recognize that, having also had that happen to me. I'm not clear. It sounds as though the rest of the committee is open to having all four ministers come for supplementary estimates. Is that not the case?

Do the Liberal members of the committee not want the ministers to come for supplementary estimates? Is that the case? I'm not clear.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: We have three boats that have to come in-to harbour. We just need to know what order they're going to come in to understand what impact they might have on the EI study, and also there's getting our own study finalized and off to the minister. We have two pieces of work in front of us.

The supps blow a hole in that, and I'm saying let's get together and figure out the best way to schedule them, also based on when we think ministers may be available or not available. It just helps us to compose a coherent schedule that accommodates everything that people are saying, including most importantly what Madame Chabot said. She has been waiting almost a full year for this study to start, and it just seems unfair that, just as we get to the start, we have four ministers come in on four meetings. That blows the entire schedule until July.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That's how it goes. I think it's happening to all the committees right now, not just this one, as you know.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Instead of saying yes or no tonight, let's punt it to the subcommittee. Let's have the subcommittee come back with a schedule we can all work with that meets all of our interests, and doesn't put Madame Chabot in a—

• (1710)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Chair, if I may, I've never known a subcommittee to bring forward the minister's calendar, so are you committing to bringing forward their availability at the subcommittee?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As best we can, to understand where it fits into the schedule.... We'll go away to find out where that schedule lies, what that schedule might look like, to get you the results and the appearances you want in a timely way, but to also understand and be respectful of the fact that Madame Chabot has been waiting literally one year to start her study.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'll just finish. I know many of our opposition members and our party have been waiting a long time to speak with the ministers as well. I know that's equally as important to them.

The Chair: Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: I would like to raise a point of order. Although the discussion is quite interesting, it is more like a dialogue.

I said no. I must admit that I am concerned about the work schedule. If we had never gone through the exercise of examining supplementary estimates, which we have done twice, I would be concerned.

First, we were given the mandate to conduct the study. I am sorry, but I have not read the entire email, and I don't know what timeframe we have or which minister is involved in these matters.

I agreed with our colleague Mr. Brown's fine idea. I'm open to receiving suggestions and reviewing the matter in subcommittee to determine how we can fit the study into our work schedule. I remind you that we have all taken on this study as a priority and that was not by chance.

If we had another two years to conduct a study, it would be a different story. Our reform study is also affected by the fact that, if we don't have time to study it, we will see a period of uncertainty between the end of the temporary benefits and unemployment insurance in September. We need to combine the two issues.

I really did not see that we had deviated from the schedule. However, if we have consensus, I'm prepared to agree to transfer the whole matter to the subcommittee and then let them come to the committee with a proposal. At that point, I will be able to say whether or not I agree.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Ms. Gazan, you have the floor.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Can I propose that...? I don't think there's any disagreement here. One is the motion that we invite the minister for the supps. The second vote was that the scheduling would occur during a subcommittee. I don't think it interferes with Madame Chabot's goal of getting the study going if we look at the scheduling in the subcommittee and agree that the ministers will come here to review the supps.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

Can I take it that there's no need to proceed with the first motion? You're withdrawing it, and you're moving a second to have this matter moved to committee for scheduling?

Ms. Leah Gazan: No, what I'm saying is, can we get on with the vote on this? I think there's some agreement here, or maybe I'm missing something.

The Chair: No. I think we're trying to get at the same thing through two different routes.

I agree with you that there now appears to be consensus that we are going to have a look at the supplementaries. That being the case, I would suggest that you withdraw the motion to determine whether we consider them—take that as a given by consensus—and let's move on to whether the subcommittee is going to be involved in the scheduling.

Are you okay with that?

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm totally okay. I will withdraw my motion. Thank you.

(Motion withdrawn)

The Chair: Great. Thank you.

Mr. Vis.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Maybe the clerk can enlighten us about the motion previously passed by this committee regarding the appearance of ministers for

supplementary estimates. I think that motion still stands, does it not?

Secondly, you guys have heard me berate people about the constitutional responsibility we all have to review how government spends money as well, but I won't enlighten you all with that today.

• (1715)

The Chair: No, we remember it well. Thank you.

Madam Clerk, has there been an all-encompassing motion with respect to the examination of estimates that I think Mr. Vis was referring to, maybe something we did on the front end?

The Clerk: I'm looking at it. I will come back off-line and discuss that with members. I'm looking at it right now, if you can give me a moment.

Mr. Brad Vis: That was from MP Kusie.

The committee did, in fact, adopt the previous schedule prior to prorogation. Then there was some back and forth at our first meeting after prorogation about the schedule of the committee. We thought we were going to have the opportunity to study new things, but then it went into something else.

That said, I'm really looking forward to the EI study before us today and the estimates.

The Chair: Seeing no further hands up, I think we have consensus that we're going to do an examination of the supplementary (C)s. The question is whether we move the questions around availability of witnesses, scheduling and allocation of time for the examination of the supplementary (C)s to the subcommittee.

That's the question. I will say that it was moved by Ms. Gazan. Is there any further discussion on that motion?

Ms. Dancho, go ahead.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I just want to clarify. Can you repeat the motion? I'm sorry. I don't have it written down.

The Chair: It's that the committee engage in an examination of the supplementary (C) estimates; and that the questions around the allocation of the time dedication of ministers and officials to appear be delegated to the subcommittee and brought back before this committee for approval.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Falk, go ahead please.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Can there be a deadline added to that of when the subcommittee will bring that back to this committee?

The Chair: What do you suggest?

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: That's a good question. I don't sit on the subcommittee, so I'm not sure how often the subcommittee meets or if it's just at the chair's call.

The Chair: Yes, it's as needed.

How about the end of next week?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Would the subcommittee be available after the HUMA meeting on Tuesday? I just think that we should get it done, because if we're going to coordinate up to four ministers before the end of March, it's going to be....

As Mr. Vaughan points out, there's spring break, so we'd best do it quickly. I would do it today if everyone was available, but I'm guessing that they are not.

The Chair: I can only speak for myself. We will try to get it done with all due haste, but I can only speak for myself. I will make myself available after the meeting on Tuesday.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I can meet after the meeting on Tuesday as well.

The Chair: Okay. That looks positive.

Madame Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: If it's possible to do it on Tuesday, I will be available too.

You just have to take into account that sometimes our meetings do not happen at the scheduled time because of voting in the House.

I will be available after the meeting, which ideally will take place as soon as possible. I will also be available during the week when we have no parliamentary business, if it is not a problem for the support team to hold a meeting.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Ms. Gazan, I thought I saw your hand up. Did you have an intervention?

Ms. Leah Gazan: No, I didn't, Chair. I'm just concerned because I am available but I don't know what's come into my office in terms of requests—

The Chair: That's fair enough.

Ms. Leah Gazan: —and what's been agreed to. I'm wondering if we can tentatively book it but send that out to our offices so that our teams can book it. I don't know what's come in, so I'm scared to book it.

• (1720)

The Chair: Absolutely. There may also be the question of House of Commons resources that we may have to deal with as well, but we will absolutely shoot to make this happen immediately after our meeting on Tuesday.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that suggestion, Ms. Dancho.

With that, do we have consensus to proceed in that fashion? The subcommittee will seek to get its work done promptly, ideally as soon as this Tuesday. Do we have consensus on that or do we need a vote? I don't think we need a vote. I think we've talked this through. We will proceed in that fashion.

In terms of our schedule, colleagues, this coming Tuesday the 23rd we will have our second meeting on the EI study. There will be witnesses from the Canada Revenue Agency and Statistics Canada on the first panel. The second panel will be the C.D. Howe Institute. On Thursday the 25th, we will commence our examination of Bill C-220. The week following is a constituency week, and the work of the subcommittee will dictate what will be done when we return. That's a bit of a look ahead.

Is there any other business to come before the meeting? Is it the will of the committee to adjourn? I think it is.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I'm sorry, I don't want to prolong the meeting too much, but I do have a question to ask.

Each party had until February 9 to send in its list of witnesses for the study on employment insurance reform. I know that, in your schedule, February 9 was not the deadline. Some expert witnesses are still wondering if they will be called. I imagine that we are not the only party to have submitted a list of witnesses, but I wanted to know what motivated that choice.

The Chair: I will ask the clerk for assistance. However, I can tell you that you are right: all parties submitted their witness lists. Normally they are allocated to each party according to the priorities established.

Having said that, I will now invite the clerk to provide further details.

The Clerk: To date, we have consolidated the witnesses proposed by all parties. So we have a list of all the witnesses. When the subcommittee meets, we can at least discuss the dates for future meetings. That will help us organize the meetings. We can then call the witnesses and invite them.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

If I understand correctly, we can discuss this at the next subcommittee meeting, when we have the schedule.

The Clerk: At the very least, we need to establish the schedule. It can help us organize when witnesses will appear.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Can we have the list of witnesses? Are we going to receive it?

The Clerk: If all committee members want the list, I can send it to them.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Are there any other interventions? Is there any other business to come before the meeting?

Do we have consensus to adjourn? I believe we do.

Have a nice weekend and we'll see you on Tuesday. Thank you.

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