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Chair: Mr. John Aldag



Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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• (1710)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 100 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We recognize that we meet on the unceded territory of the Algonquin and Anishinabe peoples.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

Welcome, Ms. Ashton. Everybody else is here in person. Ms. Ashton, you've done lots of Zoom. You know how to run everything, so I'll just get right into it.

We have a bit of housekeeping.

The leader of the government in the House announced that Thursday, March 21, 2024, will be the final allotted day in the current period, which means that all the votes in the supplementary estimates (C), 2023-24, will be deemed reported to the House as of the ordinary hour of daily adjournment on Monday, March 18, 2024.

Did everybody get that?

As such, any committees studying the supplementary estimates (C) after Monday, March 18, 2024, will not do so under the order of reference from the House. This study and subsequent report, if desired by the committee, will have to be done under Standing Order 108. Please note that in this case, the committee will not adopt the votes.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, February 26, 2024, the committee is meeting to discuss the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (C). We won't be reporting back to the House. It's subject matter only. That's what this tells us.

With that, I'd like to welcome our witnesses at the table today, starting with the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services. Welcome, Minister.

From the department, we have many officials. Thank you for being here.

We have Gina Wilson, deputy minister; Candice St-Aubin, senior assistant deputy minister; Paula Hadden-Jokiel, assistant deputy minister; Nathalie Nepton, acting assistant deputy minister, education and social development programs and partnerships; Nelson

Barbosa, director general, regional operations; Katrina Peddle, director general, Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families branch; Jessica Sultan, director general, economic and business opportunities, lands and economic development; Jonathan Allen, acting director general, education and social development programs and partnerships; and Philippe Thompson, chief of finances and results and delivery officer.

Welcome, everyone.

I'm going to use a little card system here. The yellow card means 30 seconds are left. The red card means that time is up. Don't stop mid-sentence, but wind up your thoughts, and we'll continue on with the next speaker.

With that, Minister, I assume that you're going to make the opening statement for five minutes. When you're ready, the floor is yours.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the officials for taking time away from their busy jobs to be with me today. I thought it would be good to have the team with us so that they can answer to the level of detail that I think this committee deserves.

It's truly a joy to be with you here on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to turn to the progress that our Liberal government has made towards reconciliation over the past eight years.

Prior to our government's election in 2015, the Conservatives had cut funding and refused to meet with indigenous chiefs.

Under Justin Trudeau, our government has made reconciliation a priority these past eight years.

[*English*]

That begins with water.

As you know, the previous Conservative government ignored the needs of first nations communities for clean water, and as a result, when we were elected, 105 long-term boil water advisories were in place. However, today, after working with communities and increasing investments by over 150%, the vast majority of first nations have clean drinking water they can trust.

We still have 4% of communities who live with a long-term advisory, but there is a plan under way for each of them, and Canadians can follow along online in terms of the status of the advisories for those communities.

As we know, we do need to be focused on sustained, equitable support for water systems, because if we don't have ongoing investments, not just in the equipment that serves first nations people but in the training for the maintenance, all of that progress could vanish. Reconciliation is not a destination but a journey, and it requires a long-term commitment, regardless of which party is leading the country.

That's why Bill C-61, the first nations clean water act, is so important to partners. This piece of legislation was developed through historic participation with first nations, and it restores the rights of first nations to manage their own water systems.

For the very first time in our history, it holds the federal government accountable for equitable funding for water systems in first nations. In fact, it installs an ability for first nations to work with the Government of Canada to determine levels of funding that will ensure clean water for generations to come.

The AFN is calling on Parliament to pass that bill, because as Chief Erica Beaudin of Cowessess First Nation said, "indigenous people, indigenous children deserve to be conceived, born and die [with] clean water [access]".

It was therefore distressing for partners who were in the audience that day to see, on the first day of debate, a Conservative member of Parliament choose instead to repeat very tired stereotypes, ignoring the discriminatory funding as a cause of that lack of water. Many first nations people were deeply hurt by those comments, and many are still waiting for a sincere apology.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

Indigenous peoples are also leading change in the housing sector. I recently celebrated the construction of new homes in the Liard First Nation with Chief Charlie. He told me that housing was essential to people's health and well-being. You know as well as I do that we still have a long way to go.

[*English*]

The report from the Auditor General yesterday shows that decades of colonialism and underinvestment have had significant and deep impacts on indigenous communities, and it's why our Liberal government has increased spending on housing for indigenous people by over 1,100%.

For the first time in recent history, the proportion of people living in overcrowded homes has stabilized and is starting to decrease. It's a huge contrast to the approach of the previous government, which resulted in only 99 houses built in first nations for a cost of \$300 million.

In contrast, since 2015, over 34,000 homes have been built or renovated in first nations, with 22,000 already completed. This is fundamental because, as all of you know, better housing means that more people can reach their true potential.

Mr. Chair, I've said it already: Reconciliation is not a destination; it's a relationship, and respect is at the foundation of every good relationship. We must work directly with communities to address their needs, tackle the systemic issues they are facing and transfer the service delivery back under their control.

I know that this is an uncomfortable approach for those who are more comfortable with the paternalism of the past, but paternalism has not resulted in healthy communities and people. This government is working to live up to the promise of a Canada where everyone can truly reach their full potential, and we can only do that in partnership with indigenous peoples.

Meegwetch. Qujannamiik. Marsii. Thank you.

The Chair: That was awesome timing. Thank you, Minister.

We're going to go into our first round of questions. They are six minutes each.

First up, I have Mr. Schmale. The floor is yours.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing today.

Minister, I met with the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation today. They mentioned that in 2019, they were approved—tender-ready and shovel-ready—for their medical centre, but they have yet to receive funding.

In 30 seconds or less, can you explain why?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, as you would know, MP Schmale, medical centres and health provisions are a joint responsibility of the province and the federal government, along with the first nations who often deliver care through nursing centres.

I can tell you that negotiations of that kind are under way on a regular basis for many different infrastructure projects, but I would have to turn to officials about that specific project.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Be very quick, please.

Ms. Candice St-Aubin (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): Thank you for the question.

I think the minister has covered the big points. There are ongoing conversations. As you can imagine, there are several requests in the system right now. We look forward to continuing to work with communities to ensure that the funding flows quickly and that there can be actual shovels in the ground to ensure that it's ready.

• (1720)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much.

Minister, as you know, 133 chiefs in Ontario have come together to come out against the carbon tax. In fact, they're taking your government to court because they do not feel they were heard. Some of these chiefs are in your riding.

Do you feel it's time to axe the tax?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think I've responded to this question before, certainly in the media.

In fact, that's a misrepresentation of what the letter says. What the letter says is that the chiefs would like a larger rebate from the carbon tax. In fact, should that not be possible.... Obviously, they wanted a positive answer from the government. I'm really pleased to say that the finance minister signed off just a couple of days ago on doubling the rebate for indigenous communities from 1% to 2%.

That will be good news for the Chiefs of Ontario. I'm really looking forward to being able to work with the Chiefs of Ontario on their priorities in making life affordable for first nations people and keeping a healthy environment for the next generations, and in fact the next seven generations to come.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: The carbon tax on the cost of fuel, on the cost of food, on the cost of transport, on the cost of the actual retailer selling it—that all has implications across the chain. I seem to miss how they are actually getting a better quality of life if throughout that food chain the costs are going up in every way.

As the Parliamentary Budget Officer has shown, the rebates are not helping non-indigenous Canadians, and indigenous peoples are now dealing with the fact that the rebate is next to nothing. I still don't understand how life is becoming more affordable.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will tell you that the conversations I have with first nations people really focus on two things. One is to end the ongoing colonialism that indigenous people have faced at the hands of many governments, but in particular under the previous government, which not only didn't invest in first nations communities but refused to meet with first nations leaders to talk about these very issues.

The second most common thing I talk about with first nations people is actually the climate. In Alberta—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Did you take a meeting with the Ontario chiefs when they asked for a meeting regarding the carbon tax?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I have met with the Ontario chiefs multiple times. In fact, Glen Hare and I are colleagues and acquaintances. I would say that I will meet with any first nations chief who wishes to do so, and I do so on a regular basis.

However, let me finish my thought, Mr. Chair. In Alberta, when I met with Alberta chiefs a few months back, their biggest concern was what was going to happen with the drying-up aquifers and the lack of water that the entire province is dealing with right now. It's a deep concern. Not only will this prevent access to drinking water; all of the other ways that water is used by first nation communities and economic development is hampered by the ongoing onslaught of climate change. That is the second most frequent thing I talk about.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You mentioned water advisories. Neskantaga, in my friend Eric Melillo's riding, has been on a boil water advisory

for 29 years. Can you please update us on the status of that situation?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Absolutely.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Can you do it in 30 seconds or less?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Absolutely.

I hope Mr. Melillo has visited Neskantaga. I have, and I have a deep relationship with Chief Moonias. As a matter of fact, he was in Ottawa just a few weeks ago. He is quite happy with the progress we're making. There are a number of conditions that he thinks need to be in place, and our engineers agree, before he is comfortable with proceeding with a lift. He feels very confident that for the very first time, he is working with a government that is listening to Neskantaga's needs.

I invite you to visit Neskantaga and meet Chief Moonias. They are an incredible community.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I can tell you that Mr. Melillo is doing a great job for that riding and in bringing their concerns to Ottawa.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I hope he's visited Neskantaga. I certainly would love to bring him any time—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, this is my time, if you don't mind. Thank you very much.

We're going to talk about housing now, because you brought it up.

In the Auditor General's report, the Auditor General is showing that there doesn't seem to have been any improvement in housing since 2015. In fact, only one of the ISC regional offices collected information about the mould strategy, which was created in 2008. Can you explain why?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I can certainly tell you that for the very first time in the history of this country, we're seeing the loss of housing beginning to stop. That's important, because as I mentioned in my opening remarks, year after year we were seeing a decline in the availability of housing for first nations.

Do we have more to do? We absolutely, without a doubt, have more to do. We have massive investments ahead of us. It will take all of us not voting against things like investments in affordable housing on first nations, which I have seen and noted that your members vote against time and time again. That, quite frankly, is shameful.

• (1725)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Actually, what we're voting against is confidence in this government.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: What we need all parties to do is pull together and insist that we spend more money to close that gap. I look forward to doing that work with you.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Well, more money than ever is being spent, but the conditions are not getting any better.

The Chair: We're out of time on this round. I'm going to cut off this round of questions and go to the next one.

I have Mr. Powlowski first up, for the Liberal side.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Welcome to committee, Patty.

I want to ask you for an update on where the \$2 billion that our government had committed for indigenous health will be going.

I think the last time we spoke, you quite rightly said you were waiting to hear from indigenous communities themselves as to where they'd like to see the money go.

I'm going to give you a prolonged period to respond to this question, but let me just talk about a few of the things I've heard from the indigenous community within my riding.

Certainly one of the suggestions from Fort William First Nation was about the possibility of funding their chronic care home. As I think you know, both Chief Solomon and Chief Collins have really made that a priority in health care.

The second thing I wanted to ask about was funding for land-based treatment for both addictions and mental health. Again, several different indigenous communities in my riding have asked me about that. They're looking for funding for that.

Lastly, I'll ask about any funding for indigenous people who live off reserve. As you know, a lot of indigenous people spend part of their time on reserve and part of their time off reserve. Thunder Bay has a large indigenous population.

I wonder if you could answer the question overall, but also in response to those three specific areas.

You're welcome to ask any of your many able assistants.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, and I will, for some of the details.

Let me just start with the \$2-billion health equity fund. I'm really glad you raised this point.

This is an innovative new support for first nations across the country—indigenous people, quite frankly—who have oftentimes faced extreme racism in health care systems in provincial and territorial systems.

In fact, it arises from the sad case of Joyce Echaquan, who, as you know, died filming her own abuse. That led to the indigenous health care summit, which was held during the pandemic, where we heard from health experts, indigenous health experts and individuals about what we could do together to better help with the experiences that indigenous people face in health care every day.

It's ongoing, by the way. I don't want to leave the impression that Joyce was an isolated incident. These kinds of things are happening every day in every health care system, either intentionally or oftentimes through systemic design that just doesn't meet people's needs. Quite frankly, these systems have been designed in ways that exclude the realities of indigenous people.

The Prime Minister committed to this \$2-billion health equity fund to help indigenous groups, leaders and communities that have

innovative ideas about how to bridge that gap between health care provision in provinces and territories and the expectations that they have in terms of better health outcomes. It complements the work that Minister Holland is doing on renewing those health care transfers.

By the way, I've been at all of those meetings with provinces and territories with indigenous partners to talk about our expectation that we eliminate racism in health care.

I will turn to Candice to talk about how that money's being divided and about some of the innovation that you're hearing for how people will use that money.

Ms. Candice St-Aubin: Thank you for the question.

The indigenous health equity fund will be flowing out to communities regionally on April 1.

We are currently engaging in how that will be implemented. As you are aware, this will provide 10-year funding sustainability and will maximize innovation. Certainly we're encouraging communities to look at what their needs are and to invest in that.

With the 10 years, they're able to move that money around to target different initiatives, including land-based treatment, as you were talking about. It's certainly looking at how best to address substance and opioid realities that we're seeing in communities, and it's also working with provinces to try to leverage the funding that's currently going into the health transfers to maximize those.

It could be much more clinical care and also around virtual hubs, supporting e-health and in particular mental health e-health, to maybe alleviate some of the medical transportation that's required in more northern and remote communities.

We do see a lot of innovation happening at the community level, which they're driving. This is allowing them greater flexibility to plan that care and maybe amplify those aspects.

• (1730)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Are you considering funding chronic care homes? That's big in Fort William First Nation and I think also in Rainy River First Nations.

Ms. Candice St-Aubin: That's a valuable question.

What I would say is that the beauty of the indigenous health equity fund is that it is up to communities to determine where that need is. We are not prescriptive. We allow broad flexibilities, because we do already provide a level of funding.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: That being said, there are lots of indigenous communities, lots of competing interests. How are you going to determine who you're going to fund? When will that funding stream become open for communities to apply for it?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: To be clear, it's not an application base. I was really personally insistent on that, as the minister.

An application base usually gives preferences to communities that have good grant writers and the ability to apply for grants. In fact, the Auditor General spoke about this in relation to access to housing money. We're trying to think through how we ensure that people get the money, regardless of their capacity to write a grant, quite frankly.

This money will be sent out on April 1, as my colleague said, to regional governance, local governance—people who are actually delivering health care or working with partners to deliver health care. After that is sent out, we can certainly send a list.

I would just conclude by saying, Marcus, that it is really designed in a flexible way so that first nations can use it in whatever way they want. I have seen some really interesting things that are about bridging the gap between western and indigenous medicine.

In Manitoba, for example, we've funded, in previous types of program funding, health ombudsmen, so that actually if an indigenous person is not getting the care they need in downtown Winnipeg—this might interest you, MP Carr, because it's in your neck of the woods—the health ombudsman, through the Manitoba chiefs council, is able to take those concerns from the individual and then act as an advocate for that individual within the Manitoba health care system. It's something I'm hoping that we'll be able to work more closely on with that province, with the election of its first first nations premier.

The Chair: Thank you. We're out of time on that one.

I should have mentioned that we're a pretty collegial group here. The members try to get as many questions out as they can. When you have the floor, I'd say you should get your question out. We also want to make sure that the minister and her team have time to respond.

We'll have a nice discussion as we go through this afternoon. I'll direct that to all members, just so we have a good conversation today.

With that, Monsieur Lemire, the floor is yours now for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, Minister.

Housing is one area that the supplementary estimates do not address, despite the dire housing needs. Meeting those needs would require an investment of \$8 billion in Quebec and an investment of \$34 billion in Canada.

In an effort to see the glass as half full, I want to recognize the hard work and contribution of first nations and Inuit communities,

especially in Quebec. Quebec is the province doing the best job, having prioritized capacity building in indigenous communities. I asked the Auditor General about it. She wasn't very familiar with the ecosystem in Quebec, but she did note that Quebec was making more progress than other provinces.

Indigenous financial institutions that belong to the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association, or NACCA—one being the Native Commercial Credit Corporation, in Wendake—are important because their contribution to capacity building is essential. These institutions submitted a request for better long-term funding as part of the pre-budget consultation process. Their contribution agreements are expiring on March 31, 2024, so very soon. One of the things they are asking for is \$150 million so they can issue new housing loans.

Indigenous communities are worried because the government hasn't announced any such funding, and they need predictability. The Yānonhchia' initiative is a social innovator designed by and for indigenous peoples to strengthen the housing network and indigenous-led financing.

Will you commit to pressing your colleague, the Minister of Finance, to act on the funding requests of indigenous financial institutions?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The Minister of Finance and I work on that issue every day.

[*English*]

I have met with Chief Lance Haymond recently. For example, you raised the issue of mortgages and how we can actually finance mortgages in first nations. I think the Minister of Finance is very interested in that idea.

We'll continue to pursue those innovative ideas that are coming from indigenous people. That's what's so great about this. I think the days of Canada telling indigenous people how to solve these problems is over. We've obviously not been able to dictate to first nations exactly what the solutions are. We're very excited when Chief Haymond and others come forward to talk about different ownership structures that could work within the context of a first nation.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

● (1735)

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: *Meegwetch.*

Thank you for recognizing the contribution of Chief Haymond, chief of the Kebaowek First Nation, which is in my riding, in Témiscamingue. Obviously, these issues are not limited by boundary lines, so I think it's important to show trust given the situation.

Building on their desire to take control of the housing situation, first nations in Quebec have developed innovative tools, including the indigenous finance network Yānonhchia', which means "home" in Huron-Wendat. The term stresses the organic connection between family space, community life and territory. It suggests personal responsibility for shelter, communal responsibility to ensure that no one is left behind, and sustainable use of land and resources. This network was developed in and supported by Quebec.

I appreciate your answer, but the outcome is clearly what matters in a situation like this.

Switching topics, I'd like to know whether you've had a chance to see the Auditor General's comments and criticism regarding the department's rather passive response. According to her, the department's approach is completely outdated.

What do you say to the Auditor General? Will you be announcing an overhaul of Indigenous Service Canada's practices and policies in light of her findings?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: There are two things.

One, from what I see every single day, I would say that I'm not sure that saying it's a passive response as a department is accurate. I would say that the department works with the physical resources it has. In fact, it's been very ambitious about getting any extra dollars out the door. Oftentimes, when dollars are about to lapse for housing because projects haven't been built or are not under way, the department will come to me and ask to reprioritize that money to communities that can use that money. We're very cautious and careful to not let any money lapse, because we need that money because there is such a great need across the country. I haven't seen that in housing at all.

I think you're talking about the part of the Auditor General's report that talks about vulnerable communities and how far away sometimes vulnerable communities are from being able to access housing. In that case, we have a number of different first nations-led agencies that will help communities to gain the governance and fiscal skills that they need to be able to move forward more quickly. I know that the department works with those communities as well and can provide a lot of support to those communities and certainly connect them to these indigenous-led institutions so that they have greater capacity.

I will say, before anyone says that this is in any way undermining the skills and talent of indigenous peoples, that communities are often under a huge degree of stress. Most chiefs I know are not just elected officials like us; they are also responding to—

The Chair: I'm sorry; I'm going to have to interrupt briefly.

There are bells again. I'm going to check with the committee to see if we have unanimous consent to proceed through the bells.

Do people want to go upstairs to vote, or do you want to vote remotely?

I see that we'll keep going and make sure to let you know when the vote happens.

There are 20 seconds left on the clock, Ms. Hajdu.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think it's important to understand that for those communities that have a deep state of distress, those chiefs are some of the hardest-working people I've ever met. They are literally—literally—putting out fires. They are answering calls at all times, day and night.

Our job as a government and as a country is to support those chiefs as they begin to stabilize their communities. We work with those fragile communities to ensure that they have the support they need.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I want to let the committee know that I will be moving a motion to invite the Auditor General to appear. With so many issues tied to the government's relationship with first nations, I think it's very important for committee members to hear what Ms. Hogan has to say.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go now to Ms. Ashton.

When you're ready, Ms. Ashton, the floor is yours for six minutes.

• (1740)

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much.

Madam Minister, over the next two years, Indigenous Services Canada plans on sunseting funding streams and cutting spending on programs like Jordan's principle, programs that deal with the harmful legacy of residential schools and support for mental health.

Indigenous Services Canada plans on half a billion dollars of cuts in the next four years. While the department has reassured indigenous communities and leaders that these massive cuts won't affect services, we have never seen in our history, and certainly not in recent history, a proposed cut and the sunseting of this much money.

We know that the elimination of these critical programs will be devastating for communities that already rely on them, and they need all the support they can get. At a time when the need is so great, why is your government choosing to cut funding rather than invest in first nations?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much.

As I've said publicly and repeatedly, this government is not cutting services and is not reducing any spending initiatives that would impact service delivery to indigenous communities. The reductions you see in our departmental plan are related to internal operating efficiencies and some program funding that's not being utilized—specifically, the new fiscal agreement money that has not had the uptake we had hoped. We can certainly go back to it if we see a greater uptake.

The premise of your question is incorrect. In fact, the programs you reference are ongoing. We have a legal commitment to Jordan's principle, for example, and this government has every intent to uphold it.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay. I think we'll have to agree to disagree, because the sunseting of these kinds of investments is not seen as good news for anybody on the ground.

Let's move to housing. If you asked me to describe one of the government's biggest failures when it comes to indigenous communities, it would be on housing. I think the Auditor General's report certainly proves that. We heard yesterday that since the Liberals took over in 2015, there's been “no meaningful improvement” in housing on reserve and that it's highly unlikely that your government will meet its 2030 targets.

I see the housing crisis in community after community here in northern Manitoba. First nations like Shamattawa, Poplar Hill, Garden Hill and Pukatawagan are clear that they face a housing crisis. We heard a number of shocking statements in the report from the Auditor General yesterday. She highlighted that since 2015, ISC has spent less than 7% of what's needed to end the housing gap on reserve.

How do you justify this lack of action of first nations living in overcrowded, mouldy and inhumane conditions?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much for the question.

I'll first say that no one should justify anyone living in those conditions. As I said in my media response yesterday at the press conference, I seriously hope that Canadians have the same fervour for housing as they have had for water. I certainly think that every government—this one and into the future—needs to remain focused on alleviating the ongoing gap for indigenous peoples, including in housing.

I will say, as I said in my response to one of your colleagues here in the room, that the deficit in housing and infrastructure is one of the most frequent things I speak about with first nations chiefs across the country. That is why this government remains committed to closing that gap.

You're right that the 2030 gap is ambitious. We know that the federal government has to work with partners to be able to close that gap. We are certainly making the investments, with an 1,100% increase in the funding of housing since 2015 and the creation of 34,000 homes. That's nothing to sneeze at, especially when you compare it with the previous government's abysmal performance in this space.

I will say that those investments must be sustained. In order to build from where we are now—we're in a space where we're not

seeing increased overcrowding but are starting to see communities level off and are starting to have positive feedback from first nations that are controlling and designing their own solutions to ongoing housing challenges—we have to continue to accelerate that gain. We do that by continued investment.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Climate change, as you know, is hitting indigenous communities hardest. In our region, this is evident in many ways. One of the most evident is the way in which ice roads have become increasingly unreliable. For isolated first nations, this is a matter of life and death. First nations in our region are clear: There needs to be a revival of the east side road authority initiative, and federal investment is required.

Is your government prepared to support the call for all-weather road infrastructure, including an airport for Wasagamack First Nation; investment in the road being proposed between St. Theresa Point and Berens River; and a northern route to service first nations like Oxford House, Garden Hill and first nations in between?

● (1745)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much.

In terms of the Wasagamack airport, you would know, MP Ashton, that I have been working with the Minister of Transport on this and have shared with him your advocacy. I want to thank you for that, because you're absolutely right: We have been extremely worried about the state of ice roads this year. It has a massive impact, as you've pointed out, on everything, including the cost of building housing. Infrastructure development in remote communities depends on materials and equipment being shipped up during ice road season. Those seasons are getting shorter and shorter.

We will continue to do whatever it takes to make sure that essential resources are shipped, but I think this calls for a larger conversation amongst multiple departments and provincial and territorial partners. I think we are facing down a very immediate crisis related to climate change.

I'm glad you started with climate change. It is a pleasure to work with a party that acknowledges that climate change is real and is having extraordinary fiscal impacts on first nations, including the inability to get goods and equipment up to communities in a cost-effective way.

The Chair: We're out of time on that round.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay, thanks.

The Chair: We'll go to our slightly shorter rounds now.

I want to check with everybody. We're just under 22 minutes away from the vote. Are people comfortable or okay to vote remotely?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We'll continue right up until the votes start. I'll then suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes while people vote, and then we'll resume as quickly as possible.

Ms. Ashton, are you okay with that as well?

Ms. Niki Ashton: Yes.

The Chair: That's perfect. Thank you.

For the next round, the first question is for five minutes.

Mr. Genuis, the floor is yours.

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

Minister Hajdu, Canadians would expect that the indigenous procurement system would be designed to benefit indigenous peoples and indigenous communities, not a small number of well-connected NDP-Liberal government insiders. Dalian is a two-person company. They don't do actual work; they just get government contracts and subcontract to others.

How many indigenous people benefited from the \$7.9 million your government sent to Dalian for ArriveCAN scam?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think I'll just blow by all the stupid slogans and answer the question.

Well, I'll tell you that the indigenous business directory is about—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I would love for you to answer the question. How many indigenous people benefited from the \$7.9 million that your government gave to Dalian for the ArriveCAN scam?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think I'll just blow by the stupid slogans and begin by answering the question in a sincere way, which is what I would hope we would all do around this table, because these are serious issues and sincere concerns.

Let me just back up and say that Indigenous Services Canada does manage what's called—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Please don't back up; please just answer the question.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would love to do that. Are you ready to listen?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Go for it.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: All right. That's great.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: How many indigenous people benefited? Just the number would be fine.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The indigenous business directory is a directory that Indigenous Services Canada maintains to provide to other departments of Canada a list of businesses that have been verified as either—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, Minister. This is a two-person company. They don't do any actual work. They're listed on the indigenous business directory. They receive contracts and subcontract. That's all they do. They get government contracts. They subcontract the work to others.

How many indigenous people benefited from the \$7.9 million that your government gave to Dalian? I'm not looking for a history of the program; I'm just looking for a number.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, I think that—

The Chair: Just wait one second. I'll stop the clock.

Mr. Battiste, what's your point of order?

Mr. Jaime Battiste: It's repetition. She's trying to answer the question, and he keeps getting—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It's repetition. It's repetition.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: The minister keeps getting interrupted as she—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Jamie, respectfully, learn the rules, okay?

An hon. member: It's not a point of order.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: It's not a point of order, and it's not a repetition issue. I'm repeating the question—

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Well, in this committee we give the minister—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: —because I want the answer.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I know you're coming in from another committee, but would you show a little bit of respect to the minister, Mr. Genuis?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: She's a minister; you're not. Let her answer, okay?

The Chair: We are into debate, but I will say, as I noted, that we ask the minister and we allow the minister to answer.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes.

Just the number is all I need.

The Chair: I'll turn the floor to the minister.

Continue with your response, please.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: To understand the indigenous business directory, you have to understand what it's for. The indigenous business directory is to provide assurances to other departments, including Public Services and Procurement Canada, that the people on that list are indigenous. That is the sole purpose of the list. It's about indigenating.

● (1750)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, what Mr. Yeo told the public accounts committee yesterday was that the purpose of the program is not to benefit indigenous communities but only to benefit the particular individuals who receive the contracts. What you've just said effectively confirms that. It sounds like you have no information about whether indigenous people or communities benefited beyond the two people who got \$7.9 million for no work.

Of all of Dalian's contracts totalling at least \$91 million under your government, did all of those \$91 million of contracts benefit from the indigenous procurement set-aside, and what percentage of the subcontractors were indigenous?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm kind of annoyed by this question, because it implies that if an Italian person owned a company, then only Italian people should benefit from that company's business. In that is an implicit, I would say, stereotype.

Indigenous business owners are just like non-indigenous business owners. Some indigenous business owners have many indigenous employees—in fact, many businesses do—but indigenous business owners—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I'm going to spare you the false indignation here, okay?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —are just like non-indigenous business owners, and they're looking to turn a profit.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes.

The Chair: Let the minister respond.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Your question is implicitly—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: No, Mr. Chair. I'm going to jump in in accordance with the rules.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —systemically discriminatory.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Of course. Here we go. Here we go, Minister.

Your government faces intense heat over this corruption scandal, and your response, your only response, is not to answer the question but to accuse other people of racism. This is so typical of your government.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: My response, Mr. Genuis—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm going to finish, Minister. Here are the facts.

Dalian is a two-person company. They don't have employees. There are just two of them. Does it seem to you to be a problem that this company can get close to 100 million dollars' worth of contracts from your government? They don't do any work; they subcontract. There's no tracking of whether indigenous people actually benefit. There's no tracking of whether other indigenous businesses receive subcontracts. Simply by being the middleman, they are able to claim this massive set-aside when there is no tracking of benefits to indigenous communities across the country.

Don't you think that's a problem?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would say that whatever happens, contractors should be held accountable, regardless of whether they are indigenous or not. The rules don't change for an indigenous contract.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Do you think this is an abuse of the indigenous procurement program? Do you think this is an abuse of the intention of the program?

The Chair: There are only 10 seconds left. Let's let the minister respond.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would say that if there are people on the list who are not indigenous, it is an abuse. That is why Dalian is suspended with us.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: You are fine with what happened with Dalian.

The Chair: Okay. We're out of time on this one. I'm going to have to move to the next person.

Next up, I have Mr. Carr for his five minutes.

Mr. Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Hi, Minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Hi, Mr. Carr.

Mr. Ben Carr: As you know, I spent a lot of time in my career as an educator. During my time as an educator, I had the privilege of working with a lot of indigenous students and their families in the northwest part of the city of Winnipeg, where I come from.

One of the things I noticed—in addition to so many of the challenges indigenous families still face as a result of intergenerational trauma born of residential schools, colonial policies and all the things we're well aware of—is that within the public education system specifically, because of a shortage of educational opportunities, we often see students having to leave their communities to come down to the big cities like Winnipeg, for example, where they are vulnerable. There's a bit of culture shock. There's susceptibility to gang influence. They are away from their families. There are all sorts of different challenges posed as a result of this. A lot of it has to do with provincial government jurisdiction over education, of course.

I was wondering if you could talk to us a bit more about the role of the federal government in supporting indigenous education across the country. Could you talk to us about some of the guidance or suggestions you might be hearing from indigenous leaders, specifically in relation to the education system in our country?

Thank you.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much for a sincere question. This is an area where, I think, our government has a lot to talk about, quite frankly.

Prior to the election of the federal Liberals, we saw discriminatory funding levels for indigenous education across this country, in board after board. What I mean by this is that the dollars spent per child, for lack of a better metric, were far lower in indigenous communities than in a similar provincial system. We fixed that because we know that the education of young people is one of the best things we can do to invest in our country and the success of each person. It has been a hallmark, I think, of our government: to ensure indigenous education systems across this country have funding equitable to what you could expect in provincial systems. We've in fact increased education by 80% since 2016. Again, that's a big number. It defines how big the gap was prior to our election in 2015.

Now, we're not just spending money to improve education systems; we are also building and renovating schools with first nations people, because many of the schools the children were learning in were, quite frankly, abysmal and left to rot by successive governments that didn't make those kinds of investments.

I've had an opportunity to visit schools. You can see bright, happy children and very content teachers in those facilities. They are teaching in ways that are going to help those young people reach their education potential.

The final thing I'll say is that we have been pursuing what we're calling, and what are called, "regional education agreements", which restore indigenous sovereignty over how education is delivered in communities. In fact, in Quebec there was an amazing opportunity for me to be at the signing of one of these regional education agreements. The young people, educators, students and families were celebrating their ability to design their own curriculum in order to incorporate language, culture, tradition and healing into that curriculum. This will allow their children to have a fair shot at success, just like every other child in that province.

We have, since then, signed four regional education agreements, I think. We have a number under way. We are transforming education in this country, together with first nations, which are leading the way.

• (1755)

Mr. Ben Carr: Thanks, Minister.

I agree with you in terms of the quality of the relationship the federal government is enjoying with the new provincial government in Manitoba. There is an alignment of values and specifically an alignment of beliefs on achieving more progress on the road to truth and reconciliation.

I look forward to a continued conversation with you about some of the ways we can work together with the province to address such things as the teacher shortages that we're seeing on reserve communities in the north as well to address curriculum, which you spoke about. I'm very pleased to hear you substantiate some of the progress I know is being made, but there are all sorts of things we have to look at in terms of colonial practices that still exist for students in the public education system. Again, I understand it's a provincial jurisdiction, but in many instances, these are kids who come from first nation reserves end up in the provincial system, so the partnership between the federal government and the provincial government and local school boards is really critical to ensuring that we offer them the support they need.

I thank you for your ongoing work in this regard and I look forward to our continued work together.

The Chair: Thank you. We're out of time.

We'll now go to Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you said in August 2023 that your department wouldn't cut spending and that services for first nations, Métis and Inuit would not be impacted. Nevertheless, Indigenous Services Canada's

2024-25 departmental plan clearly shows that service delivery will be greatly impacted by budget cuts or similar reductions.

The department is planning to spend about \$20.7 billion on indigenous well-being and self-determination, in other words, all indigenous service areas, in 2024-25 and about \$16.3 billion in 2025-26. That's a year-to-year reduction of 21.04% in expenditures directly related to service delivery. Spending on internal services will go from \$282 million in 2024-25 to \$265 million in 2025-26, a drop of some 6.2%.

The 2024-25 departmental plan, specifically the message from you, the minister, at the beginning of the report, says that you want to close the infrastructure gap by 2030. That includes the education facility gap. However, the 2024-25 departmental plan includes just under \$146 million for education facilities, which is 10 times less than the estimated \$12.6 billion needed to close the current gap. Just \$3.9 million is going towards major renovations or construction of education facilities for first nations in Quebec.

Can you defend these spending cuts to essential services for first nations, Métis and Inuit communities? Eight months ago, you said reductions like these would not be made. How, then, do you explain the reductions in the department's forecast spending?

• (1800)

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I have been clear that there won't be any reductions to service levels and that the initiative to refocus government spending will not impact service delivery to indigenous communities. The reductions you see in the departmental plan are related to internal operating efficiencies and any program funding that's not being utilized, such as funding that's no longer required from the fiscal framework.

I did mention the new fiscal relationship grant. Based on current and projected uptake, a portion of that funding won't be required from the fiscal framework at this point in time, amounting to \$256.7 million over five years and \$89.9 million in ongoing funding, but even with these cost savings, the new fiscal relationship grant escalator would remain fully funded. There will be no impact on the level of the escalator funding for current and future recipients, and so—

The Chair: I'm sorry; I was just going to say to wrap it up. We're out of time.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Yes. I'll just say again that this department is focused on making sure that it provides excellent service in an efficient way, and looking for efficiencies is an important part of the work that they do.

• (1805)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, Ms. Ashton, we'll go to you for your two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

I'd like to get to the issue of nursing shortages.

We know that out of the 223 nurses that ISC says it needs, 43 positions are unfilled. On top of that, more than half of the nurse positions that are filled are filled by contract agencies that are providing only emergency care, rather than the primary care that first nations deserve and desperately need.

It's so bad that communities are posting notices about the lack of nurses in their communities. When I was in Wasagamack First Nation on February 20, in front of the store there was a notice that said, "The nursing station is closed due to nurse shortages starting the week of January 29 until further notice."

Pimicikamak Cree Nation recently declared a state of emergency. Even though they're supposed to have 13 nurses, they had far fewer than that—four—and when they declared the state of emergency, they were committed another four, for eight, but still short of the 13 they deserve, given how large the first nation is and how large the community is.

We know that nurses have been clear about the stress and the burnout they face, and we know that communities are not getting the health care they deserve. In fact, I've joined with first nation leaders who have been very clear that this has had a devastating impact, including in cases of premature death.

This is an urgent situation. What is ISC doing to help first nations like Pimicikamak, like Wasagamack and like Little Grand Rapids, which either have declared states of emergency or have put forward these urgent notices? What is ISC doing to work with them to lift these states of emergency and ensure that there are enough nurses to serve first nations?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, MP Ashton.

I would say that this is a crisis that's affecting Canada. In fact, nursing shortages are profound in pretty much every community across this country and even more profound in remote communities. That's why Indigenous Services Canada has been so focused on what we can do to recruit, retain and train nurses to choose to work in the north, to stay in the north, and to build that internal capacity of communities by ensuring that more indigenous people choose health care as a pathway for their own personal careers.

We have used things like retention strategies and we have increased investments to ensure competitive pay and signing bonuses. We have thrown pretty much everything at the wall to get nurses in place, and I will tell you that there's nothing more stressful for a community, as you pointed out, but certainly for my officials, because I see those messages that come through at two o'clock, three o'clock, five o'clock in the morning from communities where officials are working with communities like the ones you mentioned, just as in many northern and remote communities, to address these nursing shortages.

We're going to keep at it, obviously, and whatever it requires, we will be there to try to ensure that communities have the complement of nurses they need. Furthermore, we are investing in those kinds of innovations that communities are talking about to have greater capacity, with the \$2-billion health equity fund, with the

health transfers and with willing provinces and territories that are interested in partnering with first nations—

Ms. Niki Ashton: Minister, if I could—

The Chair: I'm sorry. We're out of time on this one.

Colleagues, there are just over three minutes until the vote. We could suspend now or start Mr. Melillo's five minutes, if you're okay with being interrupted, Mr. Melillo.

I'll suspend the meeting while we vote. Once everybody has confirmed that they've voted, we'll resume and finish off the time that we have with the minister.

We started at 5:11. We'll try to wrap up as close to 6:11 as we can, less the suspension.

Mr. Melillo, would you like to start? When you're ready, the floor is yours for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I'd like to pick up on the Auditor General's report around housing that was mentioned earlier.

Of course, it notes that your government supposedly has committed to closing the gap on housing in first nations by 2030, but the Auditor General has found that the department has no plan to do that and that the number of homes that need to be replaced due to deteriorating conditions has actually increased since your government came into office. The report has also found that many of the nations most in need are not getting proper funding and in fact are getting less funding.

How would you explain that disparity?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, and thank you for asking the question, because I think the more we talk about indigenous access to housing in first nations, the better off this country will be. It's like water: We need Canadians to understand that this is of utmost priority to all of us.

I've answered this question before. First of all, the department does work very closely with communities to make sure that we understand their current needs, their ongoing needs and their—

Mr. Eric Melillo: With respect, Minister, the Auditor General said that the department has no plan to reach the 2030 goal that you've set.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I am saying that the department works regularly and consistently with first nations on the planning that they're undertaking to close those gaps, and we continue to have—

Mr. Eric Melillo: Do you accept the Auditor General's report?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: We accept all recommendations. I will be clear.

The Auditor General has made good recommendations, including focusing the work to make sure that the most vulnerable communities get the care they need, which was part two of your question.

However, I will also say that what I have certainly learned over the last two and half years—and I know the department knows very well—is that we must do this with indigenous partners. We cannot do it to communities—

Mr. Eric Melillo: Yes, absolutely—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: We must ensure that indigenous communities have the authority and autonomy to—

Mr. Eric Melillo: Just on that, Minister, the Auditor General's report has also stated that your department is not working closely with first nations to address this housing gap.

Again, we're hearing one thing here, but the Auditor General's report, which you have said you accept—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I don't think she said that we weren't working closely with first nations. I think what she said was that some first nations that are particularly vulnerable are having a hard time accessing the housing they need.

That is certainly something that keeps me up at night. I know the department is working very closely with those communities to determine how we can better accelerate building housing and other infrastructure in those very vulnerable communities.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Okay. Thank you very much.

In this limited time, I'd like to ask you about another Auditor General's report around policing, Minister.

In 2022, the government said they were going to work around the clock to get some legislation on the table to support indigenous policing services. Of course, it's two years later, and there are three policing services in northern Ontario that will soon be without an agreement.

Unfortunately, this is putting the lives of first nations people at risk, as you know, in our region, Minister. It's not just the policing itself, but sometimes ambulance services or other emergency services aren't able to do their jobs because of the lack of policing. Why is it that your government is dragging its feet on this very important issue?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will say that we do a complementary line of business, if you will, with indigenous communities, called "Pathways to Safe Indigenous Communities", and there is a self-determined ability for first nations to increase programs, interventions and services for community safety and well-being.

However, you will have to ask my colleague, Minister LeBlanc, questions about the work he is doing on developing indigenous

policing legislation. That is work that I know is very important and dear to this government's heart.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Again, Minister, you say it's very important, but two years ago it was promised that it would be right around the corner and that the government would be working around the clock to get it done. With respect, that doesn't seem to add up to what we're hearing from you here today.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, I will say this: Oftentimes the government has a timeline that is ambitious, but we also work in a respectful way and in full consultation with partners. I look forward to the results of Minister LeBlanc's consultations with indigenous partners, because those will help us ensure that the resulting legislation will truly meet the needs of first nations people.

• (1810)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you, Minister.

I'd like to get in one more question pertaining to the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario, for which, of course, you are the minister responsible.

The service standards for providing responses to applications have not been met for the northern Ontario development program and the regional economic growth through innovation program, according to the most recent information.

You have said that addressing this issue is important to you. Can you explain why the department is failing to meet those service standards?

The Chair: Colleagues, I just want to say that the voting period has now started. We're 15 seconds into it.

Minister, if you'd like to offer a brief response, we'll then suspend and vote and then come back in.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I would just say that this is incorrect information and that the service standards have been met within a large portion of the target.

I'm not sure if President Gideon is here. The department works really closely, though, with applicants who haven't fully fleshed out their applications yet. In those cases, those applications can take longer because they are not complete. The department works with those applicants to ensure they have a successful return. However, with applications that are complete and submitted for a decision, those decisions are, by and large, returned on time.

The Chair: We're a bit over time there. Colleagues, I'm going to suspend.

When I get confirmation that everybody has voted, we'll come back. The last five minutes will go to the Liberals, and then we'll end this session and switch panels and send our first guests on their way.

For the moment, we're suspended.

• (1810) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1820)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

We're going to finish off now with one last five-minute question.

Is Mr. Carr going to take that, or is it Mr. Battiste?

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I have two questions.

First, Minister, I would like to get an update. We've often heard at this committee that the Indian Act continues to discriminate around the second-generation cut-off, as well as when first nations mothers have children and don't declare the father as indigenous, because then it is automatically presumed that the child is not a status Indian. I know our government is taking steps to remedy that. I'm wondering if you could give us a progress update on where we are in addressing the racism that still remains in the Indian Act.

Next, regarding the housing progress we've made, I know the Auditor General has come out with a report, but I also know we've significantly increased the number of houses that are going to indigenous communities. I'm wondering if you could give us the numbers and an update so that we can get a full picture of what our government's response has been to indigenous housing.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, MP Battiste, and thank you for being with me when we announced the beginning of the consultation process for the second-generation cut-off.

For members who are unaware of this issue, this is something deeply personal for many indigenous people who, for one reason or another, have lost status, and therefore their children lose status. Those consultations are being designed with indigenous people, so they are of the utmost sensitivity, and there are a lot of opinions. There are people who feel very strongly that we need to move quickly on the second-generation cut-off. I think some communities have other perspectives. They have seen people return to the community and they wonder how they're going to absorb new members, for a whole host of reasons.

Those consultations are going to be very important, I think, in order to hear all sides and come up with a path that keeps people very comfortable with the direction.

You're right. The ongoing gender discrimination in the Indian Act is something we've been working to fix since 2015. Bill C-38 is now working its way through the House, as I understand it. We'll have debate, I believe, later this week on Bill C-38. I look forward to all members supporting that legislation and not delaying it, because families are waiting for answers.

Thank you for bringing that up.

On indigenous-led housing, I will note an article recently out of Nova Scotia. Membertou First Nation is building a record number of new homes, but all of its local contractors are too busy for more. I think a very important acknowledgement is that it's not only money that is the limiting factor for building more houses: I spoke about ice roads and the delay and interruption in getting materials to first nations communities. Skilled tradespeople shortages and a

number of other things can delay infrastructure development in communities.

Sometimes it can even be related to climate change. If a community is evacuated in the middle of infrastructure season, it can upend the entire season. Communities will lose a season and the progress they've made. It can be very expensive when communities lose that progress because, of course, a half-built housing complex left to the elements means the build, in many cases, can't be salvaged.

I know we have a long way to go, but I will say that under this approach, we are looking at much faster progress.

I want to turn to Nelson to talk about how we supported even quantifying the gap.

Mr. Nelson Barbosa (Director General, Regional Operations, Department of Indigenous Services): Thanks for the question.

I want to acknowledge two things.

One, success isn't just measured in bricks and mortar. There have been \$2.3 billion dollars spent since 2015 in housing specifically, with another \$2 billion to follow. Twenty thousand projects are under way or will be completed by 2025.

Two, partnership is also essential. I want to acknowledge and highlight the partnership and co-development with the Assembly of First Nations on the first nations national housing and related infrastructure strategy. This was led by the Assembly of First Nations, but Indigenous Services Canada worked with all first nations in 2022 to quantify the infrastructure gap. The infrastructure gap that was cited by the Auditor General is work that came from first nations. It's important to understand those needs, but it's also important to understand the partnership required to close the gap. The gap is substantial. We're seeing success, but success needs to follow the partnership model this department believes so strongly in.

I want to thank you for your question. I'm pleased to acknowledge the work we have done, but I also want to lift up the success of first nations in supporting infrastructure in their communities.

Thank you.

• (1825)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I don't think I have many seconds left, so that's it. Thank you.

The Chair: All right, thank you, Minister and your team, for being here today. I apologize for the disruptions from the votes, but that's the nature of the business here.

With that, colleagues, we will suspend and bring in the second panel. Ms. Ashton, stand by, and we'll get going again as soon as we get everybody seated here.

For the moment, we're suspended.

• (1825) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1830)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I now would like to welcome our second panel. For the second hour, we're going to continue our discussion of the subject matter of the supplementary estimates (C) 2023-24.

We have with us ministers Gary Anandasangaree, Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, and the Honourable Dan Vandal, Minister of Northern Affairs.

From the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, I would like to welcome Valerie Gideon, deputy minister, and Martin Reiher, senior assistant deputy minister, treaties and aboriginal government.

We've spent a lot of time with you over the past while. Welcome back.

We also have with us Garima Dwivedi, assistant deputy minister, resolution and partnerships; Georgina Lloyd, assistant deputy minister, northern affairs; Krista Apse, director general, missing and murdered indigenous women and girls secretariat; and Darlene Bess, chief finances, results and delivery officer.

I apologize if I messed up anybody's name.

We'll go through a couple of rounds of questions and see where we're at, but I believe that first of all we have opening statements from both ministers. I'm not sure who is going first, but whenever you're ready, either Minister Vandal or Minister Anandasangaree, the floor will be yours for five minutes.

Minister Vandal, it looks like you're ready. The floor is yours.

Hon. Dan Vandal (Minister of Northern Affairs): Hello, everybody.

Tansi. Hadlookut. Kwe kwe.

I'm very happy to be here today to discuss and answer your questions on the 2023-24 supplementary estimates for the northern affairs.

The estimates reflect a net increase of \$9 million for northern affairs. This increase in funding was used to address urgent capacity requirements for indigenous organizations in the Northwest Territories due to wildfires and to reimburse expenses incurred to support their members during the wildfire emergency.

[Translation]

Northern and indigenous communities are experiencing some of the worst impacts of climate change. We are working with northern and indigenous partners to mitigate those impacts, while helping communities reduce their reliance on expensive diesel thanks to new community-managed renewable power.

• (1835)

[English]

Indigenous-owned solar and wind projects are leading the way in the clean energy transition, with active support and investment from the federal government. In 2023, the Government of Northwest Territories reported that residents, communities and territorial government saved more than \$12 million in energy costs because of clean energy projects like these right across the north.

Partnerships and collaboration are a vital piece to strengthening food security in northern and Arctic communities. Since 2021, we have expanded the Nutrition North program and have implemented 90% of the recommendations from this committee's report, "Food Security in Northern and Isolated Communities". This is a significant step, and I want to thank all members, past and present, for their work and their continued collaboration on addressing this complex issue.

Engagement with communities and program partners led to the launch of food sovereignty programs like the community food programs and the harvester support grants. Internally, we reallocated an additional \$5 million to Nutrition North Canada through supplementary estimates (C) to support these initiatives, which helps to offset costs of food and other essential items, improve access to traditional country foods and support initiatives such as meals for elders and the school food programs.

There is certainly much more work that needs to be done, and I look forward to engaging on a local level with communities and program partners in the upcoming months to find new ways to address food insecurity in the north and strengthen these partnerships.

As a government, we have recognized the significant underfunding by past governments of all stripes when it comes to addressing housing and infrastructure gaps in the north. That's why we're working with northern and indigenous partners to increase access to safe, affordable housing and to build on historic distinctions-based investments that are supporting the housing priorities in the territories and in Inuit Nunangat.

On this note, I'd like to recognize and acknowledge the historic signing of the Nunavut devolution agreement, one of the largest land transfers in Canada's history, which supports Nunavummiut self-determination. We will keep working in partnership to complete the transfer of responsibilities by April 1, 2027.

[Translation]

The Arctic and Northern Policy Framework helps to ensure that northern lands are sustainably managed. Previous estimates have led to evidence-based decision-making on offshore oil and gas activity in the Arctic, to support responsible and sustainable resource development in the north and the Arctic. This has meant adhering to the strictest environmental safety standards.

[English]

We remain firm and steadfast in defending the Arctic and the people who live there. We are working with northern partners and communities to co-develop security strategies and we are making historic investments to increase our ability to defend the north.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a summary of how the supplementary estimates will support the important work ahead to deliver on our shared priorities to build a strong, resilient future for the north and the Arctic.

Qujannamiik. Meegwetch. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. That was right to the second. Well done.

Now we'll go to our second minister, Minister Anandasangaree.

Whenever you're ready, Minister, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): *Kwe kwe. Ulaakut. Tansi. Hello. Bonjour.*

Mr. Chair, thank you for the invitation to join you here on the unceded traditional territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin people. I want to note that I'm very glad to be back at this committee and to be able to speak to all of you here.

I'm joined here by the Honourable Dan Vandal, as well as the officials from CIRNAC you introduced earlier, including Valerie Gideon, our deputy minister.

Let me start with a few words about the journey of reconciliation we're on together with indigenous partners; with all of you on this committee, who advance this work each and every day; with Minister Vandal and Minister Hajdu; and with all of our colleagues in Parliament. It's an important journey toward taking a system that was set up to implement the Indian Act, to enforce the residential school system and ultimately to assimilate indigenous peoples and instead making that very system deliver results for indigenous peoples.

This is no easy task. It requires undoing hundreds of years of colonial history.

The year 2015 was a turning point in Crown-indigenous relations. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission handed us a road map to reconciliation through the 94 calls to action, and Canadians elected a government that pledged that its most important relationship was the one it had with indigenous peoples.

In keeping with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the former approach of making decisions on behalf of indigenous peoples has shifted dramatically and irrevocably to an approach centred on supporting the aspirations of indigenous people and communities or, in other words, indigenous self-determination.

Today we're in a new era of indigenous relations that is characterized by spending to resolve historical injustices and recognizing and supporting indigenous governments in advancing their goals, or, in other words, moving from the painful path we've come from and onto the road that lies ahead.

On the road ahead, I see hope. I see hope in the agreements that give indigenous peoples control over what they should always have had control over: their lands and waterways, their governments, their child welfare and education.

In places like the Nisga'a Nation territory, I've seen how modern treaties have the power to deliver real results. I see hope in the form of rights recognition.

Last month, with the Haida Nation, I was honoured to be in the Senate to witness the introduction of Bill S-16, recognizing the Council of the Haida Nation as the holder of their inherent rights of governance and self-determination.

There's a lot of work ahead, and it is clear to me that we cannot do the work without building a relationship based on trust. The road we come from is a bumpy one, and we have to make amends for that.

While I was in British Columbia recently, I visited the Matsqui First Nation. Their reserve lands were severed from them in 1908 by a railway, and they were never compensated.

Chief Alice McKay told me point blank that she does not like the word "reconciliation" because, as she said, there was no relationship to reconcile, but she also said that the settlement gave her hope for our relationship going forward.

● (1840)

[Translation]

The settlement of claims like these helps to build trust. Of the funding being requested through these estimates, 96% is for settlement agreements to right the wrongs of the past.

[English]

We know there's much work to do. Reconciliation is not a one-time event; it's a multi-generational journey. The calls to action are not something that can be checked off on a list; they require ongoing and sustained commitment and action.

There are real challenges ahead. We have to do more to put an end to the ongoing crisis of the missing and murdered, for example. More needs to be done in joint decision-making, like the Inuit-Crown partnership committee.

I have now said it many times: The road ahead is long. I'm thankful for the people here in this committee who are as committed to the journey as I am. Together, we will make sure that the long road ends in reconciliation.

Meegwetch, qujannamiik, merci and thank you.

I look forward to your questions and comments.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Let's jump right into our first round of questions. I believe I have Mr. Zimmer up first for six minutes.

We'll start as soon as Mr. McLeod passes around some of his pizza.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, ministers, for coming today.

There is an affordability crisis in the Northwest Territories. Here's a bill from Chris, a local resident in Yellowknife. One bill in January was \$823.35. There's another bill he also received to top up that tank again in January for another \$1128.88. That's a total of \$1952.23 for one month, Minister, of which \$199 is the carbon tax. That is set to go up on April 1, as you know.

The next person from Yellowknife is a person named Adam. He had to fill up his heating oil tank three times in January: once for \$499, once for \$1500 and once for \$730 for a total of \$3203.09. Again, that was just in January. The carbon tax alone was \$319.47.

This is from Eric, also from Yellowknife. This is addressed to me: “Sir, in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, I truly thank you for your efforts in the House to enlighten members to the challenges all northerners”—

These are your constituents as well; I live in northern B.C.

—“have in heating our homes and businesses. As you know, there are many regions that simply do not have heating alternatives. Fossil fuels, at least until new technologies offer cost-acceptable alternatives, are the only options we have at the moment. In addition to the add-ons of the carbon tax and the transportation of fuels to northern communities, the tax itself—along with the GST on top of that tax—is driving northern living costs well beyond reasonable financial tolerances, as I just laid out. I know you all know this, but as northerners it's difficult to understand how the current Liberal government is so out of touch with the realities of northern living costs. To suggest heat pumps are the answer, as the Liberals have suggested—fine for parts of eastern Canada, as they work in some parts of Canada—is beyond comprehension.

“Keep up the good work on behalf of all northerners, and Canadians, for that matter.

“Best regards, Eric”

Now we see that the new premier of the Northwest Territories is asking for an exemption because of these high costs to citizens of the Northwest Territories: “I mean, ideally a complete exemption for the territory is what we would hope for,” said R.J. Simpson, chosen...premier of the Northwest Territories” just a few months ago, as you probably have heard.

As you know, the Northwest Territories previously gave its residents rebates, but your Ottawa-knows-best government stepped in and would no longer allow the Northwest Territories to offer rebates to its citizens.

Deputy Premier Wawzonek said, “When the federal government recently made the changes to exempt home heating oil, that didn't automatically apply because what they've done is they've changed the goal post on us.”

When others were granted the temporary carbon tax exemption on home heating oil and other provinces wanted exemptions, your

colleague Environment Minister Guilbeault said that there would be “no more exemptions” on his watch. This is from the CBC: “Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault said...he will not stand for any further adjustments to Canada's carbon-pricing system”. The article goes on to say, “As long as I'm the environment minister, there will be no more exemptions to carbon pricing,” Guilbeault told The Canadian Press in an interview.”

My question to you, Minister, is quite simple: Will you support the people of the Northwest Territories and their government and exempt them from the carbon tax, or will you support your colleague Minister Guilbeault in his promise that “As long as I'm the environment minister, there will be no more exemptions to carbon pricing”?

• (1845)

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you for asking a very thorough question of almost four minutes. I guess I'm going to get the rest of the time to answer it without being cut off.

I agree with you. There's a real affordability issue in the north and the Arctic. Unfortunately, it's not new, but we're doing our best to address it. That's one of the reasons—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: The question, Minister, isn't about what you're saying, though.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I will answer it, but give me some time. Don't interrupt me.

Mr. Chairperson—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's a very simple question: Do you support the people of Northwest Territories or do you support your colleague, the Minister of the Environment?

Hon. Dan Vandal: I was answering the question in a thorough way, as he asked it—

The Chair: As we discussed, you get to ask questions and they need to answer them—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's a simple—

Hon. Dan Vandal: There's an affordability question regarding the north, which is why—

The Chair: I'm going to stop the clock.

I ask that you don't talk over each other.

Minister, we'll go to you. I'll restart the clock with a minute and a half left.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's why we brought in \$10-a-day child care, something that saves families in Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Excuse me, Minister. It's a question about the carbon tax.

Hon. Dan Vandal: —thousands of dollars a day. This member and his party voted against it. That's why we brought—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry. He's not even answering the question.

Hon. Dan Vandal: —in dental care, Mr. Chair, for children under 12 years of age—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: The question, Minister, is about the carbon tax.

Mr. Chair, this is my time. He's here to answer our questions.

Hon. Dan Vandal: He's interrupting me.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I'm asking a question about the carbon tax. It's a very clear question, and I'll repeat it, because—

Hon. Dan Vandal: I'm trying to answer it—

The Chair: I'll just—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Just so you know what the question is, will you support—

It's a carbon tax question.

The Chair: Let's have one person at a time.

I'm going to talk now. I'll let you repeat your question—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Sure.

The Chair: —and we'll go to the minister. Let's afford the minister time to respond.

Hon. Dan Vandal: He took four minutes to ask his question and you're going to ask him to repeat it.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: The question, once again, just to make it very clear.... This makes it very easy to answer it: You can choose. I gave you two options—

Hon. Dan Vandal: I'm trying to answer your affordability question, but you're not letting me.

• (1850)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Will you support the people—

Minister, I would love to ask you this question again, but you're interrupting me. This is my time, not yours.

Hon. Dan Vandal: You took four minutes to ask your question. Let me answer it.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: This is my time, though. The six minutes belong to me, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Mr. Chairperson, get hold on this committee.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: He obviously doesn't want to answer a carbon tax question.

I will ask you once again.

Will you, the Minister of Northern Affairs, support the people of Northwest Territories and specifically exempt Northwest Territories from the carbon tax? They're asking for an exemption, and this is a choice you can make as a government, or will you support your colleague Minister Guilbeault and his promise that as long as he's

the environment minister, there will be no more exemptions to carbon pricing?

Which is it, Minister?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Okay. Can I answer the question?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Please.

The Chair: There are 15 seconds left.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Come on. This is not real.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's a simple question.

Hon. Dan Vandal: There's an affordability issue in the north. That's why we brought in child care. He voted against it. That's why we brought in dental care—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Once again, he simply won't answer the question.

Hon. Dan Vandal: —for kids aged 12 and under. He voted against it. That's why we brought in the Canada child benefit, which has lifted 500,000 children out of poverty. He and his party voted against it.

That's what I can answer on affordability.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I guess you won't be answering that question, Minister.

The Chair: We're out of time on the first six minutes.

We're going now to Mr. Carr, who I believe is splitting his time with Ms. Gainey.

The floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Ben Carr: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Vandal, thank you for being here.

I'm going to take one eighty-fifth of the time to ask my question.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I'm sorry. Can you start over?

Mr. Ben Carr: Is this real?

Minister, I'm being a little tongue-in-cheek. It's nice to have you here.

I want to ask a question about Churchill.

The town of Churchill in northern Manitoba, as you know, is critical to our province. I recognize that our colleague Madame Ashton has joined us today. I think she's still with us. She, of course, represents the good people of northern Manitoba.

Minister, Churchill, through its people, its rail line and its port, plays a critical role in the economy, defence and security of our province and country. It certainly plays a critical role in terms of our relationship with indigenous peoples.

Can you tell the committee a little about some of the most recent investments the government has made in the town of Churchill and how you see that as critical to the future of not only Manitoba but also of Canada?

Thank you.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Absolutely. That's a very important question, not only for Manitoba but for Canada and the Arctic.

First of all, let me back up a bit. After we were elected in 2015, in 2016 the whole railway and port were shut down because the private American owner simply did not put any money into maintenance, so the railway had to shut down when there was flooding in northern Manitoba. Climate change is real. It's especially real in the north.

Through the leadership of your father, we invested hundreds of millions of dollars to reopen the rail line and reopen the port, and we found new owners to operate it. The first nation-owned Arctic Gateway Group, a collective of first nations and mayors from small towns in northern Manitoba, has assumed ownership of the Port of Churchill and the rail line that leads up to the port.

In fact, we were up there about one month ago to announce an investment of another \$30 million from the federal government and \$30 million from the brand new NDP provincial government. That money will be used to further stabilize the railroad that leads up to the Port of Churchill. There is a new technology they're using—some sort of honeycomb technology that they're building—under the rail lines to make sure that they are stable to not only deliver goods to the port, but also to accept goods from the port.

Through wonderful partnerships with the Province of Manitoba and the Arctic Gateway Group, we invested again in the rail line to finish the rail line stabilization—again, more investment—and I'm proud to say that this summer, they will be accepting minerals from a northern Manitoba mine and delivering them to the Port of Churchill for export. Not only that: They will be accepting a cruise ship for the first time in quite a while in the Port of Churchill, which will revitalize the community and make sure that it will be great for tourism.

We hope that this is the start of many new business endeavours in the Port of Churchill.

• (1855)

Mr. Ben Carr: Thanks very much, Minister.

I'm very appreciative of your personal support and the support of the government in the development of northern Manitoba.

Ms. Gainey, I'll turn it over to you.

Ms. Anna Gainey (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you all for being here.

I met recently with an organization called Avataq, which is located in my riding and is dedicated to preserving and documenting Inuit art, culture and archeological artifacts in Nunavik. Their work is really impressive, and the archives contain a tremendous collection of Inuit artifacts.

However, when we're speaking about Canada's north at large, it is an area with obviously unique challenges, which you've touched upon, such as food insecurity and the impacts of climate change. Arctic and northern research plays a vital role in increasing

Canada's knowledge of the Arctic, fighting climate change and improving food security in the north.

Minister Vandal, can you give us a sense of the state of the Canadian High Arctic Research Station and tell us a bit about it?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Yes. That's a great question.

I had the pleasure of visiting the Canadian High Arctic Research Station with the Prime Minister, Minister Joly and NATO chairperson Jens Stoltenberg recently. I can tell you that there's incredible interest in the high Arctic from many people, many countries and NATO, and it was a real eye-opener to see the cutting-edge research they are doing at the Canadian High Arctic Research Station. There are researchers there from all over the world, doing cutting-edge Arctic research.

As we know, climate change is very real. The north is warming at three times the rate of the south, and that's really going to threaten a lot of the traditional ways of life.

This is not to mention the whole issue of microplastic pollution. There were researchers from Europe doing some incredible research on microplastics that are being found in the ice all over the north. That's a real concern.

The climate crisis is an existential crisis for our world, and we need the good northern research that is being done at the High Arctic Research Station.

The Chair: Great. Thank you, but we're out of time there.

We'll go now to Monsieur Lemire for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As minister, Mr. Anandasangaree, you are responsible for relations with indigenous peoples, and that includes the issue of self-determination. As I see it, self-determination has to happen on an economic level as well, if first nations are to be fully empowered. I want to tell you about a young entrepreneur I met last week, Jason Picard-Binet, and the hard time he's having.

He took over Bastien Industries, which makes the moccasins I am delighted to be wearing right now.

The economic vitality of indigenous communities is a source of pride and, above all, a tool to support communities. Bastien Industries' roots go all the way back to 1878, so the business has stood the test of time. Jason Picard-Binet took over when he bought the company in 2022. A proud member of the Huron-Wendat Nation, he wants to carry on the work of the Bastien family while adding a modern touch.

Young entrepreneurs need supports. He, for instance, is looking towards new international markets and export growth. The CanExport program, however, does not make exemptions for registered businesses, because indigenous businesses are not corporations.

Are you willing to create a legal exemption to give companies like Bastien Industries better access to markets? The Department of Canadian Heritage makes exemptions like that.

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

There are some incredible businesses being started and run by indigenous people across Canada. Very recently there's been a move, especially by the Minister of Trade. I actually spoke to her about this last night. As she goes around the world to promote Canadian businesses, one thing she wants to advance is to have indigenous people as part of her delegation, as businesses that can market their products to the world.

To your specific question, I think we can definitely make the connection. Depending on where the opportunities lie and where the interests may lie, we could definitely connect them to the Minister of Trade and her team, and to Global Affairs, to be able to promote the products.

With respect to the specific exemption you're looking for, I'm not familiar with that particular issue, but I will be able to get back to you and we can continue this conversation. There is an obligation, absolutely, to ensure that we support indigenous entrepreneurs to be able to self-determine their future and to be able to build wealth and intergenerational wealth that will enable them to be fully secure financially, and by all other means as well.

• (1900)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much for that answer.

Now I want to turn to the matter of cultural authenticity and cultural appreciation versus cultural appropriation. The United States has a very strict and binding law protecting industries that manufacture products that are typically indigenous. There, Bastien Industries has to prove that its products are 100% indigenous. The company doesn't have that requirement in Canada. I'm talking about the Southwest Indian Foundation certification under the U.S.'s Indian Arts and Crafts Act. Canada doesn't have comparable legislation.

Under the two paragraphs of article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Canada should have taken such a measure, but nothing is being done right now, not even by the Department of Canadian Heritage. As a result, a subcontracting company has no way of making sure the company's products are genuinely indigenous. This puts indigenous entrepreneurs at a disadvantage because they have to compete with manufacturers of counterfeit goods.

Will you commit to supporting typically indigenous businesses by taking actions to foster cultural appreciation and prevent cultural appropriation?

[*English*]

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: My role as Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations is to advocate, both within government and also outside, to ensure that indigenous people are able to self-determine and set up their own structures, and also to advocate on their behalf toward structural challenges and limitations that may exist within the Canadian state. I look forward to that conversation and to be able to support and work with you, as well as the business that you're talking about, to be able to obtain the requisite exemptions and recognition that may be required for them to be able to trade with the U.S., for example, or other markets.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: *Meegwetch.*

Another area where your help would be especially appreciated involves indigenous financial institutions that belong to NACCA. The Native Commercial Credit Corporation, in Wendake, is one such institution providing long-term financing. These institutions' funding is expiring on March 31, 2024, and they have asked for more funding, including \$154 million to provide new housing loans. NACCA also needs support for the community investment and business development programs it delivers to first nations.

With the budget coming up, will you commit to supporting these institutions and giving indigenous communities some good news by providing indigenous networks with the funding they need?

[*English*]

The Chair: I'll just jump in here. We are out of time. I'll give the minister time for a brief response.

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: I'm going to invite Deputy Minister Valerie Gideon to respond to this question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Valerie Gideon (Deputy Minister, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): Indigenous Services Canada is the organization that provides direct funding to NACCA.

Regional development agencies also play a part. The Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, for instance, met with the people at NACCA. I am the president of the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario. I would be happy to ask my colleagues and fellow agency presidents about the issues you're raising.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Ashton, it's now over to you for your six minutes.

• (1905)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

My first question is for Minister Anandasangaree.

In the fall economic statement, it became clear that this government is moving away from indigenous peoples being this government's most important relationship, as you mentioned. Not only is this government cutting funding at a time of great need; a number of programs are being sunsetted, including those that deal with the harmful and destructive legacy of residential schools. There's currently no plan to fund this program past 2025, and communities are concerned.

Three years ago, Pimicikamak First Nation here in northern Manitoba was clear that they wanted to work with the International Commission on Missing Persons to help them with the searches of the burial grounds of the residential school on their territory. This contract is slated to end this year.

Why has your department failed to work with Pimicikamak and the ICMP? Are you willing to extend the programming available to Cross Lake at this time?

I will point out that the great irony is that Canada is willing to work with organizations like the ICMP in Ukraine and Iraq but unwilling to support first nations who want to work with them here at home. So much for reconciliation.

I'll go back to my question. What is your plan to support Pimicikamak and their desire to work with ICMP, as others have expressed as well, given that this program is being sunsetted?

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you for the question, Ms. Ashton.

At the outset, let me just say that the work around unmarked graves is critical to ensuring that there's justice, accountability, closure and the ability for communities to heal.

ICMP was contracted to do some work for the Government of Canada. It is one of several organizations that are able to support communities. There have been a range of views with respect to individual communities being able to access a type of service, which is essentially DNA testing, and additional work around exhumed bodies. ICMP is one of those players in this space. There are others as well that offer that type of service.

Ultimately, what it comes down to—

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'm sorry, Minister, but just to be clear—

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: May I respond? Ms. Ashton, if I may just—

Ms. Niki Ashton: Well, I'd like you to respond in terms of Cross Lake and not about who the other players are. Cross Lake has asked to work with the ICMP, so that's what I'd like to hear about.

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: Our objective is to ensure that there's self-determination over the type of agency or partner that they want to work with. If Cross Lake wants to work with ICMP, then that is something we will facilitate. There's absolutely no reason we won't be able to do that.

It ultimately comes down to the notion of self-determination. It will be determined on a community-by-community basis, based on the wishes of the community.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

I want to turn to Minister Vandal on Nutrition North.

In the last fiscal year, the northern affairs department allocated \$134 million to Nutrition North. Almost half of that money went to the North West Company, a massive corporation that made \$190 million of profit last year. The Nutrition North program is supposed to bring down grocery prices for northerners. Instead, we're seeing it help CEOs.

According to a recent study at U of T Mississauga, only 67¢ of each dollar in grocery subsidies is passed on to consumers. People here in northern Manitoba, in Nunavut and elsewhere are experiencing significant hardship. Nutrition North is not working for them the way it's supposed to, when a family-sized box of cereal costs \$17.99 and a litre of olive oil costs \$36.59. The list goes on.

Presumably, neither the minister nor anyone else in the government would tolerate paying this price for their own groceries, so why should northerners? What is this government doing to address real food insecurity in the north and also to ensure that Nutrition North funds are not going to line the pockets of companies like the North West Company?

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's a great question, MP Ashton.

I know food security is incredibly important to the north. I was in Inuvik, Northwest Territories back in 2022 when I announced an extra \$163 million of new money for Nutrition North.

I'll get right to the issue that was on APTN about a month ago. Our government is absolutely committed that 100% of the retail subsidy is to be passed on directly to northerners. We are committed to that. We have started an internal review of the program. I've personally had a meeting with the researchers who came up with that analysis, and we will continue to work together. There's an internal review of the program. Once that is done, there will be an external audit of Nutrition North, specifically on the retail subsidy.

I can say that Nutrition North is about more than just the retail subsidy. We also co-developed the harvesters support grant with northern and Indigenous partners. It's helps northern partners go out and hunt, trap and fish for traditional country foods. It's something that's incredibly popular. It's something, as I mentioned, that was co-developed with Inuit and other northern partners. It's a way to get traditional foods back into the diets of northerners.

We've also included a community food program. We're working with schools—

• (1910)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Just quickly—

The Chair: We are out of time now. I'm sorry, Ms. Ashton.

Before I go to the next round, which is going to be for five minutes, I want to reinforce that we can only have one person speaking at a time. It's impossible for the interpreters to do their job if we have people speaking over each other.

I would also say that when we have a question for the minister, we should give, perhaps, an equal amount of time for a response. That's for consideration. However, it is the member's time, and the member controls the time slot for their questions and where they want to go with them—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I appreciate the equal time, but that's not in the Standing Orders.

The Chair: No, I'm just—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Time is allotted to us a members, so that's up to us, I guess.

The Chair: I'm saying—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I hope I get a quick answer.

The Chair: The other piece is this: It is the member's time and we do, generally, let them direct—

Hon. Dan Vandal: I have a point of privilege, though.

If the member takes four minutes to ask a question on affordability, I should be given 30 seconds to answer without being interrupted.

The Chair: I'm just saying that it is the member's time. However, if we're asking questions, we should hear answers. That's what I'm going to ask that we do here.

I see Mr. Zimmer is up for the next round of questions. He has five minutes. Watch for the yellow card, because that means we're getting close to the end. With the red card, I'll cut it off and move on.

Mr. Zimmer, the floor is yours.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The question I have is—

I'm sorry. Can I start? I'm not sure if there's a point of order being made by somebody.

The Chair: Start from the top.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

Previously, a member from the NDP asked about food prices in the north. I'm going to be asking you about food prices and specifically how the carbon tax affects food prices in Yukon. I'm going to list some prices here. I will read this out, because it's really shocking, like some of the prices that have already been read out today.

These are stats from Yukon specifically, and these prices in Whitehorse are compared to prices in Alberta and British Columbia. First, for oranges in Alberta, it's \$4.09; in British Columbia, it's \$4.38; in Whitehorse, it's \$6.12. For potatoes in Alberta, it's \$6.98; in B.C., it's \$7.04; and in Whitehorse, it's \$15.85 for potatoes. For bacon in Alberta, it's \$7.33 for 500 grams; in British Columbia, it's \$7.38; and in Whitehorse, it's \$11.17 for the same 500 grams. For one kilogram of pork chops in Alberta, it's \$9.46; in British Columbia, it's \$9.49; and in Whitehorse, it's \$15.26. Finally, for one kilogram of sirloin steak—my last product here—in Alberta, it's \$22.66; in British Columbia, it's \$24.06; and in Whitehorse, it's \$35.16 a kilogram.

This is certainly expensive.

I spoke with Mark today. He has a local grocery store in Dawson City. He lives in Dawson City. He goes in to work every day to try to keep prices low for his customers. I've seen it with my own eyes. He really works to keep those prices down for his neighbours, but he currently pays a 58% fuel surcharge because of the carbon tax on every grocery shipment that comes from Edmonton. That will quickly rise on April 1 to almost 70%, on top of already high food prices.

This week—you might have seen it, Minister—Yukon MLA Wade Istchenko moved a motion in the Yukon legislature to axe the carbon tax for Yukon. He lives in Yukon and sees for himself first-hand the high prices caused by the Liberal carbon tax. I think he sees it himself. It's not like we need to.... I live in northern B.C. I don't live in Yukon and experience that high a price, although we have high prices in northern B.C.

He sees these first-hand and hears from his residents and his constituents about their plight in trying to buy food and keeping food affordable in Yukon.

I'll ask this question, Minister, and I hope you can answer it quickly.

Minister, will you support the people of Yukon and exempt Yukoners from the carbon tax or will you support your colleague, Minister Guilbeault, and his promise that “as long as I'm the environment minister, there will be no more exemptions to carbon pricing”?

• (1915)

Hon. Dan Vandal: I would answer that affordability in the north is a real issue. That's why we are addressing it on many different levels. Food is too expensive, but it's simplistic to say that it's only the price on pollution that's causing it. There are many variables and factors in the price of food.

Also, I travel the north a lot, probably more than you do, and I can tell you that what people talk to me about is the environment. The price on pollution is an environmental plan, along with many other initiatives—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Minister—

Hon. Dan Vandal: When I go to the Northwest Territories—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: —it's not working. If it's an environmental plan, it simply isn't working.

Hon. Dan Vandal: —people talk to me about wildfires. They talk to me about all the businesses.... Seventy per cent of the people living in the Northwest Territories had to be evacuated—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Minister, it's a tax plan, not an environmental plan.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Businesses were shut down—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: The targets you're setting aren't even being met in the north.

Hon. Dan Vandal: —for months, and it cost literally millions of dollars. It cost Canadians millions of dollars to take care of the repercussions and to prevent—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: You're making life unaffordable for northerners as it is.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm going to stop the clock. There are 45 seconds left.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Our poor translators—how are they able to translate that? This is becoming a debate instead of a question being asked and answered. Let's be respectful of the poor translators who have to go through this.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I am—

The Chair: Yes, I'd just reinforce—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I gave the minister a lot of time to answer my simple question about the carbon tax, and he went on and talked about something else, so I'll ask—

Hon. Dan Vandal: I answered your question.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: —in my last time that I have—

The Chair: It's your last question and we'll give the minister some time.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: —will you support—

The Chair: Anyway, there are 45 seconds left, so the floor is over to you.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

Again, I'll come back to my question. You can answer it with one final simple answer. It's between two options.

Will you support the people of Yukon and exempt—this is the question—Yukoners from the carbon tax, as is being asked, or will you support your colleague, Minister Guilbeault, and his promise that “as long as I'm the environment minister there will be no more exemptions to carbon pricing”?

It's simple.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's not a question; that's a slogan.

Eight out of 10 families in Canada receive more money in the rebates.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: You know that's not true, Minister.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That is true.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: The PBO has actually come out and said that it's not true. You sat in the House, as I did today, to hear our leader explain exactly why it's not true, and it's not true.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I have a question for you.

The Chair: We are out of time.

Hon. Dan Vandal: If that's not true, why in 2021 did you run on a price on pollution?

The Chair: That's the end of our five minutes there.

We're going to stop there and go next to Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to both ministers for joining us here today.

My question is for Minister Vandal.

Last summer was a very challenging time for us in the Northwest Territories. It was the worst wildfire season we've ever seen in our history. It was the worst one on record, for sure. Three of our largest communities were evacuated. In fact, 70% of the territory's population were evacuated. That meant there were huge costs incurred by the government and also by businesses. Many businesses had to close for a fairly long period of time.

I want to ask if you could expand on the supports the federal government has put in place to help the Northwest Territories recover.

I also want to say thank you for making yourself very available over the summer and responding, especially to me, whenever I picked up the phone. That was very much appreciated.

For my second question, we know and we're already hearing that this coming summer may be even worse than last summer. We're experiencing drought conditions already. We had very little snow-fall on the southern part of the territories. The Government of Northwest Territories is already predicting a very bad fire season.

Can you talk a little bit about what the government's doing to help the territories recover and what we're doing to try to prepare for this coming fire season?

● (1920)

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you so much for that important question.

Last year I was in Inuvik with the Premier of Yukon and the Premier of Northwest Territories. That was just at the beginning of the wildfires. They had already started, but was just near the beginning. I tell you, the smoke was so thick that we had to get out of Inuvik much earlier than planned. That was just the beginning. Things got significantly worse than that, so I really felt for the people—the older people, the elders, the youth and the people in hospitals who had to be moved.

I thank you for your advocacy and your help. We were on the phone many times—not just me, but many other ministers. Our government stepped up right away to help residents evacuate and then return home. We provided, across Canada, \$300 million to help provinces and territories increase firefighting resources, of which \$28 million was specifically to support the Northwest Territories' wildfire response.

I did visit some of the folks from Northwest Territories in Edmonton. It was good to touch base with them and talk to them, with the Premier of NWT.

Eventually, when they opened up, CanNor was there with a significant amount of funding for businesses to open up again and to recoup some of their losses.

From speaking with Minister Sajjan, who played a very important role, I know that they've trained a significant number of Northwest Territories firefighters to prepare for next year. We hope that next year is not as bad as last year.

It all comes down to the need for a credible climate plan. The price on pollution that we are implementing is a significant part of that credible climate plan. There are many other initiatives that are included, like climate adaptation. There are a lot of initiatives included in that, but that's something that our government is addressing head-on. That's something that the party on the other side of the lobby really has no plan for.

That's something that we're going to keep moving on. We're going to work co-operatively with the territorial government, with first nations and with the indigenous nations that live there. We're going to have their backs in the upcoming year.

The Chair: We're now at the end of our time.

We'll move along to Mr. Lemire, who will have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Anandasangaree, I have two short questions for you, and I would appreciate it if you would keep your answers short.

I want to talk about the lack of first nations policing legislation and the need to recognize first nations policing as an essential service. A legislative framework was promised that would make equitable funding and resources available for first nations policing, ensuring that police services receive the funding, resources, infrastructure and personnel that they can't always get.

When will we see a bill to support this essential service?

[English]

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. LeBlanc has tried to co-develop quite a lot of things on first nations policing. I believe his department is undertaking consultations on how to move forward.

In terms of timelines, I can't give you any. It is something that you should put to Mr. LeBlanc, but it is very much a part of his mandate to be able to develop and to ensure that there is first nations-led policing within communities.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Your answers highlight the importance of consulting first nations. I want to talk about an issue affecting a community I represent. People from all the communities I represent attended a rally on Parliament Hill to protest the planned nuclear waste disposal facility in Chalk River. As you know, a court challenge is being launched to halt construction of the facility.

Do you think the stakeholders were properly consulted, especially in this time of truth and reconciliation?

• (1925)

[English]

Hon. Gary Anandasangaree: As for the decision on Chalk River that is before the courts, I won't be able to comment specifically on that process itself.

I do want to acknowledge the concerns I've heard, particularly from members of your community. I was able to meet with the chief of Kebaowek First Nation yesterday, and I will continue to engage with him and others. The concern with respect to process is something that we can address on a going-forward basis.

With respect to the decision and the pending legal challenges, I think it's probably best that I don't comment on that.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: *Meegwetch.*

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. We're out of time.

Ms. Ashton, you have the last two and a half minutes. Whenever you're ready, the floor is yours.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

My questions are to Minister Vandal.

First of all, as you are aware, the Sayisi Dene and Denesuline first nations at Tadoule Lake and Lac Brochet have outstanding issues relating to the Nunavut devolution agreement, despite their attempts to resolve them with you and your department prior to the signing that did not take place.

Are you still intending to work with these two first nations to resolve the issues that they have raised?

Hon. Dan Vandal: Absolutely. I met with both first nations several weeks before we signed the Nunavut devolution agreement. I committed to them that they will be treated fairly all the way through the process and that nothing in the Nunavut devolution agreement deviates or takes away from their section 35 rights.

The Government of Canada will continue to negotiate in good faith with both first nations, which is really not my ministerial responsibility but Mr. Anandasangaree's.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I know that both first nations are disappointed that the unresolved issues were not resolved prior to the signing, and they are very much looking forward to resolving the outstanding issues as soon as possible.

To the point not just around Nutrition North but more broadly about affordability, as you know, many first nations here in northern Manitoba face a high cost of living because they depend on the ice roads, and the ice roads are increasingly unreliable as a result of climate change.

I raised this question to Minister Hajdu, but it is intimately related to the question of subsidizing Nutrition North and to food security, particularly here in northern Manitoba: As the minister responsible for Nutrition North, do you support the calls of first nations on the east side of Lake Winnipeg, as well as further north, who have been clear about this? They want a reinstatement of the east side road initiative, and they are calling on the federal government to invest in all-weather road infrastructure, an airport for Wasagamack First Nation and investment in the stretch between St. Theresa Point and Berens River, as well as the northern leg between Oxford House and Garden Hill.

These are all first nations that depend on Nutrition North and subsidies and these are all first nations that are facing an extremely

high cost of living, and an all-weather road in the age of climate change would make a real difference.

Do you support these first nations' calls for federal investment in all-weather road infrastructure?

The Chair: I'll just say that a brief answer would be appreciated. We are at the end of the two and a half minutes, but Minister, please respond.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Absolutely I do. Climate change is real. Winter roads are going to become rarer as time passes. That means the federal government and the provincial governments are going to have to work together to make sure that all-weather roads are constructed in the north.

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, that brings us to the end of the resources and the time that we have available today.

We do have invitations out for all three ministers to come back to speak with us about the main estimates, as well as for the supplementary estimates (B), which we've been trying to land since before Christmas.

I hope to see all of you again soon, but for tonight, we are adjourned.

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