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Chair: Mr. John Aldag



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• (1705)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 108 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We recognize that we meet on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee is meeting to study the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025, which were referred to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. This includes the Canadian High Arctic Research Station, vote 1; the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, votes 1, 5, 10 and L15; and the Department of Indigenous Services, votes 1, 5 and 10.

Before we begin, I'd like to ask all members and other in-person participants to consult the cards on the table for guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents.

Please take note of the following preventative measures in place to protect the health and safety of all participants, including our interpreters. Only use a black, approved earpiece; the former grey ones must no longer be used. Keep your earpiece away from the microphones at all times, particularly when the red light is on. When you're not using your earpiece, place it face down on the sticker provided on the table for this purpose; there are now stickers for left- and right-handed persons.

Thank you, everybody, for your co-operation.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Our witnesses and members who are online have gone through the approved sound checks, so we're good to go.

Note that photos are not permitted while the committee is in session.

I'll introduce our first panel, starting with the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services. From the Department of Indigenous Services, we have Gina Wilson, deputy minister; Candice St-Aubin, senior assistant deputy minister; Paula Hadden-Jokiel, assistant deputy minister; Catherine Lappe, assistant deputy minister, child and family services reform, by video conference; Marc Sanderson, assistant deputy minister, education and social development programs and partnerships sector; Danielle White, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy and partnerships; Marc Geoffrion, director general and deputy chief financial officer, planning

and resource management; Jessica Sultan, director general, economic and business opportunities, lands and economic development; and lastly, Jonathan Allen, acting director general, education and social development programs and partnerships.

Colleagues, before we start today, there are a couple of things to go through. Minister Hajdu has a hard stop at 5:30 as she has a commitment. She has a five-minute opening statement, which will take us to 10 minutes past five o'clock. We have two hours of resources; in fact, I think we have a deviation to go beyond that if we need to, but we will only have the minister until 5:30.

I'm wondering if we can do the first round of questions at five minutes, and then if we want to keep the Indigenous Services officials for the second half-hour, we can do that. We're just not going to get to everybody if we do six minutes at the start.

Let's start, Minister, with your opening statement. Then we'll get into some rounds of questions.

Minister, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services): Thank you very much, everybody, for having me here. It is a real pleasure to be with you on the unceded and unsundered territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people. I look forward to being able to answer your questions today on the main estimates for Indigenous Services Canada. You heard that we have a whole host of professionals here with me to answer those questions.

With \$21 billion in its 2024-25 main estimates, Indigenous Services Canada supports indigenous partners in delivering the important services that exist in every indigenous community. Some of the department's top priorities in terms of the work that we do—and, I would say, priorities of the community as well—are things like supporting indigenous children and youth and families, increasing the educational outcomes for indigenous students, improving access to health services and funding infrastructure in first nations communities.

Over the last several years, Canada has made significant investments in the first nations child and family services program to help better support first nations and first nations child and family services agencies in providing culturally based family supports that will address and bring down the overrepresentation of indigenous children in care by keeping children with their families.

We're also continuing our work with partners in devising a fully reformed program so that this program never returns to the abysmal state that it was in over a number of decades. Reducing gaps in education for indigenous students compared to other students in Canada is also a priority. With over \$3.4 billion dedicated for education in these estimates, first nations, Inuit and Métis students will be able to access better educational opportunities.

Of course, funding of over \$6.2 billion from these estimates will support better health outcomes for indigenous people, including providing better access to high-quality health services for indigenous communities, reducing systemic racism within our health systems across the country, and closing socio-economic gaps between indigenous peoples and others in Canada.

This investment will also significantly advance the work with Inuit partners to eliminate tuberculosis across Inuit Nunangat by 2030. It will also support the continued implementation of Jordan's principle so that first nations children can quickly access the services and supports that they need when they need them.

Lastly, investments of over \$4.3 billion will support community infrastructure in first nations communities. This includes the innovative Watay project, also known as the Wataynikaneyap transmission project. It's Ontario's largest and most far-reaching indigenous-led transmission project. Once completed, it will connect 14,000 first nations community members to reliable electricity, electricity spanning over 1,800 kilometres. This will eliminate dependence on costly diesel fuel, improve connection and healthy socio-economic and environmental conditions, and decrease costs for communities over the long term.

I have to say on a personal note that it was very exciting to be in a community as they switched the lights on and to see the celebration of community members knowing that they had clean, reliable electricity in their community.

On April 18, for example, Sandy Lake First Nation was connected to the transmission line, and it is the 12th of a total of 16 first nations that will be connected to the grid. Almost \$1.5 billion of the 2024-25 estimates is going towards supporting Watay.

As you know, the main estimates identify planned government spending and the spending authorities for which our departments seek Parliament's approval annually. As the main estimates are prepared in late fall, they don't include spending items announced in budget 2024. However, that said, through budget 2024 investments, we'll continue to build on the momentum that we're seeing. Since 2015, there's been a 180% increase in investments towards indigenous communities and around 25% of the investments in budget 2024 target indigenous priorities.

More than half of overall budget 2024 infrastructure funding is allocated for first nations on reserves. Thanks to the report produced by the Assembly of First Nations on closing the infrastructure gap, we can better plan for new approaches for that significant gap.

Indigenous Services Canada is assessing the investments and impacts of budget 2024 to its ongoing services, and how budget 2024's \$2.3 billion over five years will renew existing programming. The federal government focuses on building relationships

with indigenous partners by addressing past harms, increasing dialogue, supporting community capacity, fostering inherent self-rights and advancing a fair fiscal relationship with indigenous peoples. Budget 2024 makes investments in priority areas that will deliver an economic boost to these communities.

● (1710)

As previously mentioned, we're here to discuss the main estimates from my department, not budget 2024, but I look forward to discussing in more detail the budget 2024 investments at a future appearance, which I believe is on June 3.

I welcome your questions, I look forward to our conversation today, and I applaud your interest in pursuing reconciliation.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We're going to try to squeeze in four six-minute rounds of questions, and then at that point, we will release all the witnesses for Indigenous Services Canada. I know that's going to make it really tight for the minister, so I'm going to have to ask everybody to be as on point as possible.

The other thing, members, is I just want to remind you that at the last meeting when we had ministers, there was some talking over each other when mics were on, and we can't have that happen. It makes it impossible for the interpreters to do their job. It makes it impossible to have meetings in both official languages.

Today, I'm going to ask you to make whatever statements you want and make them as long as you want, but when a question is asked, please allow the minister time to respond. If you want to make a point, continue talking. Once a question is asked, I think it's only reasonable to give the minister time to make an informed response.

I'll ask for that. If we can't follow those rules, I may have to suspend, and that will further eat into the time we have.

Let's get through this as quickly as we possibly can, and have a good discussion.

With that, Mr. Brock, the floor is yours for the first six minutes.

Mr. Larry Brock (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Minister, are your department's contracts, particularly those under the indigenous procurement program, thoroughly reviewed for potential fraud and criminality? What mechanisms are currently in place to detect and prevent such issues?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, MP Brock.

I will say the work we're doing to ensure that we have a list of indigenous businesses that can benefit from the procurement policy of the federal government is very important. In fact, it's part of the economic reconciliation agenda to make sure that the spending of the federal government actually benefits indigenous-owned companies and companies that are indigenous-led.

As you know, and as I've answered at this committee before, my department works closely with other departments to make sure that they have access to that list. We also provide audits upon request by other departments or, certainly, if we've heard complaints by specific partners—

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, Minister. I'm reclaiming my time.

Dalian Enterprises received \$8 million to work on the Arrive-CAN app. It is a two-person company that works out of a basement. It performed no IT work. It simply acted as a middleman, connecting the government with IT professionals.

What percentage of the work subcontracted by Dalian was given to indigenous businesses?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I think—

Mr. Larry Brock: Just give the percentage, Minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I've said it here before. First of all, that particular company is under a postaudit.

I will also say—

Mr. Larry Brock: Minister, give the percentage, please.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —it's important that we continue to realize what the point of the indigenous registry is.

Mr. Larry Brock: Minister, give the percentage, please.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The point of the indigenous registry is to make sure that—

Mr. Larry Brock: Okay. You clearly don't want to answer the question. I'm going to move on.

In 2014, there was an internal audit of the program, which recommended that the government increase the number of preaward audits, postaward audits and random audits. In those 10 years, how many audits have been completed?

• (1715)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: One of the exciting things about the work we're doing on the procurement strategy—

Mr. Larry Brock: Just give the number, please, Minister.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —is actually transferring control of—

Mr. Larry Brock: Minister, give the number, please.

The Chair: Mr. Brock, I'm going to ask you to hold to allow the minister to provide an answer.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —determining who is indigenous to indigenous people.

Mr. Larry Brock: I have a point of order, Chair. It was a very specific question.

How many audits have been completed in the last 10 years?

This minister is deliberately not answering the relevant question I put to her. Where the minister continues to deviate in her responses, I will continue to interrupt. Canadians who are watching this, Chair, want answers to these very important questions.

The Chair: I will afford you that opportunity to ask the questions, but we need to give the minister the time to respond. We cannot have people speaking over each other.

Mr. Larry Brock: But she's not responding, Chair.

The Chair: She's attempting to respond. Let's see what she comes out with as far as....

Mr. Larry Brock: How many audits?

The Chair: Minister, let's go to you.

The clock is running. We have three minutes and 44 seconds left.

Mr. Larry Brock: How many audits?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The member opposite may not like my response, but I am responding to the member opposite. I'm talking about indigeneity and how important it is that the Government of Canada get out of the business of determining who is indigenous and work with—

Mr. Larry Brock: I know it's important, Minister.

How many audits? I will tell you, because—

The Chair: Mr. Brock, I'm going to have to suspend if we continue this. It cannot happen. We will suspend. The interpreters cannot do their job. We can't follow when both people are speaking.

I would say to give the minister five seconds or 10 seconds, and we'll move it back to you to get the response you're asking for.

Mr. Larry Brock: I gave her more than five seconds and 10 seconds, Chair. She doesn't want to give me an answer as to how many audits have been conducted in the last 10 years. That is the question.

The Chair: Minister, the floor is yours for that question.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair—and thanks for attempting to have some civility in this place.

I will say that it's important to understand the purpose of the list if we're talking about audits. The purpose of the list is not to determine, from our department's perspective, the procurement process itself but, really, to provide support to other departments around the indigeneity of—

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you, Minister.

The answer, for Canadians, is four, and those four were completed in the last two years.

The Chair: Mr. Brock, I'm sorry, but I'm going to pause here for a second. I'm going to stop the clock.

Mr. McLeod, I see your hand up. I don't know if this is a point of order. Sometimes there are audio issues, and I just want to make sure that we're dealing with this. We're at two and a half minutes left.

Mr. McLeod, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, I'm really reluctant to interrupt this interesting discussion, but can you ask the members not to yell? I don't know what the interpreters are going through, but it's very difficult for me to participate if somebody's yelling into the mic or talking extremely loudly.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLeod.

Mr. Battiste, is this a point of order?

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Yes, just in terms of what Michael said—and I'm sure he doesn't want to say this—I know that Larry's new to this committee, but we have folks here who are dealing with hearing disabilities, and so for someone to yell into the microphone makes it very difficult for them.

I just ask that, out of consideration for some of the members we have here and for the interpreters, you show a bit more sensitivity for their ailments.

The Chair: I think the point has been made here.

I'm starting the clock again, so there are two and a half minutes left.

Mr. Larry Brock: May I respond to that point of order?

The Chair: We're getting into debate. I think the point, simply, is that we can have only one person speaking at a time, and we can't have people speaking...I'd say, just try to not be—

Mr. Larry Brock: How much time do I have left, Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes and 33 seconds.

Mr. Larry Brock: Thank you.

Minister, your government provided a list of contractors through indigenous procurement, but did not list any subcontractors. Canadians simply don't know where their money is flowing. How can you be assured that the money isn't flowing to subcontractors working out of their basements here in Ottawa, without a penny flowing to first nations communities?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'll turn to the officials to talk a bit about the process of how people are certified to help—

Mr. Larry Brock: Minister, with all due respect—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: You just asked a question.

Mr. Larry Brock: —that's an insult to members at this table. We don't want to know about process. I want to have a relevant response to the question, Minister. You haven't given me a response yet that has been relevant to any of the questions I put to you.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Actually, you did ask me a process question because you asked me how we determine an indigenous company, and how we follow and track what that indigenous company does.

That, to me, the way my mind works as a former planner, is a process question, and so I would like to turn to officials to—

Mr. Larry Brock: How much money has been flowing through subcontractors actually employed by indigenous owners, with money going to indigenous communities? Just give the number, please.

• (1720)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The process of the list that the Indigenous Services Canada department maintains is that the Indigenous Services Canada department determines indigeneity and provides that information to other departments of Canada that are looking to procure to meet that 5% target of procurement, all with the goal of ensuring that we can foster economic reconciliation.

Mr. Larry Brock: However, you're failing, Minister. Indigenous communities have repeatedly told you that the process is flawed. You, as Minister of Indigenous Services, have an absolute responsibility...that money is actually flowing to indigenous contractors. You don't have a process. You're not conducting any audits.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I disagree with the allegation that the department doesn't have a process, and I also disagree with the allegation that all partners are disappointed. In fact, I work closely with many experts—indigenous experts in economic reconciliation—and we are actively working with partners on a pathway to transition the list to indigenous partners in a way that makes sense to them and that supports their goal of economic prosperity for their communities.

The Chair: That's the end of our time for this one.

I go now to Mr. McLeod online.

Mr. McLeod, I'll jump in when your six minutes is up. It's over to you.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us.

First of all, I want to put out an invitation to the minister to come and visit us here in Northwest Territories. I think you would be shocked to see the level of disasters that are happening right across Northwest Territories, and I imagine that for the rest of the north it's the same. We're experiencing extreme drought conditions.

I live on the bank of the Mackenzie River, and it's getting to a point where we can just about walk across the Mackenzie. It used to be referred to as the mighty Mackenzie, and it's a shame that the climate crisis is causing the river to possibly dry up. This is only May, and there's no water. I'm assuming it's part of what's going on in B.C. and Alberta, but it's causing a lot of problems.

As you know, the wildfires that burned across the country last summer were devastating to many of our indigenous communities. Here in Northwest Territories, we evacuated almost 80% of our population.

I'd like you to talk a little bit about how your department assisted indigenous communities to recover from last year's wildfire season and how you're working with communities to prepare for the 2024 season, because the fires have already started here, and we're only in May. I'm scared to imagine what it's going to be like in July. Perhaps you could just speak about wildfires, how our government helped the situation last year and how you're helping to prepare for this year.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, MP McLeod.

I'll never forget the calls with Chief April of K'at'odeeche last year in the middle of the wildfire that so devastated Northwest Territories. In fact, it's a sad reality of my job that in the summer I repeatedly make phone calls to first nations leaders across the country, who are in the most untenable situations and who sometimes, obviously, have to evacuate an entire community, with everything that means. I think until you've actually listened to a chief or met first-hand with community members who are being evacuated, you don't have a full understanding of just how disruptive, scary and difficult that is for families, and sometimes people are out for a very long time.

The 2023 wildfire season forced almost 30,000 first nations people to evacuate. That was almost three times the number of people who had to evacuate the year before. Not only is it devastating emotionally and devastating to the infrastructure if in fact communities do experience loss, but it's also extremely expensive, not just in terms of the wildfire response but also in terms of the rebuilding that, in many cases, can be very difficult to pursue. We've heard about the hurdles to getting infrastructure built in Lytton and communities in that area in B.C. Many times, forests have been decimated. Every chief I speak to, especially in the west, is very frightened about what the future holds and is very concerned about a climate that increasingly means evacuating not just once every 10 years but now once every year. I spoke to a chief from Alberta today, the chief of the Doig River First Nation, who said that this is the second year in a row his community has been evacuated.

We've been doing a number of things to help communities prepare. One is to support the collaboration between provincial response, federal response and community response. It has to be all hands on deck. We do that by convening tables to provide communities better capacity to do their own emergency response planning. Being prepared in advance is a huge advantage, as is having money in advance. Over the last number of years, that's something we've been able to change. We've provided advance payments to communities so they're not scrambling and desperate to find the actual cash to be able to do this work.

• (1725)

Mr. Michael McLeod: Minister, can I interrupt you?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Yes, you can. I'm sorry.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I really wanted you to talk about one issue that's really plaguing us, which is insurance. We have 27 indigenous public communities here in the north. They're not re-

serves. The cost of insurance has become ridiculous. I even heard the other day that somebody was quoted \$18,000 by an insurance company for fire insurance. Anybody who needs insurance is cancelling their insurance because they can't afford it.

I'm wondering if you, as a minister, are talking with your colleagues in cabinet about the possibility of creating a public-private home insurance program, not necessarily specific to indigenous people, but for people who just can't afford—

The Chair: Mr. McLeod, we're out of time, but I'll allow the minister a very brief answer.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Really quickly, of course, the government's looking at how we can address all of these compounding problems related to climate change. What's not helpful is having members of Parliament who are essentially denying that climate change is real, because it is hitting the pocketbooks of every Canadian in this country, whether through excessively priced insurance in flood zones or fire zones, or the many other ways it's impacting Canadians.

We all need to be on board, preparing for what is going to be an undoubtedly difficult fire season this year and in years to come.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to go now to Monsieur Lemire, who will have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

First, I would like to offer my condolences to the loved ones, family and friends of Alexandre McKenzie, an extremely dedicated member of the north shore Innu community who was recognized for his cultural, linguistic and historical contribution to the community. I offer them my condolences.

Madam Minister, I would like to hear what you have to say about the process of realigning government spending. A change has been made in the formulas in order to reduce grants that support child and family services coordination agreements and related fiscal arrangements by \$120 million.

How does your department determine the amounts needed for indigenous communities to develop their own child and family services legislation, systems and programs in preparation for coordination agreement discussions?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Good question.

We work with communities to adopt a fair and realistic approach to ensure the best chance of success for every family and child.

[*English*]

It's really important that we don't impose a fiscal approach on communities, but rather that we work with communities and with the province or territory to figure out how to best support the community in that transition.

What we don't want to see is communities taking on the responsibility without sufficient resources, and that's why those are negotiated agreements with communities.

• (1730)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: In this case, we're talking about requests for around \$311 million. The 2023-24 main estimates contain \$431.1 million in spending for this file.

I'd be curious to know which formula and basis were used to calculate the amounts allocated to the various coordination agreements. Could you send us this information in writing?

These types of budget cuts certainly don't address all the needs in communities.

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It might be difficult to provide a formula in writing, because it is dependent on the size of the community, the needs of the community and their specific desires. Some communities want to do more than other communities. Some communities want to work with provinces more than others.

I will also say that sometimes, the amount of money that is received in the budget is related to the upcoming coordination agreements that we know are ready to be signed in the very near future.

Catherine, do you want to speak to this just a little more?

Ms. Catherine Lappe (Assistant Deputy Minister, Child and Family Services Reform, Department of Indigenous Services): Yes, certainly.

[*Translation*]

Yes, as the minister said, it depends on the circumstances of each community. We're negotiating the amount with each community and with the province in question.

There were no cuts. As the minister said, we have several agreements that receive, or have received, funding from previous years' budgets. There are currently seven agreements in place. The announcements in this year's budget are for the agreements we plan on finalizing in the coming months.

It's not just a formula. We try to take data collected through the child and family services program and tailor the program according to each community's needs and the respective areas of responsibility.

So there are variations from one community to another. Over the next few years, we'll be working with national organizations to develop not just a formula, but a more coherent methodology, drawn up through co-development. For the moment, we're working community by community. We try to adapt the program according to the needs and contributions of the provinces and territories.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: We agree that the ultimate goal is the well-being of community members as well as the communities themselves. Right now, many communities are thinking together about how they want to transform the system. After all, everything evolves within an ecosystem.

Have you also set up a process for looking into the services provided to teenagers? You know how much they're affected by all the changes going on around them. Many of them aren't doing very well. There are a number of mental health problems, for example. I'm worried about the future of children and teenagers.

To what extent does your department address and prioritize this area?

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, but I missed part of the question. Did you ask about services for adults or adolescents?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I'm talking about services for teenagers. How is your department looking into the services set up for them?

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Adolescents are covered, in many ways, through both the child welfare agreements and Jordan's principle agreements.

In fact, we have something now called "post-majority care", which actually refers to that very delicate age of youth who are 17, 18, 19 and upwards. You're absolutely right. That age is so difficult, especially for children who have experienced a life in care.

The agreements that are developed conceptualize how best to support youth, as well, within or from their communities. Each community is different. Each community has a different approach. Almost all community members want to know where their children are.

[*Translation*]

These children could be somewhere close to their community, but they could also be in other parts of the country.

[English]

That's a problem for communities, because they lose track of where their loved ones are. Therefore, part of our work is to try to work with the provinces and territories to get that information transfer to the communities so that they know where their children are and they have better options to keep their kids connected to their community and culture.

The Chair: That's our time.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, *meegwetch*.

[English]

The Chair: Now we'll go to Ms. Idlout.

When you're ready, Ms. Idlout, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you. I will be speaking in Inuktitut.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm sorry, MP Idlout. I unfortunately have to catch a plane.

I'll do MP Idlout's question, and then I will have to go.

● (1735)

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

I'm sorry. I have many questions for you, and our question period has been shortened, unfortunately.

We know that targeted infrastructure and capital expenditures need to be \$350 billion for first nations, \$75.1 billion for Inuit and \$2.7 billion for Métis. Those are capital expense items—infrastructure dollars.

Why is it that you aren't requesting supplementary funding now? It isn't enough. We need supplementary funding to cover infrastructure costs.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much.

I would agree that this gap is giant. It was one of the reasons we actually commissioned the study from AFN and other partners to understand exactly what the gap is. After a decade of inaction from the Harper government, we've seen increases for first nations infrastructure of 156%, but, in fact, that is barely scratching the surface. With a gap of \$400 billion, it's going to take some creativity, innovation and work with partners to close that gap more quickly.

You're absolutely right, MP Idlout. You and I have travelled together, and we've seen what the gap in infrastructure means for people. It means things like overcrowded housing and schools that are in dire need of repair. Even though I get to go and celebrate with communities and do grand openings of schools and water treatment plants, we need to work more quickly.

This is an investment that will help, but we are obviously going to need to invest more as a country.

The Chair: Minister, I know you need to run. I understand we have agreement from the parties to allow the officials to go, as well.

I apologize for the late start. Votes cannot be controlled by us. Thanks to all of you for being here.

Before we suspend, we'll let the officials go, along with the minister.

I know that Mr. Melillo had a point of order he wanted to raise.

Did you want to raise something, too, Mr. Battiste? Okay.

We'll go to Mr. Melillo first, and then we'll go to Mr. Battiste. I will also explain what's happening with our second panel, and then we'll suspend.

Mr. Melillo.

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

I appreciate the minister being here, and I can appreciate the time crunch she was under with the votes. However, it was agreed to, and the expectation was that we would have time for a full hour. I know there are members of all parties who have many important questions to ask—

The Chair: Just a second, Mr. Melillo.

We'll suspend. We'll get the room cleared, and then we'll come back and will try to get the interpretation working.

● (1735)

(Pause)

● (1745)

The Chair: We'll get back under way.

We won't jump into our next session. We had a couple of points of order from the previous session that we need to clean up before we go to our second minister of the day.

Minister Vandal, if you and your officials can hold tight for a minute, we're in the middle of a point of order from Mr. Melillo. We'll then go to Mr. Battiste, and then hopefully we can get to our session. I also have some updates.

Mr. Melillo, please go ahead.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will quickly repeat this, because I don't think it was heard before we suspended. Of course we all understand the minister's time crunch with the votes and with the circumstances today that caused the Indigenous Services minister to have to leave early; however, we do have an agreement and an expectation of one hour of questions for that minister.

I know that members of all parties have many more questions, and I would implore our committee to invite her back to finish that time when it's appropriate. I suggest perhaps next week. I understand that we have the Crown-Indigenous Relations minister appearing. Perhaps that could be a time to fit the minister back in.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll come back to this, but first I will go through the speakers list that I have.

Mr. Battiste, we will go to you next.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I will definitely relay that the minister was a hit and that they want her back for sure on that.

Mr. Chair, it's my understanding that there has been some discussion amongst the parties in light of the letter sent by MP Schmale, who's not here today. We want to respect his wishes. We said that the second hour of today would be for Minister Vandal to appear. Minister Anandasangaree will make himself available next Wednesday at a time where we can have him in during our session, with, hopefully, less disturbance in the votes. We all know that the silly season is upon us; we can do our best to make great plans and then the House can throw us off.

That's what I understand the second panel to be and why we have Minister Vandal here today and not Minister Anandasangaree.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Battiste.

To try to bring those two things together, that was an update I was going to do, along with a couple of other updates.

The motion we had was to invite the three ministers for the two-hour panel today. Then we had Mr. Schmale's letter this morning, asking for one hour with each of the ministers, so it was outside the scope of the motion we were working with. We've heard the request that has been made.

Now, in addition, we've had our time with Minister Hajdu and Indigenous Services Canada cut short. Thinking that I knew where your motion was going, Mr. Melillo, I was able to talk to the minister's officials, and she is amenable to coming back. We need to find time in the calendar.

Now, I will mention a couple of things. The second part of that is that Minister Vandal has agreed to come for this hour, and then Minister Anandasangaree is going to come. They're trying to find time in the calendar, but next Wednesday... The issue we have there is that we built a full panel for next Wednesday on the taxation study. I need direction from the committee if we want to cancel one of the panels on that study to bring in Minister Anandasangaree, or if we want to request resources for a third hour to do those.

To try to bring Minister Hajdu in at the same time would be challenging, but she is scheduled to come back in a couple of weeks to talk about housing. They are going to look at her schedule to see if she might be able to add half an hour for the main estimates at that point, which would still be before we have to report back.

Those are the balls that I have up in the air here as the chair of the committee. We don't need to decide it at this moment, because I'd like to get into the questions we have, but I wouldn't mind direction at the end of the meeting on whether we'd like to displace one

of the panels on the taxation study for next Wednesday with Minister Anandasangaree, or if we would like to request the third hour in case we are able to get those resources. Give that some thought.

In the meantime, Minister Vandal, welcome so much to you and your officials.

Deputy Minister Valerie Gideon, welcome back. You're always a pleasant addition to our table.

We also have with us Darlene Bess, chief, finances, results and delivery officer, and Georgina Lloyd, assistant deputy minister, Northern Affairs.

I'm going to remind everybody, as we did with the first panel, that I'm going to ask us to have one speaker at a time. Last time, we got a bit over top of each other, and it makes it impossible for the meetings to happen. We're trying to go with the protocol that people have a chance to make their statement. They can go as long as they like. When they ask a question, though, I'm going to try to give reasonable time for the minister to respond.

If the person asking the question has heard enough, then I would say to just get the minister's attention and get into your next question, because ultimately this is about the discussions, but we do want the minister to be able to provide an adequate response. If we can't respect that, then we may have to suspend and restore order, but I think we're going to have a good conversation here.

With that, Minister, I will turn the floor over to you for five minutes.

● (1750)

Hon. Dan Vandal (Minister of Northern Affairs): Thank you so much.

It's great to be here again. It seems like I was just here last week.

[*Translation*]

I'm pleased to be here today to discuss how Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada is working with indigenous and northern partners to develop the northern economy, build housing and infrastructure, improve food security and strengthen northern communities.

[*English*]

The 2024-25 main estimates reflect an increase of \$1.1 billion for Northern Affairs.

One of the most pressing issues in the north is food security, and the main estimates contain \$133 million for nutrition north Canada. We are helping northerners access affordable, healthy food with new budget 2024 investments of \$23.2 million for the grocery subsidy and \$101.1 million, over three years, for the harvesters support grant, the community food programs fund and food security research. Nutrition north subsidizes food, household items like diapers and soap, and personal hygiene items. The list of subsidized items relies on direct input from people who live in the north. The harvesters support grant was co-developed with indigenous and northern partners and it supports traditional hunting, harvesting and food sharing. In its first year alone, the grant supported 15,000 harvesters, 410 hunts and 717 food-sharing initiatives. Nutrition north alone will not solve food insecurity, but it's a key piece of a long-term strategy to address factors that affect food security, such as income, employment and access to distributors. Through the nutrition north food security research grant, launched in 2022, we are also supporting indigenous-led research projects that will help improve the program.

Our government recognizes the challenges associated with northern housing. That's why we're making historic investments to build housing and address infrastructure gaps. Budget 2024 invests an additional \$918 million in indigenous housing and infrastructure. Investments such as these will allow territorial and indigenous governments to improve the overall housing conditions of the north.

Another critical challenge in the north is the dramatic impact of climate change, with the north warming roughly three times faster than the global average. The main estimates contain \$67 million for the climate change adaptation and clean energy program, which will support projects in northern and Arctic communities. The federal government is working with communities to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. For instance, the climate change preparedness in the north program is working to develop northern-led solutions to coastal erosion, permafrost degradation and increased floods and wildfires.

I highlight as well that our department is working to reduce the risk to human and environmental health associated with contaminated sites in the north. The main estimates allocate \$713 million to the northern contaminated sites program to manage a portfolio of contaminated sites in Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut. This program demonstrates the department's commitment to self-determination and economic reconciliation through indigenous partners' participation in project governance and the creation of socio-economic benefits.

The main estimates contain \$26.2 million for implementing the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement. This agreement represents the largest land transfer in Canadian history, a historic step forward in self-determination for Nunavummiut. Our investments are grounded in the inclusive engagement that took place under the Arctic and northern policy framework, which was co-developed with indigenous and northern partners to reflect their needs and priorities. The framework guides our activities and investments to 2030 and beyond, and aligns our national and international objectives with the priorities of northerners.

The 2024-25 main estimates also strengthen our efforts to defend Canada's sovereignty as we accelerate progress on this and other

fronts for the benefit of northern residents, Arctic residents and everyone else in Canada.

• (1755)

Qujannamiik.Marsi. Merci.

It's great to be here again.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You're right on the five-minute mark. I appreciate it.

For this round, we're going to start with Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Zimmer, you have six minutes. The floor is yours.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here once again.

I want to ask you some specific questions regarding the REACHE program. This is an original program, the target of which is to reduce diesel or gasoline use by seven million litres, one of the programs touted by you, Minister, as a great use of funds collected through the carbon tax.

My first question is how many litres' reduction the program has actually provided.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's a great question. Thank you so much for that. We know that the climate is actually changing at three times—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Just a specific number, Minister.

Hon. Dan Vandal: —the rate of the change in the southern climate, so it's important that we have these sorts of programs.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I reclaim my time.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I do know the northern REACHE program—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Minister, the answer to that question is actually—

Hon. Dan Vandal: Do you want an answer?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: You just used up your time to answer.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I didn't know you were the chair of this meeting.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Can we pause?

The Chair: I will pause here. We're just trying to have a good conversation here.

Ask the question as you've done.

Minister, we'll give you a bit of time.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: My question was 10 seconds long and his response was at least 30, and he wasn't even getting to my question.

Mr. Dan Vandal: That's not right.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Anyway it's my time.

The Chair: We have five minutes on the clock. We'll go back to Mr. Zimmer for his next question.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

The Chair: The floor is yours, and the clock is running.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Your department has actually given it a number. It estimates that out of the seven million litres, there has been a reduction of 2.6 million litres of diesel or gasoline. But, again, that's an estimate, because you lack hard data.

To date, Minister, how much has the program cost taxpayers?

Hon. Dan Vandal: I can tell you, first of all, that northern REACHE has funded 210 projects since 2017. The preliminary work for 11 hydro projects has been funded since 2017.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: How much has this particular program cost taxpayers, Minister? That is the question.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I can tell you that's an important part of all of our programs to fight climate change in the north.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: What's the answer to that question, Minister?

He's had enough time to attempt to answer.

According to your own department, according to your own documents, you've spent about \$66 million as of 2024 on that particular program for a reduction of 2.6 million litres of gasoline or diesel. That is \$66 million to make a reduction of 2.6 million litres. How much per litre is that, Minister?

Hon. Dan Vandal: First of all, I question those numbers that have been put on the record.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: They're from your own department, Minister.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Those are numbers—

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

Mr. Bob Zimmer: They're in the 2022-23 departmental results report.

The Chair: Mr. Zimmer, wait just a second. We have a point of order.

I am going to go to the point of order, but I would just remind people to please.... The minister was trying to respond, and some of these things require a bit of context and more than just a yes or no. I do agree that the responses need to be short.

I'll go to the point of order first, and then we'll come back.

• (1800)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Mr. Chair, Mr. Zimmer's two questions were about 19 and 30 seconds. The minister had three seconds before he was interrupted both times. If you want to take a look at this, I'm timing this with a lap timer right now.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: This is my time.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: And Dan's interrupting me as we speak. Let's give it a chance.

Dan, you know you're new to this thing. We try to do things collegially here.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: We know each other. You can do this. This is what we're doing. Let's give him ample time because we have, Dan, people with hearing disabilities, who are listening in on this. Have some sympathy and sensitivity for our translators and other people.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Zimmer, were you finished your question?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I already asked the question. I was waiting for an answer to the question, which he was not giving. I'll repeat the question.

The Chair: I'll start the clock, and you can repeat the question.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: This is going to be a 10-second question. That is \$66 million to save 2.6 million litres. How much per litre is that, Minister?

Hon. Dan Vandal: First of all, I question those numbers. This is something I would turn to the public service to answer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I'm looking for a quick answer.

The Chair: Perhaps you'd like to turn to the officials to see if they have that response.

Ms. Valerie Gideon (Deputy Minister, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): What I can say is that we actually exceeded our target. The 2.6 million litres is exceeding our target—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: That's not an answer to the question, so I'll respond.

Ms. Valerie Gideon: —which was two million by March 31, 2023.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I'm actually asking how much per litre it cost taxpayers. You're answering a different question.

Hon. Dan Vandal: Come on. This is ridiculous.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I will actually give you the number. It is over a \$20 cost to taxpayers for every litre saved. Again, that is an estimate from your own department.

I want to get on to my next question. One thing I found interesting from the same program.... Wood stoves are one of the highest-emitting sources of carbon for home heating, as you likely know, Minister, so I found it strange that you would be spending carbon tax dollars on wood stoves. This is the document. It's an answer to an Order Paper question that we got right from your department. I'll go right to the first page, and this is for the money spent. On the first page, it is about funding to support the installation of wood stoves. Page two is about funding to support the purchase and installation of wood stoves. Again, on another page, it is about funding to support wood stoves. On the last page, it shows funding for the installation of close to 400 wood stoves, Minister.

The question is an obvious one. For this program, the carbon tax is supposed to be collected to reduce carbon. Here you are, as a ministry, funding projects of one of the highest-emitting sources of carbon, and that's a wood stove, Minister.

My simple question is this: Why are you funding wood stoves with the carbon tax?

Hon. Dan Vandal: First of all, I can say that we need an overarching strategy to fight climate change. I know you don't agree with that, so that's where we differ, right off the bat. That's a foundation.

That's a detailed question, so I'll go to the public service to answer your detailed question.

Ms. Georgina Lloyd (Assistant Deputy Minister, Northern Affairs, Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs): Part of what is a priority in the northern REACHE program is a self-determination based approach. Northerners and indigenous—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: The question is actually about how much carbon it is reducing. The target was supposed to be seven million litres, and you've even admitted that it's only been 2.6 million. You haven't even met your target. Then, part of the cost and part of the \$66 million is being spent on wood stoves. I have a report from the U.K. that says wood stoves are 550 times more inefficient than even oil-fired furnaces in the north. This is supposed to be reducing carbon, not making it worse.

Ms. Georgina Lloyd: The 7.6 target is cumulative. We have met the target in the year that we were requested to.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Buying wood stoves...?

The Chair: Let the officials respond, please.

Ms. Georgina Lloyd: Indigenous people get to choose, and they have a self-determination based approach in terms of how they would like to replace diesel. This is replacing diesel, which is a huge producer of carbon.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Diesel-fired furnaces emit 5.4 grams per megawatt hour of energy produced. A solid open fire or a wood stove burns 500 times that.

• (1805)

The Chair: We're out of time now. We're going to go to the next witness.

On the second question round for six minutes, I have Mr. McLeod.

Mr. McLeod, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to Minister Vandal for joining us.

I know, Minister Vandal, that you're quite aware of our situation in Northwest Territories. Our communities are on the front line of climate change. All the changes that are happening are really severely impacting our supply chains. We're seeing barges being redirected to record low levels in Northwest Territories. Our supplies have to be trucked all the way to Inuvik and then barged upstream because the Mackenzie River is drying up. There are sandbars all over the place. Even small boats with outboard motors are not able to get around. All of this is disrupting the resupply of essential products.

I wanted to know if you're having these discussions. Is this something you're talking about with territorial government people and indigenous governments? Are you talking about how the communities in Northwest Territories will have access to the goods they require? Not every community has a long runway. Many communities don't have roads, and shockingly, the Mackenzie River, which is the longest river in Canada and the second longest in North America, is all completely, at least in front of my community, gravel bars all over the place. There's no way barges are going to get by. We need to find a better way to do things.

What kinds of discussions are you having with your colleagues to look at the possibilities of how we can lower the cost? Having to redirect our supplies is really going to be draining on our communities. I don't know how some of them are going to continue to exist.

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

In Northwest Territories, I've been to Tuktoyaktuk and I've seen the shoreline erosion first-hand, when homes had to be moved away from the ocean that is rising. Families had to be relocated to other parts of the town.

I've experienced first-hand the Mackenzie River, which is suffering from drought-like conditions, while at the same time, there's no less water in the Mackenzie.

Northwest Territories last year was burning. There was an incredible number of wildfires, and 70% of the people who lived in Northwest Territories had to be relocated.

I think it's important that we continue with our whole suite of programs that battle climate change, not only at Northern Affairs, but in other government departments. That's so very important. You need to have a plan, first of all, to battle climate change.

Compare that to not even two years ago, when the Conservative Party had an annual general meeting in which the membership of the party actually voted to say that climate change was not real and that it was a hoax. You can see that sort of philosophy dripping down from the party to the people sitting in this room. They don't believe that climate change is real. That's simply the reality.

However, I've had good conversations with Premier R.J. Simpson. As recently as two weeks ago, we were in Iqaluit together, where we talked about all of the challenges and all of the ways our governments can work together. We have a good relationship with the territorial government. We know this is an existential threat. It has to begin....

Through the dark decade that we suffered prior to our government being elected in 2015, there was absolutely nothing done for climate change or infrastructure, and we need to reverse that. We know it's the right thing to do, and we know that's what Canadians want.

• (1810)

The Chair: Mr. McLeod, you have one minute left, if you have another question.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I want to quickly check this with you, because I think it's very important. I already asked Minister Hajdu about this.

Have you been having any discussions with your colleagues regarding bringing forward a program for public and private home insurance? Most people in our communities now can't afford the new rates, and people are just going without insurance. If they lose their house, they essentially become homeless.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's something that was identified to me—by you, actually—some time ago. There have been discussions, and there have been discussions with the premier. They are important discussions that are ongoing.

For sure, we are going to follow up on that to do whatever we need to do.

The Chair: We're out of time.

We're now going to Monsieur Lemire, who will have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Vandal, the first nations housing crisis is due in part to inadequate access to capital, which is the result of Indian Act restrictions on the use of land for loan security. The fact that all housing-related resources and responsibilities are tied to government-assisted housing solutions leaves little room for individual initiatives. It's a mutually reinforcing situation that perpetuates the problem.

At the committee's March 20 meeting, I spoke with a number of ministers about the possibility of letting indigenous financial corporations issue housing loans to individuals. Such a tool would help pave the way for reduced spending and less reliance on federal funding. It would contribute to reducing the housing gap in a meaningful way.

The government hinted that it would respond favourably to initiatives such as the Yänonhchia' initiative, a housing finance network led by and for indigenous people.

In terms of budget funding, how much can we reasonably expect the Yänonhchia' initiative to be allocated this year, to establish a housing loan portfolio, thereby giving people an alternative? That could fix part of the problem and serve as a way to increase the number of housing units for indigenous people.

Hon. Dan Vandal: That's a very good question.

When I was consulting with stakeholders across the north, affordable and sustainable residential housing was the thing people wanted to talk about most. In this budget, we've allocated \$900 million to first nations, Métis and Inuit housing. In the 2023-24 budget, at least \$4 billion was allocated to urban, rural and northern housing.

However, we have to keep working, and thinking about new models. The need is so great that we could never address it all in a year or two. That's why we have to examine different models like the one you just mentioned. It's important to do that in co-operation with the departments responsible for housing.

I'd be open to talking to you more about your ideas and setting up a working group.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: That would be wonderful. Indigenous financial corporations are certainly in need of capacity building, so they can operate in communities deemed too risky by financial institutions. Indigenous communities are seen as having a high risk of mortgage defaults.

Against that backdrop, the Yänonhchia' initiative is based on the success of the Aboriginal Savings Corporation of Canada and a proven network of indigenous financial corporations.

When can we expect to see a real change thanks to an initiative that is bringing communities together and having a structural impact in Quebec? A solution already exists. A pilot project has had excellent results. We want these people to have the opportunity to get to work.

What you said partly answered the question I was about to ask you. I take your comments to mean that you're willing to work together, and I'm interested in doing that.

I'd also like to talk to you about the First Nations Finance Authority, whose bond rating is currently on a par with Ontario's and Alberta's. That shows you how strong its internal controls and safeguards are, not to mention how financially sound its members are.

Can we seize this opportunity to expand the authority's work so that indigenous communities can benefit and more “by and for indigenous” initiatives can be established? I'm talking about developing that infrastructure specifically.

• (1815)

Hon. Dan Vandal: Yes, absolutely. That's important. We all want to work in support of self-determination, and that's our plan.

We are truly interested in any model that proposes to build partnerships and houses, whether in Quebec or elsewhere in Canada. I can tell you that clearly aligns with the mandate of the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Gary Anandasangaree. That's a good question to ask him next week.

That doesn't mean that we can't start planning or meeting with stakeholders to discuss the project's potential, but it's more important than ever to attract private investment in support of that as well.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: At this rate, it would take more than a hundred years to eliminate the infrastructure deficit. The Crown has the ability to transfer funds to first nations to support loans and attract capital to financial markets for the benefit of indigenous communities, in particular those who belong to the First Nations Finance Authority.

They were asking for \$200 million in funding a year. Do you think it would be possible to implement any parts of their master plan right away?

[English]

The Chair: We're out of time, but I'll give you time for a brief response and then we'll move to the next questioner.

[Translation]

Hon. Dan Vandal: Potentially, yes, but we would have to discuss it at greater length. We can start talking about it when we meet, and then, we can invite the other departments to participate in the discussion.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you for being so open-minded.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Ms. Idlout. Whenever you're ready, Ms. Idlout, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You mentioned that climate change is a threat and happening very fast. Reducing diesel and carbon is also a problem.

In Kivalliq region, they had a plan to reduce emissions, but what happens is that you fund those annually, so it's not a long-term plan with annual funding. If the Kivalliq hydro-fibre link is going to happen, when will there be adequate money for the Kivalliq hydro project so that they can proceed with the work they want to do and reduce diesel and carbon emissions?

We need to be more mindful of our climate. When are you going to give them enough funding to address some of the carbon and diesel issues?

[English]

• (1820)

Hon. Dan Vandal: Thank you for that great question.

Kivalliq is a very important region in Canada. It's immediately north of Manitoba and about 300 kilometres from Churchill.

We have worked well with Kivalliq on the Kivalliq hydro-fibre project. Through some of our programs, we have funded upwards of \$15 million to date to get some of the preliminary work done. It's a very important project.

There are a couple of things that are important. We've had a change of government in Manitoba, and the new government is much more interested in being a partner with Kivalliq than the previous one was, which is really no surprise to me. They're interested in being at the table. They're interested in being a source of hydro-electricity for Kivalliq, but it's very preliminary, and those discussions are ongoing.

The second thing is that I've been talking to the Premier of Nunavut, who sees the benefit of that hydro-fibre link. There are a couple more projects in Nunavut that are equally important. These are long-term projects, which are going to bring incredible benefit once they're done.

In budget 2024, there are ongoing discussions about investment tax credits, which, in an ideal world, we hope Kivalliq will be able to benefit from.

It's an important file. It's a long-term file and a long-term investment, but we were elected to think long term in order to solve some of the large problems that Canada and the world are facing.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

Earlier you mentioned infrastructure money, which will be \$918 million toward housing. We know that it's not enough for housing. We know that, in Inuit lands, they need \$75.1 billion to adequately house the population.

Before the 2024 budget was released, the three premiers of Yukon, N.W.T. and Nunavut wrote a letter—ahead of time—that they required \$600 million. They gave you adequate notice before the budget, while you were doing the budget preparation.

You said that you were working with the premiers very well. Why is it that when they requested \$600 million, you did not allow for that in the budget?

[English]

Hon. Dan Vandal: That is a very important question. We know affordable and safe housing is a priority in the north.

We are working well with the premiers. They've made requests. They haven't always received everything they've requested. However, in the last eight years, our government has spent more than any other government in the history of Canada on housing in the north. There's still a lot of work to do.

The problem is, of course, that the gaps are so large from previous governments not investing what they should have in the north for housing and infrastructure. I say previous governments of all stripes. I'm not trying to be partisan here. It'll take us a long time to catch up, but we're committed to doing it.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for your reply.

I will remind you to remember your response. In the future, when you reply this way, that you've already spent a lot of money, and that you've spent a major amount of money, remember that many have no homes. Many are homeless and have no safe homes. Children go to school after sleeping in overcrowded houses that are mouldy and old.

What your response is saying is that you've spent a lot of money, but it hasn't made any changes to our social and housing problems.

Don't respond by saying how much money you've spent. Remember how much money you said you have spent. Is it enough? Is it addressing the needs?

[*English*]

• (1825)

The Chair: We are out of time on this one, but Minister, if you would like to offer a brief response, I'll give you the floor for that.

Hon. Dan Vandal: I agree that we need to do a lot more in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon. I'm not disagreeing with the member. I'm saying that we've made progress. There's a lot of work to do, and we will continue to work on investments in the north and the Arctic. We will continue to work in partnership.

The Chair: Thank you.

I understand, Minister, that you also have a time restriction of 6:30.

Colleagues, I need a bit of direction before the minister goes. Because these are mains, and we're able to report them back to the House by May 31, I'm looking for some direction.

Normally, at the end of the hearing, we would do the call on whether various votes shall carry. We have received confirmation that Minister Anandasangaree will come to meet us on May 29, which will be prior to the reporting back period. We can wait to do the voting on the votes until after we hear from the minister.

Minister Hajdu's team has come back with a reply. She is scheduled to come on June 3 to discuss housing in response to the Auditor General's report. She'll be here with Minister Fraser on housing.

Her team has said she could stay for the extra half hour to finish off today's discussion on mains.

The issue is that June 3 is after the reporting back period. Do we want to hold back the votes reporting back to the House until we hear from Minister Anandasangaree, but not Minister Hajdu? If we wait for her, we don't report the mains back. The mains just go back as simply studied. I'm looking for direction from the committee on that.

There is another piece that I was asking about at the beginning. For May 29, do we want to have Minister Anandasangaree on top of the two panels for the taxation study for a third hour that day, or do you want me to bump the second panel, or the first panel, whichever one it is—when he can come, and stay with the resources we have for the two hours on May 29? Could I get input from the committee on those?

Minister, I know that you don't need to be here for this. I was told you need to leave at 6:30.

Colleagues, I don't know if we want to go with a round of questions with officials, after the minister's gone, if they're able to stay.

I turn to the committee for your direction.

Okay, we'll keep the officials.

We'll send the minister on his way.

Minister Vandal, thank you for being here.

Ms. Idlout, the floor is yours.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

I'm very unhappy. I'm not pleased. If I had been told that Minister Vandal was going to leave early, I would have asked my partner beside me from the NDP to ask his question.

I'm upset because the Liberal ministers say that indigenous people are very important, that the north is very important and that northerners are very important, but as much as they say how important we are, they do not make time for us. They leave early. We are trying to resolve some of our issues. They do not reply to our questions. They are discounting us and our issues by leaving early. We are not a priority for them.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We did have the minister booked for an hour. Votes have disrupted things today—that's the reality of it—and we were 15 minutes late starting with this panel.

An hon. member: Why isn't he staying for the full hour, then?

The Chair: I was told he has to stop at 6:30—I don't control his calendar—so he needs to go. However, we have the officials, who have said they're able to stay.

Mr. Desjarlais, please go ahead.

• (1830)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): This kind of relationship between our democratic institutions and the ministers they're supposed to hold accountable is exactly why Canadians and, most particularly, indigenous people can't trust these institutions.

We have credible questions about the main estimates, which are the financial resources for the capital projects of indigenous communities. We have members of Parliament present in this committee who represent indigenous nations and constituents concerned about outcomes for indigenous people in this country, and they find themselves at a loss when we have ministers—not just Minister Vandal, but, from what I understand, Ms. Patty Hajdu as well—who have declined to stay for the entire hour.

I'm not a regular member of this committee, but in the public accounts committee—I recognize that my former clerk is here—we would force the government members to stay.

When it comes to the issues most vital to the outcomes of indigenous people, this is simply unacceptable, Chair. Should you wish to represent this institution, which you do as the chair of this committee, it is your obligation to ensure that a credible amount of time and effort is put into answering the questions that members, who are democratically elected to this place, have an opportunity to ask.

Without that, Chair, it affects both our ability to hold the government accountable and that of the government members to speak to the benefits of indigenous communities. It defeats the mandate of this committee and prevents it from doing either if the minister is not present.

The Chair: Mr. Desjarlais, if I might—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I find this to be incredibly challenging, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I know you're a guest here. I don't know if you saw the notice of meeting, but what was published for today was that the first hour, from 4:30 to 5:30, would be with Minister Hajdu. That's what we had booked. She had committed to an hour with us. As we know, there were bells that prevented us from starting at 4:30. That created a crunch right from the start. We actually started 10 minutes earlier than we should have through the unanimous consent of the committee. The votes caused this crunch. For the second hour, Minister Vandal had agreed to be here from 5:30 to 6:30—for the full hour—but because of votes.... He'd planned his day and I don't control his calendar. We were told we had him until 6:30. Then he had other commitments that he had made.

It's through the unfortunate circumstances of votes disrupting our meeting. Usually, on Wednesdays, there are votes after question period. Then we're able to start at 4:30 and go through our two hours. Today is one of those unusual days. We've done the best we can. The ministers committed to being here for the time they could, with

a hard stop. I believe I did my job by setting up the meeting with the resources we had for the time we had and in response to the motion, which was to have all three ministers here for the two hours.

We've now already agreed to have a third minister—Minister Anandasangaree—come for a third hour, as well as Minister Hajdu. Because she had to leave early, she has agreed to come back for the remainder of the time we were supposed to spend with her. She can't get back to us before May 31. We'll still hear from her then. We'll still have a chance to interact with her. However, if there's going to be a vote on the mains, minus the amounts that were passed through the interim supply period, that has to be done by May 31.

That's where we're at. We have resources until 6:45 with this panel. If we want to go into the next round, it would be 15 minutes—five for the Conservatives, five for the Liberals, two and a half for the Bloc, and two and a half for the NDP. We will run out of time at 6:45.

I also asked for some direction on two items. One is for May 29. Do we want to have a third hour with the minister, or displace one of the two panels we have already booked for the taxation study? Also, do we want to do the reporting back on the voting on mains at the end of that meeting, as opposed to waiting for Minister Hajdu's final appearance?

I have a speaking order here. Mr. Melillo is first, then Mr. Desjarlais.

It's over to you.

• (1835)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You asked us a few questions, so I'll try to address them all.

To start off, I don't want to belabour the point we heard from some other members, but I also agree that it's unacceptable that we weren't able to have either minister for the full hour. I understand the explanation you gave—I just want to make that very clear, as well. It's very much standard practice that the ministers do everything they can to honour the time, regardless of votes and how things may change. This is quite unusual and certainly quite concerning.

To that end, because we invited Minister Hajdu back, I think we should offer the same to Minister Vandal. If that can't be done before the date to report back, I don't think it's necessarily an issue. I do think it's important that we hear from them, even if we have already reported back.

For next week's meeting, we have a lot of important stuff to get through, so I would suggest that, if it's possible and if we have the resources for a three-hour meeting, it would be favourable for us in order to fit that all in.

Lastly—and I know other members have their hand up—I think we're probably going to have a few other things to discuss based on the questions you put before us, so I would suggest we let the witnesses go.

The Chair: Is there agreement from the committee to allow the officials to go? Then we'll look at the point of inviting Minister Vandal back. There would be 15 minutes on the clock for him.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We thank our witnesses for being here.

You're released for the day.

We'll go back to Minister Vandal's office to see if he's available to come back to finish out the time we had asked him to be here for.

Mr. Desjarlais, I have you next on my speaking list.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll have to beg your pardon. I think we both know that you as the chair of this committee have the power to second resources for the purpose of executing the mandate of Parliament and of this committee, which is to ensure that ministers, in this case, on the main estimates, are made present. Other committees, when they're suspended for a vote, will allocate the difference of time to the end of the day in order for the meeting to take place as parliamentarians have the right to exercise their voice on a question that the government needs to answer.

What I have a preference for is co-operation of a chair that would make those rights possible. I'm not saying that I find you contemptuous of your mandate. I find it disingenuous, however, to suggest that the minister's calendar is paramount to Parliament. I would beg you, Chair, to take this into consideration in the future. It's your job to make sure that members of Parliament, especially when it comes to indigenous issues, ask these questions and that you take this seriously.

What I've heard around this table today is almost nothing other than the Conservatives talking about why the north shouldn't get stoves to heat their homes and then the very good questions from Ms. Idlout.

Second to that point, we then end the meeting short for credible questions on the resourcing of indigenous issues. We have to get real here. This is not how members of Parliament who are elected should be treated. The minister can't just come out here and say, "Oh, on my calendar, I have a dinner at 6.30. I'm sorry, John, but I have to go". This committee is a committee made for the purpose of indigenous peoples and their policies. Until our chair can make certain that we're respected, the policies and accountability, important mechanisms of this place, aren't met.

Wouldn't you agree?

The Chair: I would offer that there is no chair that controls ministers' calendars. As I said, I was tasked through a motion.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: It's not about the calendar.

The Chair: No, we were asked—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Chair, it's not about the calendars.

The Chair: My mike is on now, so I'm going to speak in response to the concerns you've raised.

We extended invitations for the ministers. The ministers were very flexible today in adapting. The motion had been for three ministers in two hours. We now have three ministers for three hours. Votes have disrupted that. Minister Anandasangaree and Minister Hajdu have agreed to come back to give us the full hour that they had committed to. We will extend the offer to Minister Vandal to see if he's able to come back for the balance of the time. I agree that it is a very important function of our committee to look at where money is being spent through the budgetary allocations, and we've had disruptions today.

I can't compel the ministers to stay beyond the time. They have planned out their day. They know that we're here.

• (1840)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: But the committee could—

The Chair: We had officials, and they were willing to stay to continue the discussions, but there was agreement from the committee to release them, and that's what we've done.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I feel like it's now a matter of a motion that's required to compel you, Chair, to make certain that the commitments of time made by the ministers are met. I believe this is something that the opposition should unite on, Conservatives, Bloc and New Democrats. We should formulate a motion at the next meeting to ensure that indigenous people are given a fair shake here, because this is unacceptable.

That's my last comment. I'm saddened that this is how accountability for indigenous people is met in committee. It's not fair.

The Chair: Next to my speaking list I have Mr. Battiste and then Mr. Carr.

Okay, go ahead, Mr. Carr.

Mr. Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Chair, respectfully to my colleague for whom I have.... This has to go through the chair, as you know.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Are you going to say more?

Mr. Ben Carr: You have taken an opportunity, Mr. Desjarlais, to do a bit of grandstanding here about what you perceive—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Is talking about indigenous accountability grandstanding? Is that what you're saying?

Mr. Ben Carr: Can I finish?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Well, that's what you just said.

Mr. Ben Carr: May I finish?

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You may finish, but I'm questioning your objectives here.

Mr. Ben Carr: May I finish?

The Chair: Mr. Carr, you have the floor. We'll get you to make your statement.

Mr. Ben Carr: I believe it's been made fairly clear, Mr. Chair and colleagues, that despite the concern some members of this committee have raised, fairly enough, about the way in which today's meeting was undertaken, the important thing is how the adherence to the principles that my colleague across the way has raised, those of accountability and ministerial accountability specifically, will be undertaken. It just means we have to wait a couple more days or weeks in order for that to happen. If there is something pressing in the next week or so that, if not answered, my colleagues believe will jeopardize the outcome of a particular community, then I think it's fair for that to be raised and to be brought to the attention of the ministers immediately.

Given that the nature of today's visit was specifically in relation to the main estimates, I think it is reasonable that in light of the disruptions that occurred today, ministers Hajdu and Anandasangaree, upon the asking of the committee, as per Mr. Melillo's remarks a few moments ago, will return in order to meet the accountability measures that the committee expects of them. I take a deep breath here. I think it's a little bit far-fetched to suggest, when there has been a public commitment already on the part of the ministers to return, and a public commitment on the part of all members of the committee to reinvite Minister Vandal, that there is some type of evasion of parliamentary accountability here.

I also simply want to say to my colleague, perhaps he hasn't spent a lot of time around this table in the last couple of months, but we try very hard to be collegial at this committee, and we try to work with one another—

The Chair: Mr. Carr, I'm sorry but I'm going to interrupt and get you to wrap up. The bells have started. We need to wind up.

Mr. Ben Carr: Okay, sure.

There can be disagreement, Mr. Chair, of course, about the quality of answers, the satisfaction with answers, but I do think there's a commitment to try to be collegial. Mr. Zimmer may not feel there's collegiality between me and him or other members of the govern-

ment side, but certainly with other members, I do think that exists, and I just hope we can make an effort to try to have that tone of collegiality continue.

I respect the concerns of my colleague across the way, but I don't see any reason to believe there's an evasion of accountability. It just means, unfortunately, due to what happened today, we have to wait a couple of weeks before we see the ministers again.

The Chair: Mr. Battiste, we do need to go now that the bells have started.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Mr. Chair, I know we're not going to wrap up all the questions you had for us today, but I wanted to make sure your last few minutes as chair of this committee weren't spent in a bad way.

As a first nations person and as a colleague, I want to end this meeting by thanking you for your contributions as chair. It is a difficult job. It's difficult to chair. There are a lot of emotions. A lot of people are really trying to do their best to move forward on indigenous issues. We all know where we need to get to for reconciliation, but sometimes we disagree on the first steps.

I want to thank you for your time. Thank you for all that you've done and for your role in advancing reconciliation over the past few months not only as a member of this committee, but also as the chair.

Farewell. Have a great trip, and we'll see you in the future.

● (1845)

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, I'm sure most people have caught on by now, but this is my last meeting as the chair, so thank you. It's been a pleasure working with everybody. I'm resigning my position as member of Parliament on Monday and returning to British Columbia, so the first order of business on Monday will be the election of a new chair. I wish you well with it. In the meantime, keep up the good work that this committee has done.

Thank you all for your support, even during some challenging meetings.

With that, colleagues, we're adjourned.

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