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Chair: Robert Morrissey



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• (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. The clerk has advised me that we have quorum.

We will begin meeting number 11 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Pursuant to the motion adopted on June 18, 2025, the committee is meeting on government mandate and key priorities for the first hour, and youth employment in Canada for the second hour.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. All members are attending in person today. No one is appearing on Zoom, which means no one had to be sound tested for interpretation.

Before we begin, I want to review a few items. You have the option to participate in today's meeting in the official language of your choice. Make sure you have your earpiece on and you have chosen the official language in which you choose to participate. If there is an issue with interpretation, please raise your hand and get my attention. We'll suspend while it is being corrected. I would also like to advise you to please ensure that your devices are on silent mode and to avoid tapping the mic boom, as it can cause health issues for our interpreters. Please address all questions through the chair. Wait until I identify you by name before you speak.

In today's meeting, for the first hour we have the Secretary of State for Seniors, the Honourable Stephanie McLean, appearing in person to speak to her mandate. As well, we have Paul Thompson, deputy minister, Department of Employment and Social Development, and Kristen Underwood, director general, seniors and pensions policy secretariat.

I will now give the floor to the secretary to give her opening statement. Then we'll move to the normal questioning round.

Madam Secretary, you have the floor for five minutes or less.

Hon. Stephanie McLean (Secretary of State (Seniors)): Thank you so much, Chair.

I would like to start by acknowledging that we are gathered today on the unceded and unsundered territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin nation.

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

Thank you to the members of this committee for the invitation to speak about my mandate and priorities as Secretary of State for Seniors.

[*English*]

The Government of Canada is working to ensure that older Canadians can age with dignity. I am honoured, as the Secretary of State for Seniors, to talk about the actions we're taking to support older Canadians in this current economic climate.

Since taking on this role, I've had the distinct privilege of meeting many seniors across the country. I am very impressed with the contributions they are making in our communities every day.

My top priority in the role of Secretary of State for Seniors is, first and foremost, to help provide the people who built this country with the retirement they worked so hard for. I will absolutely continue to uphold the Government of Canada's commitment to provide seniors with the services they need where they live. Services like this give older adults the opportunity to thrive in their communities. My objective in this role is to make a positive contribution for older Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Supporting seniors is not just about honouring those who built this country through their work and lifelong commitment; it is also about investing in everyone's future.

[*English*]

Older Canadians are an important part of our social fabric and our economy. People such as the veterans in my riding, who fought and risked their lives for Canada, make our country stronger, more resilient and more responsive to the challenges of the modern world.

With increased life expectancy and with an aging population in Canada, we have an action plan that protects our pension system and that ensures all older Canadians receive the benefits they're entitled to.

We're also modernizing our benefits delivery system—this is a system that was built more than 60 years ago—by bringing benefits like the old age security program and the Canada pension plan into one streamlined and user-friendly system. We're making sure that it's functional, fast and responsive to the needs of Canadians. This is a massive undertaking, so we're doing it in phases and with the utmost care.

In June 2023, we successfully transferred 600,000 OAS clients onto the new platform. In March 2025, we added 7.4 million more. Then, at the end of April, these 7.4 million seniors received their OAS payments through this new platform, accurately and on time. This was a giant leap forward—a massive milestone—for the way we serve Canadians. It means that millions of OAS clients now have access to self-serve options like updating their personal online information and applying for benefits online.

I want to take a moment to thank all of those in the department who worked so very hard to make this milestone a reality. Without their dedication, it absolutely wouldn't have been possible.

Canada's retirement income system is a stable base, and it's on this base that Canadians can build a secure future. My job as Secretary of State for Seniors is to ensure that the pension system in Canada responds to the reality that older Canadians are living in.

In July 2022, the previous government increased the OAS by 10% for seniors aged 75 and older, and this provided more than \$800 extra for full pensioners over the first year.

In 2023 and 2024, the OAS program paid over \$76 billion in benefits to 7.4 million Canadians. In the same year, 2.5 million low-income seniors received the guaranteed income supplement, which put up to \$1,100 in the pockets of the most vulnerable seniors.

For some seniors, government-funded OAS and GIS are their only livelihood; therefore, it's essential that they get access to these benefits without delay. So far this year, we've improved the speed of pay for old age security as well, including the Canada pension plan disability benefit and for the GIS. Over 96% of our clients were automatically reassessed this year. I would like to highlight to the members of the committee that this is the highest renewal rate we've ever seen. It's largely thanks to the additional automation features that are made possible by the new benefits delivery system.

To further support older Canadians, the government also indexes the OAS benefits quarterly. This means those benefits can only go up; they never go down. We're also indexing CPP, which is one of the top-ranking public pension plans in the world. This is a pension plan, but it's also a social insurance program. It's the largest survivor and disability insurance program in Canada. This gives protection to disabled contributors and their families, as well as to the families of deceased contributors.

At the end of the day, we know these benefits work, as the poverty rate among senior is half of the national average.

In closing, I remain focused on making sure older Canadians receive every dollar they're entitled to.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

That's the promise we made to you, and I'm working every day to make sure we deliver on that promise.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Secretary of State.

[*English*]

We'll begin the first round of questioning with Ms. Roberts for six minutes, please.

Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Secretary, I would like to thank you for coming today. I have a few questions.

One thing that really concerns me is that I recently had to assist seniors who had been living in their car over the winter. The reason is that they just couldn't afford the cost of living and, therefore, couldn't afford the rent or their food.

For seniors on fixed incomes, every cost increase, from groceries and rent to medical supplies, erodes their purchasing power. As we know, 58,255 widowed women are over 65 and living in poverty. Single seniors are 39% of Canadians over 65, yet single seniors do not benefit from income splitting. We know that's an issue. In 2021, the census showed that 305,000 seniors were living below poverty, with over 173,000 women affected. Seventy-one per cent of single seniors were living alone, earning under \$50,000.

How are we supposed to respond to seniors listening today who are choosing whether to pay their rent, to buy medicine or to buy food when they're barely making their rent payments?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Thank you for the question.

While seniors are at half the rate of the national average for working Canadians below the poverty line, we know there is still more work to do, such as with the single seniors you mentioned. That's why we're focused on building an economy that brings down costs for Canadians, and this very much includes seniors and helping them get ahead.

You also mentioned food prices and the overall cost of living. We know this is putting pressure on Canadians, particularly those with fixed incomes. To support seniors, we've made significant investments, including increasing the maximum GIS for single seniors, which you were talking about, and increasing the OAS pension for seniors 75 and older. OAS benefits, as I mentioned, are increased quarterly to keep up with the rising cost of living. These investments are really crucial in reducing the poverty rate, and we know they're working because the poverty rate for seniors is half the national average.

We know there is more to do, and that's why we're focused on making historic investments in key initiatives that affect affordability. We know housing is a key affordability issue. This really feeds into the Canada housing plan. The national housing strategy also has seniors as a core consideration with respect to the development of that strategy—

Anna Roberts: I apologize for interrupting, Minister.

What's upsetting is the story of one my constituents who lost her husband. She is 74 years old. She worked for only a few years. She raised her four children and is living on a minimal income. She has a small townhouse of 1,200 square feet. As we all know, when you move a senior out of the environment they are accustomed to, they deteriorate. She decided she was going to rent one of the rooms to a student to help offset costs. She applied for a job to allow her to stay in her home. She also applied to get a reduction on her property tax. We all know that's a blanket situation, because when she sells the house, that money will have to be paid back at some point, but in the interim, it helps her to stay in the home she wants to retire in. Unfortunately, she lost her job, and because she had earned that little extra, her OAS was clawed back. The student then lost his job, and she felt bad about throwing him out because he couldn't pay his rent.

How do I explain to this woman that the government is doing everything it can to assist her when she's being penalized for doing something that will help her stay in her home?

• (1115)

Hon. Stephanie McLean: A lot of seniors are still able to work and take on additional jobs, so it sounds like this particular senior is really sophisticated and doing what she can. She's leveraging her assets. I hear about municipal property taxes in my constituency as well. Folks bought their home for \$60,000 and paid it off back in the nineties. Now it's worth \$1 million and they're paying property taxes on that.

We know these costs contribute, and that's why this requires a multi-level government approach.

Anna Roberts: Let me give you another really profound statistic. The total potential impact on the GDP of closing the gap in women's health is \$37 billion per year.

I have a senior who is working to try to offset some of the costs. Her money is clawed back and she cannot afford her medication, which is going to cause health issues and put a bill on our health system. It's going to burden our health system because she now has to go to the hospital or the doctor. She has to choose whether she buys her medicine, pays her rent, pays her utility bills or eats.

I know she's listening today and I know she's going to want an answer from us about how we're going to justify her GIS being clawed back because she worked and made \$3,000. She has a student who lost his—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Roberts.

Madam Secretary, you can respond to that in a follow-up question, if you choose.

Madam Koutrakis, you have six minutes.

Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Secretary McLean. It's really great to have you here to talk to us about the important work that you and your team do for seniors.

You spoke in your opening statement about how your mandate is to help provide retirement for seniors who worked their whole lives to have a comfortable retirement. Can you expand a little bit on the priorities and how these align with the broader goals of the ESDC?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: That's an important question, particularly given that the secretary of state position is newer to government. It's been a while—since Harper—since these positions have existed. It's a great question.

My priority is to ensure that seniors in Canada can age in dignity within their communities, that they can stay in their communities and that they receive the benefits they've worked really hard for and to which they are entitled.

To ensure that, I am responsible for leading the coordination of efforts across the federal government that support seniors. We know that across departments there are things happening that affect seniors, for example, the actions that the Department of Finance has recently taken with respect to fraud and scams, which we know disproportionately affect seniors. I work closely with my colleagues to provide seniors' perspectives and to ensure they're taken into account.

I also oversee programs and initiatives that are specific to seniors that promote aging with dignity, combat isolation and deal with financial security. All of these measures are really central to the government's approach in ensuring we're bringing down the cost of living for Canadians and for seniors to help them get ahead.

I also play a leadership role on the program design with respect to the Canada pension plan, old age security, GIS and the Canada pension plan disability benefit. These pieces also exist not just within the seniors portfolio and ESDC but within the Department of Finance, because it's responsible for many of the investments and financial regulation pieces.

My role also includes helping seniors age with dignity and, as I mentioned, combatting social isolation. One of the key programs that we oversee and take care of out of my office is the New Horizons for Seniors program, which I know most MPs are really familiar with as this really impacts the seniors directly on the ground in their communities.

Underscoring the role that the provinces and territories play, I co-chair the federal-provincial-territorial ministerial table that's responsible for the seniors forum.

That's it in a nutshell.

• (1120)

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you for that.

You also spoke about the modernization of the system for the application process, which is a self-serve portal for OAS. We've also heard from some seniors who have experienced delays in accessing benefits or services. I know the system is being modernized.

What is being done to improve service delivery and reduce wait times for seniors applying for OAS and GIS, despite the modernization of the system?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: We've heard this for a long time. That really fed into this critical investment in updating and modernizing the system. While we're at that 96% re-enrolment rate, there's still more to do, because we want to be at 100% to ensure timeliness for seniors. We recognize that timely service is critical, particularly for those for whom OAS and GIS are their only sources of income.

In 2024-25, for example, 87.5% of OAS benefits were paid within the first month of entitlement, so this includes new sign-ups for OAS. In March 2025, very recently just this spring, the OAS program successfully migrated that 60-year-old platform to a new system called Cúram. The platform provides Canadians with that single point of access. It's not only for OAS, CPP benefits and GIS but also for EI, which is of interest as well to this committee.

We continue to modernize service delivery and expand automation. We're looking at new and emerging technologies, which includes things like artificial intelligence, which we know has a real-world use case for speeding up certain kinds of systems and processes. We're optimistic this will help enhance service to Canadians.

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you.

I cede my time.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Koutrakis.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have six minutes.

Marilène Gill (Côte-Nord—Kawawachikamach—Nitassinan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to give my time to my colleague Ms. Larouche.

Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank Mrs. Gill, who has the best interests of seniors at heart, for allowing me to ask questions today of the Secretary of State, given my role as the Bloc Québécois spokesperson on seniors' issues.

In preparing for this committee meeting, I noticed that the briefing notes provided by the Library of Parliament fail to mention the fact that the government has increased the old age security pension by 10% only for seniors aged 75 and over, completely ignoring seniors aged 65 to 74. However, there is mention of the cost associated with this increase. All we hear about is the expense, when in fact the cost of caring for these people is minimal. I don't see it as an expense, but rather as an investment. There are seniors who live be-

low the poverty line and cannot age with dignity. First, they are entitled to this financial support. Second, when we allow people to become impoverished, it means greater costs for society.

I would also like to commend my Conservative colleague Anna Roberts, with whom I've had discussions to get her support for Bill C-319—which I introduced in the last Parliament and which sought to increase old age security pensions by 10% for seniors aged 65 to 74. Mrs. Roberts gave the example of her 74-year-old mother, who was already in a precarious situation and who, unfortunately, was not eligible for the increase in the old age security pension like seniors aged 75 and over.

Madam Secretary of State, wouldn't you agree that this 10% increase—which creates a gap between the pensions of people aged 65 to 74 and those aged 75 and over—has an impact on seniors' households?

• (1125)

[*English*]

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Thank you for the question.

You're referring to the fact that in July 2022, the OAS was permanently increased by 10%, and then your bill was put forward to address that. That 10% increase was for those 75 and older. I understand your bill was to address the 65-to-74 age group.

This increase to 75 years and older was done to address the fact that we are aware that those who are 75 and older have less ability, generally, to continue to participate in the workforce. For some folks who retired earlier, their financial planning doesn't take them as long...and this is because folks are living longer than they expected to in many cases. Their retirement investments just aren't taking them far enough. They can see, going forward, that they're not going to have as many funds to rely on. This is why this age group was specifically targeted.

Those who are 75 and older tend to have higher health-related needs. Depending on the province they live in and the resources available, this can mean higher costs for them as well. This really was a targeted measure that was put in place to make life more affordable for those who experience more vulnerability.

We know the need is great, particularly for those who are relying on OAS and GIS specifically. To target those who are 75-plus was intentional to address the heightened need.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Madam Secretary of State, poverty and illness do not wait for you to turn 75. I'm not the only one saying so.

In October, the organization SOS Dépannage, based in Granby, in my region, sent me a written report on hunger for 2024, pointing out that on page 34 of the document, I could find data on its clients who request food assistance and whose main sources of income are old age security and retirement pensions.

Yesterday, Chantal Vézina, in an interview on the program *Tout un matin*, presented Moisson Montréal's report on hunger, along with its recommendations for helping seniors in precarious situations.

Madam Secretary of State, it is not acceptable to respond that you will help food banks. It is shameful that in 2025, seniors are reduced to standing in line for food assistance.

Ms. Vézina said that one of the first solutions was to increase pensions. She was referring specifically to people aged 65 to 74, since it is even more difficult for them because they have received nothing.

Madam Secretary of State, what do you have to say to food aid organizations that are asking not only for help in providing more services, but above all for an increase in pensions for seniors?

[English]

Hon. Stephanie McLean: No one should have to make a decision between feeding themselves or heating their home. I think the question is how the issue is addressed.

When we look at old age security and the GIS, those programs combined, from their inception going back to World War II, were created and intended to be part of a retirement plan—not the whole retirement plan—for Canadians.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[English]

Ms. Falk, go ahead for five minutes.

• (1130)

Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster—Meadow Lake, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, Secretary, for being here.

Seniors are feeling the full weight of the cost of living crisis, and this has been created under your Liberal government. Canadian food inflation has nearly doubled the Bank of Canada's target, and food prices have been rising 48% faster here in Canada than in the United States.

After a decade of Liberal inflationary deficits, it's not just food; it's the cost of housing, heating and basic necessities that have gone up. The situation is particularly dire for those living on fixed incomes, who don't have the flexibility to absorb higher costs.

As the Secretary of State for Seniors, are you actively advocating within cabinet for an end to the government's inflationary deficits, which are driving up costs and making life harder on seniors who are on fixed incomes?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Yes, seniors are on fixed incomes. I think it's important to remember that Canada has one of the world's best pension regimes.

This pension—

Rosemarie Falk: That's right, but my question was about whether you are advocating for them within cabinet. That was my question.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I'm sorry. You had several questions embedded in one question.

Rosemarie Falk: No, I had one question. I had some statements and then I had one question.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Okay. Maybe you can reframe it.

Rosemarie Falk: Are you advocating for seniors within cabinet?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I'm absolutely advocating for seniors within cabinet. That's my primary mandate. I spoke to that with respect to my answer to one of the members of the Liberal caucus.

Rosemarie Falk: With respect to that, your government created a two-tier retirement age by giving the 10% OAS boost to only those seniors who were over 75. That actually left seniors aged 65 to 74 owed; they are falling behind because of that increase.

It is also your Liberal government that has created uncertainty and financial hardship for seniors. The Bloom Finance report found that 76% of seniors say rising costs are eroding their retirement savings. Stats Canada reports that nearly half of working seniors aged 65 to 74 say they're still working out of financial necessity. They're working because they have to work, because everything is too expensive.

This is the reality facing seniors under your government. How do you justify a high-tax and high-spend agenda that fuels inflation while seniors are forced to choose between heating, eating and the essential medications that they need?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I'm sorry—what was your question?

Rosemarie Falk: How do you justify a high-tax and high-spend agenda that is fuelling inflation while seniors are forced to choose between eating, heating and the medication that is a necessity for them?

It was your government that created the two tiers of seniors.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: You're asking about the difference compared to those aged 75 and up. Is that correct?

Rosemarie Falk: Seniors cannot get by. They have saved their whole—

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I'm just trying to understand your question.

Rosemarie Falk: I'm sorry you don't understand it. I don't know how much more plain.... I'm a big advocate for plain language, and this is in pretty plain language.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Your initial question was about taxation and our budget plan. Then you asked about—

Rosemarie Falk: My first question was about whether you advocate for seniors in cabinet. That was my first question.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I answered that question. I'm trying to get clarity—

Annie Koutrakis: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm just wondering if we can allow the secretary of state to complete her sentence before we interject. I understand and I know that time is limited.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Koutrakis.

I'm lenient. It's the member's time to question, so I'll resume with the member, but please respect one another.

Thank you.

Rosemarie Falk: Thank you, Chair. I do take issue with that. I am a respectful member of this committee.

I'm sorry that my questions seem to be difficult.

My question is on the cost of living. The cost of living is increasing. These seniors are on fixed incomes, and your government has created more pressure by creating two tiers of seniors—some who get a boost and others who don't. It's basically saying, "You're having a harder time than you're having, so because you fall in this category, you get more money." In reality, because of the cost of living—especially because they're on fixed incomes and they don't have more income coming in—they have to go back to work in order to not live on the streets and in order to pay for medication and put food on the table.

We heard from my colleague Ms. Roberts how there are seniors taking in students, for example, so that they can have a place to live.

Why do you and your government support a high-tax and high-spend agenda?

• (1135)

Hon. Stephanie McLean: It is really important that we invest in seniors. Our government is investing in old age security, and we're investing in those who are 75 and older, as I mentioned, who have higher needs.

Rosemarie Falk: The two-tier system that your government created—

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Those higher needs need to be addressed. By ensuring that there are additional funds for those seniors, we're helping to address poverty. This means that—

Rosemarie Falk: But they're still living in poverty, and they're being forced back to work.

Thanks, Secretary.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Secretary and Ms. Falk.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joseph, you may go ahead for five minutes.

Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Secretary of State, you highlighted the importance of recognizing the role seniors play in our society. I heard you say a number of times that seniors built the Canada we are so proud to call home.

First, can you tell us a bit more about the recent efforts to encourage seniors to play an active role in their communities?

Second, what are your greatest achievements to date in your role as secretary of state?

Third, we often hear certain opposition parties downplaying the importance of federal investments in supports for seniors. Can you remind us how these measures have improved seniors' lives in a concrete way and why it's important to remain proactive on this issue?

Thank you, Madam Secretary of State.

[*English*]

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Thank you for that question. It gives me the opportunity as well to finish some of my thoughts from the prior question.

The leader of the Conservative Party has made it very clear that he wants us to cut more than \$56 billion from the budget between 2025 and 2029. It's very interesting to me to hear from the Conservative members that they want increased spending. It's hard for me to square those two things and, at the same time, explain to them how these investments are so crucial to seniors and cannot withstand a \$56-billion cut to the kinds of services that seniors rely on.

The old age security program is a budget item. It's a line item. It's real dollars that Canadians rely on. It's not a cheap line item. This is because it puts real dollars into the pockets of Canadians. Old age security alone at its full rate is just over \$800. The GIS at its full rate is around \$1,100. Those amounts ensure that we keep seniors from falling into poverty at the same rates that we see in the national average. We know that it's working, because we see that the senior population is experiencing poverty at half the rate of the national average.

That doesn't mean it's okay that anybody is living in poverty. That doesn't mean that what is happening in the global economic context, raising the cost of groceries, raising the cost of housing materials, is okay. It means we need to invest in Canadians, and those investments need to be smart and strategic. Canadians are relying on all of us elected in the House of Commons to support initiatives and a budget that invests in them. That very much includes seniors and the programs and services they rely on.

I focused on old age security, but we have the New Horizons for Seniors program. This is a program that with a \$56-billion cut we would absolutely see lost. This is a crucial program that fights social isolation. Over the summer I had the opportunity to go and see the real world impacts of those dollars. What it means is that social services organizations are able to reach out to seniors who are living alone, who are isolated, and ensure that they have access to the food programs that many of these senior centres are running. Those food programs help to combat food insecurity.

Without investments from the Canadian government, with a \$56-billion cut tomorrow, simply put, those services cannot exist.

• (1140)

[Translation]

Natilien Joseph: I have another question for you.

Do you really think—

The Chair: Unfortunately, you have only five seconds left.

Therefore, I'm going to go ahead and give the floor to Ms. Larouche for her two and a half minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are talking about standing up for seniors. Ms. McLean, we met in June in connection with your position as the Secretary of State for Seniors. I told you about my concerns that the government was completely overlooking people between the ages of 65 and 74. When it comes to the responsibility for seniors' issues, some are wondering why the government created a secretary of state position rather than a ministerial position. What message was the government trying to send in appointing someone who has less power than a real minister? That's my first question.

Second, the Liberals are responsible for an unacceptable inequity, by creating two classes of seniors: young seniors and old seniors. Keep in mind that, starting at age 65, people collecting their pensions are living on fixed incomes. What's more, just like those 75 and older, people between the ages of 65 and 74 are grappling with rent increases, food inflation and higher drug prices, but they weren't entitled to an increase in their old age security pension or guaranteed income supplement. We introduced Bill C-319, legislation that sought to raise the guaranteed income supplement exemption from \$5,000 to \$6,500 before the clawback kicked in. If you're saying that those under 75 can work, as you seem to be, then they shouldn't be penalized for doing so.

Madam Secretary of State, what is your time frame for raising the exemption for income that a senior may receive without having their guaranteed income supplement reduced? That would help level the playing field for seniors who choose to work.

When are you going to eliminate the inequity between these two classes of seniors?

[English]

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I think there are multiple pieces that address your question.

First of all, I'd like to talk about the financial realities that our country finds itself in, given the global economic context. We know that the cost of living is increasing due to tariffs. We know that this

means it's going to be difficult for the government coffers to be able to do business as usual, because we're going to have to pivot to other trading markets. Also, the costing for the funding at the same 10% increase would be \$19.76 billion over the first six years.

The government has to make tough decisions—

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[English]

Ms. Roberts, you have five minutes.

Anna Roberts: Thank you, Chair.

Here's my concern. We have a single senior who earns \$50,000. We have a couple who earn \$50,000. That single senior pays, between federal and Ontario taxes, almost \$6,000 in taxes. It's \$5,797 to be exact. The couple pays \$600. Therefore, we have a single senior who is penalized because she's single and therefore paying more in taxes.

What really upsets me about this is that seniors are going to the food bank to help so that they can bring food home and not feel guilty. Do we really want a society where our seniors, who have built this country and raised us, have to use the food bank?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: We absolutely don't want a society where anyone feels and experiences a situation where they need to access the food bank in order to make ends meet. That's why it's important to protect the services and investments we're making into seniors.

• (1145)

Anna Roberts: Excuse me, Secretary. Taxes are eroding the opportunity for seniors to live within their means. We're asking them to budget, but how can they budget when we continue to increase taxes?

I have a simple example here where they're paying out that much in taxes and having to go to a food bank to get food. How do I justify that? How do we change that? How do we change that system for someone who is living below the poverty line who has to go to the food bank because she feels guilty? Also, if she doesn't do that, she doesn't have rent, and if she doesn't have enough money to pay her rent at the end of the month, she'll be kicked out. She has to choose what to do.

We're putting seniors in an awkward position, and we're doing nothing about it. Taxes are continuing to increase, and they're impacting our seniors.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Obviously, the federal government can't do anything about the provincial taxation in Ontario. That's within the purview of that province.

With respect to what we have control over and what we can do, we are increasing the maximum GIS for single seniors, for example—

Anna Roberts: But she doesn't get it because she's chosen to get a job. She doesn't qualify for it because you claw her back.

When we talk about taxes, the federal taxes on a single senior earning \$50,000 is almost \$3,700. It doesn't make sense to me that we're asking her to live within her budget. You're giving her GIS. That's great, but that's still not enough when she's paying \$2,800 a month in rent. It doesn't justify it. I'm sorry.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: For the seniors who are working, there's an earnings exemption. That provides a full exemption up to \$5,000 of annual employment or self-employment earnings as well as the 50% exemption on the next \$10,000 of earnings. This is a total exemption of \$10,000 on the first and \$15,000 of earnings, which helps—

Anna Roberts: Can I ask another question? I have limited time. I do apologize for interrupting you.

Can I ask you how many full-time FTEs are in the department?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I mean, you can ask all the questions you want. If you want answers to some, you'll just have to give me the opportunity to answer them.

In terms of the FTEs, for which year is that—the current year?

Anna Roberts: This is your department. I would assume that you would know how many FTEs you have.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: You're asking how many FTEs we had for 2022-23. In that year, we had a total of 36,959, but that's not how many FTEs we have today.

Anna Roberts: What is it today, then?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: For 2024-25, it's forecasted to be 35,941—we haven't closed the year out—but for 2023-24 it was 36,615.

Anna Roberts: We have over 173,000 seniors—women—living below the poverty line.

How do you justify the FTEs to service our seniors who aren't even making ends meet?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: This is for the totality of ESDC. This includes labour. It includes employment insurance. It includes the full scope of ESDC, which is one of the largest departments, if not the largest, with the most FTEs in government.

Anna Roberts: I would say—

The Chair: Thank you. That was over five minutes.

We will now go to Ms. Fancy for five minutes.

Jessica Fancy (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome and thank the secretary, Mr. Thompson and Ms. Underwood for coming here today.

It's nice to talk about those who have helped build the country. My colleagues across the floor have highlighted some very big issues in terms of affordability—which they should—but without the

global context of where we are today. I'd like to point out that the Conservative government voted down a number of programs that help bolster the quality of life we all want to see our seniors live. They include reinstating the OAS and the GIS programs, increasing both OAS and GIS programs, and increasing the working allowance, which would help a lot of women. They talked a lot about women living single lives, and that's something that helps bolster them. They voted down dental care and they also voted down pharmacare.

As one of the final speakers today, I would love for you to help us talk about the future and what you see that we can do to look towards the future within this new government. Where do you see the greatest opportunities for progress?

● (1150)

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Thank you very much for your question.

You raise several really good points and have given me the opportunity to speak to something important that your Conservative colleagues didn't give me the opportunity to address. It's a quick discussion about old age security and where the thresholds are for what they're referring to as clawbacks.

It's important to note that the minimum income threshold in 2024 for a senior before they start receiving any kind of clawback was \$90,997. A senior won't start to experience a “clawback” of old age security until they are at the minimum income threshold.

There is the earnings exemption as well, which you mentioned. This allows seniors who are able to continue working.... We know that many are working and that many choose to do so, and this really speaks to the health outcomes of this country and how much we've invested, both provincially and federally, to ensure longevity and a quality of life for seniors in the country.

Looking forward at where things are going, the importance of the times we're living in and the global context cannot be understated. To that end, one of the areas I've been focusing on.... In the short term, we're going to be doing a lot of work on this, but we know it's a whack-a-mole thing, so it will require ongoing government commitment, attention and intention.

We've been focusing on financial security by combatting scams, frauds and financial crime. We know that seniors are disproportionately targeted. That's why I was proud to stand up with Minister Champagne and Secretary Long. One of the first conversations I had with Secretary of State Long was about the need to combat these scams. We know that tens of millions of dollars leave the country every year and go to crime, and that is because seniors have been targeted. These scams are becoming more sophisticated, using AI and the like, so setting up a dedicated, targeted financial agency staffed by specialists and subject matter experts to focus on scams and crime is going to be really important—and not only from a financial perspective.

We've seen stories in the news. Just today, we saw that a senior couple lost their life savings. This is an anti-poverty initiative, ensuring that seniors are protected and that they're not going to be scammed out of their life savings. Our pension system is built as a three-pillar model, with old age security, the CPP and private retirement savings. To see individuals lose the entirety of their private retirement savings means not only that those seniors are at risk of poverty, but that they are going to be more reliant on government services.

This needs to be a focus of this government in our future work, and it will be one of mine.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fancy.

For this next set of turns, three committee members will be taking the floor.

[English]

We're beginning with Madam Falk for two minutes, and then we'll have the government for two minutes and the Bloc for one minute.

Madam Falk, you have the floor for two minutes.

• (1155)

Rosemarie Falk: Thank you very much, Chair.

Secretary, I've been hearing you say a lot about the dignity of seniors and ensuring that seniors have dignity. I think dignity is making sure that seniors can live within their means and make choices for themselves. If you talk to seniors, many of them want to age in their own home. They want to stay in their own communities.

I note, in your opening remarks, you said it's important for seniors to access the services they need where they are. Having said that, why is your government supporting the shutting down of rural post offices?

Hon. Stephanie McLean: In terms of what is happening with Canada Post and the plans with respect to the future of Canada Post, I really can't speak for my colleague.

What I can say—

Rosemarie Falk: This contradicts keeping seniors in their communities and in their homes. When you go into rural areas, a lot of times the post office is where a lot of seniors will get their socialization for the day. They'll go out and get their mail. It's a thing

they do. I guess I'm seeing a contradiction in what you're saying in your opening remarks on seniors accessing services where they are, and I'm using the example of rural post offices.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: If I had been able to finish my answer, what I do know is that with respect to the rural post offices, there is a priority to ensure that rural postal services remain intact. I'm not aware of any plans that are in place with respect to closing down rural post offices—

Rosemarie Falk: Your government is in agreement with respect to closing down rural post offices—

Hon. Stephanie McLean: I'm sorry. The interpreters can't hear both of us when you're talking over me.

Rosemarie Falk: There's a contradiction, and you're wasting time.

You're wasting my time—

Hon. Stephanie McLean: The interpreters can't—

The Chair: Order.

Thank you, Ms. Falk and Madam Secretary of State.

I would again remind members that it's your time, but please respect both the person giving the testimony as well as the question.

Madam McKelvie for two minutes.

Jennifer McKelvie (Ajax, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all of you for allowing me to fill in today. It was wonderful to hear your testimony about some of the work you're doing to help our amazing seniors in this country.

I have two questions. I'll ask the first, and then, if you have time, you can move to the second.

My first is on how you engage with seniors directly. How are they engaged in this process and how are you hearing what they're saying and using that to inform the work you do?

The second you touched on briefly, but I would love it if you had more time to talk about the New Horizons program and how it's addressing loneliness.

Hon. Stephanie McLean: In terms of engaging with seniors, we have multiple levers that we take advantage of. Not only do I personally engage with seniors, but there's also the national seniors council. This is a body that provides advice to the minister, to the department. They are an extra sort of outreach arm that we can rely on, both with respect to research and to engagement of seniors to ensure we are hearing their perspective. We also have partnerships and arrangements with different institutes and universities that provide us additional research and information to make sure we have the best data possible.

One of the other things that I think is really key and that we don't talk about enough is the return to the long-form census since the last Conservative government. By returning to the long-form census, we're able to get better disaggregated data, including on seniors, so that we know where they're at in terms of their well-being and are able to make good, informed decisions with respect to that.

One of the other ways we engage with seniors is that we have a robust network of contacts within the department. We send out regular newsletters and solicit information from seniors' organizations and seniors' advocates. Not every province has a seniors' advocate.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Secretary of State.

Thank you, Madam McKelvie.

Madame Larouche, you have one minute.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Secretary of State, I want to follow up on something Mrs. Falk asked about Canada Post. You started answering, but I'd like to take the discussion further.

The Bloc Québécois maintains that the reforms to Canada Post must include assurances for seniors and regions, because they can't be left out in the cold.

In practical terms, how can your department ensure that the proposed changes to Canada Post will not negatively affect the services available to seniors, especially in rural and remote areas? Beyond being concerned, do you have any concrete ideas?

[*English*]

Hon. Stephanie McLean: Yes, there are two things.

First of all, I think it's premature to get ahead of our skis. What has happened here, to my understanding, is that the minister, by removing restrictions, has allowed Canada Post to put forward a plan. He has given Canada Post 45 days to provide that plan. In terms of what that plan is going to look like, it remains to be seen, and I'm sure the minister will have more to say once that is put forward.

With respect to combatting—

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Secretary, Mr. Thompson and Ms. Underwood.

That concludes the first hour.

Thank you to all for attending this morning.

To the committee, we will suspend for about five minutes while we move to the next round.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Committee members, I would ask you to take your seats, so we can resume with the second hour, which covers youth employment in Canada.

Joining us in the room we have three witnesses. Nobody is appearing virtually, so I would ask the witnesses to please familiarize themselves with the headset, the earpiece, and choose the official language in which you want to participate in this meeting. If there is an interruption in interpretation services with either members or witnesses, please raise your hand and get my attention. We will suspend to have that corrected.

For those attending in the room, please put your devices on silent mode. Please refrain from tapping the boom of the mic, because it will cause issues for our interpreters. I remind everyone to please direct your questions through the chair.

We have three witnesses. From the Forest Products Association of Canada, we have Derek Nighbor, president and chief executive officer. From the Students Commission of Canada, we have Sharif Mahdy, chief executive officer. From the YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth, we have two representatives, Rebekah Skeete, director, employment services, and Julie-Ann Vincent, chief operating officer—one of you will be providing the statement.

Each witness has five minutes or less for an opening statement.

We'll begin with Mr. Nighbor for five minutes, please.

• (1210)

Derek Nighbor (President and Chief Executive Officer, Forest Products Association of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of this committee, for the invitation today and for making this study on youth unemployment a priority.

As the leader of the Forest Products Association of Canada, as the proud son and grandson of unionized pulp and paper workers in the upper Ottawa Valley and as someone who worked in the forestry sector as a young person to help pay for school, I will say that this is a topic that's close to my heart both personally and professionally.

Forestry is jobs: 200,000 full-time, family-supporting jobs in over 300 communities across the country and another 200,000 indirect jobs from coast to coast.

Let me begin by thanking all parties around the table for their engagement with and support of our sector and its employees during this very difficult time.

Last week, we were grateful to have representatives from the Liberals, Conservatives, Bloc Québécois and NDP all join us for our national forestry conference and all commit to standing with our industry, our people and our forestry communities as we face serious headwinds given the current trade dispute with the United States, which now has our softwood lumber companies facing combined duties and tariffs of over 45% on exports to the United States.

As the government works to secure a deal that works for Canada, we, as an industry, are doing our best to keep employees working and to keep them as connected as possible to our mills and woodlands operations. We are working with the federal and provincial governments and our labour partners to support employees who might find themselves out of work, either temporarily or for a longer period of time. The priority now is to protect the existing jobs as best we can.

Despite these challenges, which the committee is looking at through this study, for the foreseeable future we still have a lot of jobs that need to be filled: forest technologists, forest technicians, logging truck drivers and heavy equipment operators. What some young people might not know about are the emerging opportunities in drone technology, AI, wildfire risk mitigation, biomass electric power generation, and prefab, modular and mass timber manufacturing. We continue to be focused on building a future-ready industry and supporting the talent pipeline for the jobs of tomorrow in Canadian forestry.

Half of our employees will retire within 20 years, and right now only 10% of our workforce is under the age of 25, despite nearly five million young Canadians being ready to work. We see real opportunity in the young Canadian talent pool and a huge opportunity in the indigenous youth talent pool. We are working with a range of partners to address skills gaps, rural infrastructure barriers and a generally limited awareness of some of the interesting careers and good-paying jobs that can be found in forestry. Last fall, FPAC released “Unlocking a Future-Ready Workforce for Canada’s Forest Industries”, which profiled some of the needs and opportunities.

In summary, I’ll close with just a few recommendations, and we can get into more detail in the Q and A if you wish.

First, we should develop a forest-sector skills development plan that clearly maps skills gaps and a regional approach to addressing them. There’s some great on-the-ground infrastructure to build off of.

Second, as part of this development plan, we should support employer-led training programs in rural and northern communities so that young people don’t need to leave home to be trained.

Finally, we should stabilize and grow proven youth employment programs and support networks through multi-year youth employment program funding through ESDC. With regard to groups that are tried, tested and true, I’ll reference the outland youth employment program as one that has 25 years’ experience in providing six-week training opportunities to indigenous youth in high school, aged 16 to 19. In that 25 years, they’ve put over 1,000 indigenous high school children and youth through that program, and they’ve touched nearly 200 communities across the country. Well-established groups like OYEP should not be facing funding cuts; they should be leaned in on because they have a proven track record. Project Learning Tree Canada, Forestry Together and Women in Wood are other grassroots initiatives that we’re pretty proud of, that are connected to communities, that started with a coalition of the willing and that now enjoy broad support across Canadian forestry.

In closing, before I turn it over to my colleagues, I just want to say, on behalf of businesses, employees and communities in the forestry sector, that we appreciate your engagement and support.

I look forward to any questions or comments you might have.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nighbor.

Mr. Mahdy, you have five minutes, please.

Sharif Mahdy (Chief Executive Officer, The Students Commission of Canada): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the Students Commission of Canada’s perspectives on youth employment in Canada.

My name is Sharif Mahdy and I am privileged to serve as the chief executive officer of this organization.

The Students Commission of Canada is a national Canadian charity, founded in 1991, with an expertise in youth engagement in all facets of Canadian life, including employment and skills development. We partner with youth. We listen to youth. We work with them and their expertise to address the challenges they face and engage with them, together, to contribute to Canadian society. Our mission includes supporting other organizations, businesses, governments and collaborations to do the same.

Four pillars guide our work: respect, listen, understand and communicate. Our capacity to support, advise and consult with others is generated in part from the aggregated knowledge we synthesize, but its immediate and main genesis has always been from our own direct work with youth.

In our beginning, everyone at the Students Commission was a volunteer—both youth and adults. Youth became employees as soon as we were able to move from an all-volunteer model to one with paid staff. Paid youth staff and youth as co-op placements, for credits and/or paid, have been with us since the early years.

Today, I will share what we are hearing from youth. Specifically, I’ll share some of the solutions and innovations that they’ve suggested to address and tackle our current youth employment challenges. This includes pulling and sharing results from our engagements and programs on youth employment, including sharing some direct voices of young people themselves.

What we are hearing very loudly and clearly is that this isn't the same workplace or workforce that young people imagined 10 years ago. The economy is shifting, career paths are non-linear and success today is as much about connection, adaptability and identity as it is about credentials.

Youth are anxious about the present and the future that they face. What we have learned from thousands of youth and the organizations, schools and employers who serve them is that it takes a whole-of-society approach to address youth employment, so that they can handle the pressures of today's world, particularly after the gaps in pre-employment preparation that were generated during and post-COVID—an era of so much virtual work and virtual education.

We have a stream of programs focused on youth skills development. We work in the pre-employment skill development space. We are in the process of co-creating, implementing and scaling frameworks that integrate pre-employment soft and hard skill development through extracurricular opportunities and connections to service in community, with formal education and credit accumulation, and stronger ties to employers with practical experiences of workplace learning and purposeful employment. Again, it's a whole-of-society approach.

We also lead the national Take Our Kids to Work program, which is Canada's most recognized career education program. We provide ongoing resources, videos and experts to support employers, educators, families and students to participate in introducing grade 9 students to the changing world of work. In 2025, we reached 1,169 employers and 1,159 educators, and supported 400,000-plus students to be engaged in career exploration. Our "Career Live" virtual engagement program also attracted 6,000 attendees from coast to coast.

We are working to expand this grade 9 innovation into a network of employers, youth sector organizations and educational institutions that are supportive of a more integrated work-learning strategy from grade 9 forward, linking skill development, practical employment and education, and breaking down silos across these various systems.

SCC's art of work program also serves youth in later grades. As a result, we have been able to bring corporate funders and government partners to the table to work together to integrate employment and engagement in experiences and effective training practices across multiple sectors. Again, it's an emphasis on the whole-of-society approach.

We have also learned to recognize that youth have diverse employment needs. Some thrive in part-time roles, others in full-time, and some use the experience as an entryway to education. We assist our employers and employment program funders to adjust their expectations and offer to provide this kind of flexibility, particularly for placements designed for youth facing employment challenges in first and transitional employment.

• (1215)

The Students Commission of Canada enhances existing systems by partnering with local organizations, schools and employers. We leverage national and local connections, evidence-based research,

and evaluation to co-create sustainable, community-rooted solutions. We believe in a world where all young people transition positively into a successful adulthood.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mahdy, for your opening comments.

Ms. Vincent, you have the floor for five minutes.

• (1220)

Julie-Ann Vincent (Chief Operations Officer, YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee.

My name is Julie-Ann Vincent. I am chief operating officer of the YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth, and I'm accompanied by my colleague Rebekah Skeete, director of employment services.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to speak about youth employment and the important role the YMCA plays both in Halifax/Dartmouth and across Canada in helping young people find meaningful work and build the foundation for lifelong success.

The YMCA's mandate is simple yet profound: to ignite the potential in people. This helps build stronger, healthier communities. A healthy community is one in which young people have equitable access to opportunities, including employment. The impact of this work extends far beyond a first job. It builds confidence, resilience and the skills needed for lifelong employability.

At the YMCA, youth are at the very core of what we do. Examples of youth-focused programming include settlement services, before and after school care, child care, health and wellness programs and employment services, including those designed specifically to help youth find employment and support their workplace readiness. These programs recognize the strengths and assets that youth bring to work as well as the unique barriers they face in finding meaningful employment.

We also do more than provide services for youth. We also bring the perspective of a youth employer. Last year alone, 260 youth were employed through our programs and operations, representing over 52% of our workforce. Among our leadership team, 12 of our leaders are youth, making up 18% of our leadership positions. That's just the YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth. Collectively, YMCAs employ more than 13,000 youth across the country. With 37 associations across Canada, YMCAs are among the country's leading youth employers. Organizations like the YMCA are major employers, innovators and economic drivers in our communities. These numbers reflect our belief that youth are not just tomorrow's leaders; they are also the leaders of today.

Today, we're here to talk about the challenges young people are facing when it comes to accessing employment. Specifically, we're here with three recommendations to improve the current challenges.

The first is to adopt a youth-centred, people-first approach. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each young person brings unique strengths and unique challenges. Programs must be designed to meet youth where they are, recognizing their lived realities and building on their assets. We see first-hand how employment programs like the summer work student exchange, Canada summer jobs, and the youth employment and skills strategy program can alter the trajectory of lives. Programs like these support youth development and instill transferable skills—now appropriately called skills for success in ESDC's framework—for a variety of different careers and industries.

The second recommendation is sustained investment in community-based programming. Invest in what works—the continued and stable funding of community-based programs with demonstrated success and long-term impact. Earlier I mentioned that our experience has shown us that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to youth gaining meaningful employment. Community-based organizations ensure that a variety of programs are offered to meet youth where they are, whether that is geographically, culturally, developmentally or their socio-economic status.

Further, proven youth employment models must be protected and expanded, not reimaged for every funding cycle. Funding programs that support pilots and innovative solutions are critical; however, there is a significant need for funding available to support programs that have been proven to work. If ongoing program funding is not available, programs enter the market and are then withdrawn, leading to instability and confusion, and it reduces the trust in the organizations providing these supports for youth.

The third recommendation is the recognition of the role that the social determinants of health play in youth employment. Employment interventions must support whole-person outcomes. Stable housing, food security, access to education, mental health support and a sense of belonging are prerequisites for employment success. They play a long-term, defining role in a young person's ability to succeed.

Investing in youth employment is an investment in healthy communities and a strong, inclusive Canadian workforce. The YMCA is proud to continue this work alongside government, employers and community organizations, and we are proud to stand with youth as they build the future of this country.

Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. We look forward to your questions.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vincent.

We'll begin the questioning round with Mr. Genuis, for the opposition, for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses for some really interesting and thought-provoking testimony.

My questions will be for Mr. Nighbor.

I want to discuss three distinct issues with you. The first is how we talk about vocations in the natural resource sectors, and in forestry in particular. The second is building homes where jobs are. The third is credential recognition as it relates to your sector.

On the first issue, it seems to me that some of the discourse from the government and other social actors has been quite negative about natural resource sectors, forestry included. That discourse has an impact on young people who are considering what areas to pursue their studies in. If you have authority figures telling you that something is a job of the past, it's going to be harder to attract people into those sectors, when in fact our natural resource sectors are the lifeblood of our economy and we need people to pursue those careers.

What are your reflections on that discourse around natural resource vocations specifically?

Derek Nighbor: Thanks for the question.

I'll be very direct. Under this government the tone has changed significantly. That has been welcomed.

I also think economic realities have forced us as a country to look inward at some of our natural strengths, which I think is where natural resource opportunities lie. We have seen coordinated campaigns to try to undermine Canadian forestry out of the U.S. and Europe—that's standard. I would say the current economic crisis that we're in has enabled an opportunity in our sector to get focused on the possible, to start thinking about the economy again and to start thinking about jobs and leaning into some of Canada's natural advantages.

What I'm hearing from our CEOs and heads of HR in our member companies is that young people want to know that they're making a difference. They want to know that forestry is sustainable. They want to know that we're making products ethically and treating the land that we're working on well. Those are themes. I'm proud of what we do in that regard in forestry.

I also think the opportunity we have on the housing piece domestically is huge, as well as the other community benefits that come with forest management.

Garnett Genuis: I have to keep moving to the other themes, but to put a fine point on it, when you said the current government and previous government, are you highlighting specifically comments or the tone during the Trudeau years as being problematic?

Derek Nighbor: Specifically...yes, that's correct.

Garnett Genuis: Okay.

On having homes where the jobs are, one of the things we have highlighted as part of our Conservative youth jobs plan is the importance of having homes and community infrastructure in places where jobs are in order to make it easier for people who are unemployed in a larger centre to consider job opportunities.

What are your reflections on the issue of people considering careers outside the area they grew up in, and the importance of having homes available as part of that?

Derek Nighbor: Homes are key infrastructure. My colleague from the YMCA talked about the social determinants. We're seeing that.

I was in Fort Nelson, B.C., just before the pandemic, as there was a movement to try to rebuild the forest economy in that part of northeastern B.C. The hospital there doesn't deliver babies. You have to go four hours away or, heaven forbid, if you have a complicated pregnancy, then you have to go to Vancouver for maybe a couple of months.

On cellphone coverage and broadband access, some of that social infrastructure is absolutely critical to making these communities attractive as a place where somebody would want to move their young family or start a young family.

There's the access to housing piece as well. There were some stats out of the federal government last year around the inaccessibility of affordable rental properties in rural Canada. I think the housing piece is one of a whole host of pieces that we have an opportunity to focus on. To me, that's a rural lens play and a regional play; it's probably not one-size-fits-all.

Garnett Genuis: An important thing to include as part of a jobs plan is to actually look at people being able to live where the jobs are.

Derek Nighbor: One hundred per cent...plus the related social determinants and supports in that community.

Garnett Genuis: I'll spend my last minute and a half on the issue of credential recognition.

When a lot of people think about credential recognition they think about the professions they interact with—often health care. You have important issues around credential recognition in the forestry sector.

In previous engagements I've heard that many Ukrainians who came here, in particular as part of that wave after the start of the further invasion, had backgrounds in forestry, but there were issues in credential recognition. When we fail to recognize the credentials of people who come to this country it's a double negative because they're not able to work, and there are problems in the jobs they could work in. Also, they end up competing against young people in entry-level positions.

I notice the government included some discussion of this in their latest announcement. The fact is that they already have an existing fund that is supposed to be doing this work and is not doing it successfully. We put forward some proposals on credential recognition.

What are your reflections on the link between credential recognition and job creation and how it plays out in your sector?

• (1230)

Derek Nighbor: It's critically important. We have the Forest Professional Regulators of Canada, a national body that does work with the provinces. This is another big federal-provincial play where I think there's a huge opportunity to try to align things. From Nova Scotia to B.C., we have different provincial regulatory bodies, so I do think that national body can work through a one-window approach.

We're not an industry that's tapped into the temporary foreign worker program in a big way, so I would view that as an aside. In terms of credentialing newcomers to Canada, I would also say it is about working with the provincial and regional college networks on some of the microcredentialing, because there is an escalation. I mentioned prefab, modular and mass timber. There are a lot of new skills now. When we start building more in factories, that's going to mean that the plumbing and the electrical are done differently. How can we help accelerate some of the trades work and the accreditation to get that done?

The Chair: Thank you.

Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we go to Ms. Fancy for six minutes.

Jessica Fancy: Thank you very much, Chair. Through you, I'd like to welcome all four of our panellists today. It's always nice to see some east coasters in the house.

I have questions for all of you, but I'd like to start with Mr. Nighbor.

Good afternoon, Mr. Nighbor. We just talked with the colleague across about how we can make natural resources a viable sector for our youth. It reminds me a lot of our forestry and what goes on in my riding of South Shore—St. Margarets, where I have a major industry employer in the area. I want to look at the role the private sector has and its leadership on how we engage youth and tell them this is a viable industry.

My question to you is this: Private sector leadership is vital to tackling youth employment. From your perspective, Mr. Nighbor, what makes federal partnerships, whether through wage subsidy programs or research internships, effective in encouraging employers to hire and mentor youth?

I look at that in a co-op program where I'm from in which they've had a lot of people who have done co-op programs with the local employer and have gone on to actually work for them over the decades.

Derek Nighbor: There's mutual benefit there for government and industry alike. These are our workers and our talent of tomorrow. We want to attract people to our communities but also train those people close to home, as I said, as much as we can.

The other thing that's challenging for our members is when the rules of the game change on a regular basis. This is where we should be leaning into multi-year funding. I know that with some of the YESS or the youth employment support programs under ESDC, we had a number of organizations that were funded quite consistently year over year. Then they all stopped getting funding.

There is the case of the outland youth employment program, which to me is a model program for indigenous youth aged 16 to 19 across northern Canada. They had to close a couple of camps at the last minute.

My advice is that the benefit is very clear on both sides, but if my members and our union partners were sitting here, they would talk about consistency and multi-year planning to allow people to really invest and have confidence in making more investments in some of those programs for the future.

Jessica Fancy: That's awesome. Thank you very much, Mr. Nighbor.

My next set of questions is for Ms. Skeete and Ms. Vincent.

In Atlantic Canada, we know we have some very unique labour market challenges, if I can put it that way. In our current partnership model, we can look to the future as well. How should the federal government work together with provincial governments and community organizations like yours to help ensure that our youth programs are responding to the local realities of what we're seeing?

Julie-Ann Vincent: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the question. It's very important to recognize that different areas face different challenges. One of the key things we strongly believe about partnerships, funding models and programs is that they recognize local realities. For example, in Nova Scotia, we have a strong African Nova Scotian population. We have rural and urban communities, and we have small centres. We also have the Acadian population. There isn't one program that is going to serve all of those needs.

In addition to what Mr. Nighbor said about consistency in funding and programs, we agree that it's about investing in local, on-the-ground organizations or partnerships of any kind that actually understand the realities that youth in those regions face. That's going to allow for greater uptake and greater results than a one-size-fits-all approach.

• (1235)

Jessica Fancy: Thank you very much for that.

Mr. Mahdy, before I became an MP, right up into the first week of the election, I was a grade 9 teacher. You mentioned earlier the take your kid to work day, which I know is coming up the first Wednesday in November. In regard to programs like that and the government's approach to youth employment, with an emphasis on such wraparound supports as mentorships and mental health awareness and financial stability, could you speak very quickly to how these supports can change outcomes for youth?

Sharif Mahdy: Absolutely. Take Our Kids to Work is a great example of the whole-of-society approach that I was describing in my opening statement. It requires little government investment and involves a number of non-profit and private sector partnerships that allow for companies to get students into their spaces. Those students have actually told us through our research that Take Our Kids to Work catalyzes a career exploration journey and opens doors to all sorts of career exploration opportunities that they wouldn't have had otherwise.

What we're hearing is this: How can we make Take Our Kids to Work year-round, and how can we broaden it beyond grade 9 as a way to try to address some of the challenges that are happening with youth employment right now? Some of those innovations include, again, private sector and non-profit partnerships where we place some of these students, once they have a career interest in an organization, into paid co-op and paid work-integrated learning experiences that allow them to take what they discovered from Take Our Kids to Work and take it further.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Madame Gill, please.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today. It's very appreciated. We will take what they say into account when making our recommendations.

My questions are for Mr. Nighbor specifically.

I represent an area that is geographically remote, although I could argue that the other regions are the remote ones. I am the federal member of Parliament for Côte-Nord, a region in Quebec where the forestry sector is everything. That's why I worry about the message the government is sending the forestry industry and young people, because they are interconnected.

For years, we have faced crises when the time came to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement, which is now the Canada-U.S.-Mexico Agreement. Since January, we have been in a crisis involving our neighbours to the south, but the government isn't sending any positive signals to the forestry industry.

On one hand, we're being told that the youth unemployment rate is up, but on the other, there's a labour shortage. We have both supply and demand, but we can't seem to match one with the other. That makes me worried.

Where I'm from, CEGEPs train students in the forestry sector, of course. Groupe Rétabec, Arbec, Domtar and Kruger are some of the forestry companies in my region; it's also home to Boisaco, which has a different type of business model. What message are we sending young people? We are telling them not to go into the field, because there are no jobs since the government pays the sector no mind when it signs trade deals. It feels as though the message we're sending young people is this: There is no future in forestry, so you're better off forgetting about it and going into something else.

It struck me when the Prime Minister decided not to give workers hard hit by the crisis wage subsidies to help them keep their jobs. On the contrary, they were told to get trained in another field, to find another type of work.

Could you tell us what you think should be done? As we speak, a sector is being dismantled and young people simply see no future in it. It was already a struggle to attract them to forestry with all the crises that have hit the sector over the past four decades.

What needs to be done? What message does the government have to send youth to make them interested in forestry again, so as to generate wealth for our communities and young people alike?

• (1240)

[English]

Derek Nighbor: Thank you for the question.

I appreciate your engagement and Monsieur Simard's engagement in support of our sector. It's definitely a difficult time. It's very tough to now recruit people into a sector when people are wondering if the mill is still going to be there in a couple of months. There's no doubt about that. That said, I have hope in two areas.

One, what we've been talking to the government about is that the best result for our youth, for our industry and for our forest-dependent communities is to get a deal at the negotiating table that works with the United States as soon as we can—not a bad deal but the best deal as soon as we can. We get that it's complex, but what we're hearing for our sector is that it's not close right now. What we need to do is protect our employees, to bridge us to try to get through this. That's the priority right now in terms of supporting young people.

I'd also say that the initial package the government... We're probably in the range of 1,000 to 2,000 across the country in terms of layoffs or curtailments right now. The \$50 million as part of the response package is designed to support about 6,000 displaced workers. What we're working on with Unifor Québec, the steelworkers and others is the next step. If this drags on further and if the employment impact is beyond 6,000, we need a response package to protect those families and those workers.

It's a two-part issue. We have a natural challenge. It's tough to recruit now, but I think we just need to work with the government to try to get the supports in place to keep as many people connected to the mills for as long as possible.

[Translation]

Marilène Gill: The message needs to be different, then. You mentioned everything the government announced but has yet to put on the table. We are still waiting for measures to be implemented.

You talked about keeping people in their jobs, but there are no supports for that. I also heard you talk about employment insurance, EI, although in a different way than I'm about to. Nonetheless, we talk about it here as well. Workers need that support.

We have a lot of people in my region who do seasonal work, especially tree planters. Government supports for temporary foreign workers also contribute to the decline in regional forestry workers. The fact that the work is devalued may also explain why young people don't want to work in the sector.

Would you like to see the government show more support for the forestry sector? I don't see that now. I hear the government talking about the steel and auto sectors, and I agree they're important, but forestry never seems to be one of the government's top concerns. Do you wish it was?

[English]

Derek Nighbor: The first thing I'll say on worker supports is that we can't forget about our contractors. Quite often, these programs will support full-time employees at our mills, but the truck drivers, the loggers and the mechanics are the first ones hit. Our ask to the federal government is to ensure any support package for workers includes contractors.

On the government mention, this has been an active debate in the sector for many weeks. It was steel, aluminum, auto, energy and forestry. In the last two weeks, it has been steel, aluminum and energy. That has been frustrating for us, to be very honest with you. We get that it's very difficult, and we get there might be reasons at the negotiating table for that. That said, we don't expect to know everything going on with the negotiating strategy, but we need to know where we stand.

Our message last week to Minister Joly, the PMO and others was to please keep us posted. If things are shifting, please let us know so we can communicate with our people.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

Mr. Généreux, it's over to you for five minutes.

Bernard Généreux (Côte-du-Sud—Rivière-du-Loup—Kataskomiq—Témiscouata, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses.

I have a question for you, Mr. Nighbor. About seven or eight years ago, Mr. Trudeau announced an initiative to plant two billion trees. Did you see any of those trees? Do you know where they are?

[English]

Derek Nighbor: The companies and workers I work with aren't.... Those tree-planting contracts have been through the provinces with other contracting agencies. There hasn't been a prime benefit to us.

What we'd like to see if that program were to continue.... There is a lot of land under the purview of provincial governments that has been burned so hot that the trees aren't growing back. My pitch would be to think about other ways to use that program.

• (1245)

[Translation]

Bernard Généreux: Making promises is easy. That's more or less my point.

In my riding, the White Birch Paper mill, which manufactures paper from wood chips, is currently closed, leaving 175 people out of work since August. The mill was supposed to resume operations in November, but that's been postponed until January, so nothing is for sure.

We've met with various industry stakeholders. Yesterday, I spoke with one of the biggest players in Quebec, which has a mill in Saint-Pamphile, in the regional county municipality of L'Islet. They told me that they couldn't sell their lumber to New Hampshire, a four-hour drive from my riding, because the Europeans could sell to the state for less. The U.S. tariffs on Canada are to blame, especially since the extra 10% was put on.

What do we tell our young people in Saint-Pamphile and the rest of Quebec's regions? You talked about the regions, and that's probably the most important thing we should be talking about today. It's important to talk about the regions. That applies to all regions in Canada, not just those in Quebec. However, they are especially top of mind for me, as they are for my fellow member next to me, of course. It's not complicated; our regions depend on forestry products, so we need help.

What are you asking the federal government for at this time?

[English]

Derek Nighbor: Your comment about Europe is really important, because since 2017 we have lost 6% market share on softwood lumber in the United States. It has not been to the Americans. The Americans have stayed flat. We've lost six points to the Europeans who, right now, enjoy a 30% advantage on the trade side, so that's a big challenge.

In terms of next steps with government, the package that was announced in the beginning of August was a good first step, but it was just a first step. The \$700 million through BDC hasn't quite flowed yet, but it's getting close. The \$50 million for worker supports is only going to be enough to support about 6,000 workers, and that's going to flow through the provinces. What we're watching for in the next couple of weeks is to see whether the money that's dedicated to the people and businesses gets through.

[Translation]

Bernard Généreux: The problem, Mr. Nighbor, is that the government's solution doesn't meet the industry's needs. I'm a businessman, so I know that money isn't what the industry needs. What the industry wants is access to markets. The problem with the U.S. is that we now have little to no market access, because of the tariffs.

The answer isn't to hand out subsidies to businesses. In fact, they're not even subsidies; they're actually loans or loan guarantees. Programs to improve efficiency are also being made available to them. Improving efficiency is well and good, but if there aren't any markets—

[English]

Annie Koutrakis: I have a point of order, Chair.

I'm just trying to follow the questioning, and I'm questioning the relevance. We are doing a youth study.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Généreux, please continue.

[Translation]

Bernard Généreux: All right.

If there aren't any markets, there aren't any jobs, and that means no jobs for young people. I don't know how you can't understand that, Ms. Koutrakis.

As long as the tariffs stay as high as they are now, jobs will be in jeopardy—that is a fact. The U.S. is even proposing to raise them. We can't let the Europeans eat our lunch when they are thousands of kilometres away. That's outrageous. We have to continue negotiating with the Americans.

Every single day, young people in my riding go to work in the forestry industry, and they have a lot of questions about how the federal government is engaging with the U.S. right now. To be perfectly frank, it's not going well. When I look at the solutions you're proposing, I can see they have merit. Nevertheless, the government has clearly done a poor job of negotiating with the U.S. to date, and it's having an impact on jobs for young people. I say that for the benefit of my fellow member Ms. Koutrakis. Can young people really picture a future in the regions? We definitely need to focus on the regions. Canada's big cities are great, but we have regions too, and they are the ones supplying a key material big cities need to build housing. The industry needs those jobs and those young people.

What else can you recommend to give young Canadians working in the forestry sector a bit of hope?

What you said about contractors or businesses working in the forestry sector is important. In many cases, they are self-employed people operating incredibly expensive equipment, so they need solutions for the future too.

• (1250)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Généreux. You went over the time.

[*Translation*]

It is now Mr. Joseph's turn for five minutes.

Natilien Joseph: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Listening to Mr. Généreux, I thought I was in the House, because he seemed to think that the witness was an MP. It's fine.

My question is for Mr. Mahdy.

The Conservatives are always pushing for less government, and what that means for many young people is fewer job placements, fewer employment programs and reduced access to training.

Can you tell us how cutting those things would stimulate youth employment, rather than make things worse?

[*English*]

Sharif Mahdy: Thank you for the question.

In what we're proposing as a whole-of-society approach, we're not saying that government or the state doesn't have a role to play in supporting ongoing youth employment. In fact, some of the projects and work that we have done resulted from government starting to fund the initiative and then businesses and others coming to the table. We're looking for a mix of government, corporate and non-profit partners to be part of the conversation to support employers to work really closely with youth. The number one thing we're hearing from employers is that they don't necessarily know how to work with youth, and that wraparound supports for those employers are really important. That can only happen when we have government, corporate and non-profits working together in an integrated approach.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Thank you, Mr. Mahdy.

My next question is for Mr. Nighbor.

Every season, numerous regional employers in the forestry sector rely on Canada summer jobs and the youth employment and skills strategy for funding to hire and train young people in the field.

Can you describe what effect those wage subsidies have on small operators and young workers gaining their first paid work experience in the forestry sector?

[*English*]

Derek Nighbor: Thanks for the question.

The YESS program is very important to our sector. I've talked a bit about the outland youth employment program. One of the other programs that have benefited from YESS is Project Learning Tree Canada, which has placed 8,000 young people in conservation and

forestry job placements—3,000 of those were youth who had barriers to employment.

My point on the YESS program is that there's been some tremendous infrastructure built. The more we can lean in and scale up there in a sector like ours.... We're national. We have a great network of people, and we can really mobilize. My advice, in our sector, as we try to fix some of these challenges that we're facing, to blunt the blow and to provide opportunity, is to really lean in on where we've been successful. We're prepared to work with the government to do that.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Mr. Chair, I'm going to give the rest of my time to Ms. Koutrakis. I think she wanted to say something earlier.

[*English*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Koutrakis, for two minutes.

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you for your testimony and for appearing here before us.

We heard in a previous committee meeting that high youth unemployment “translates into pessimism and resentment, lost opportunities to build skills and networks, dependence on other family members and economic hardship. It represents a failure to launch.”

In your opinion—and any one of you can answer this question, or all of you, if we have time—what specific skills or work habits are most at risk of being lost when young people face extended periods of unemployment during their careers?

Sharif Mahdy: Thank you for the question.

I think the number one skill that we're seeing could potentially be eroded as a result of the youth unemployment challenges right now is adaptability—the ability to adapt and be resilient to the changes that are happening in the world. Jobs are changing quite rapidly, and what you need to thrive in this economy is the ability to be adaptable when those jobs do change or when new technology comes to the fore. If we're not preparing young people at a young age for that adaptability that's going to come down the road, then they're not going to have the skill set to cope with the ever-changing needs of our economy when technology continues to evolve.

• (1255)

Annie Koutrakis: What federal programs do you think would be most effective in preventing failure to launch?

The Chair: Give a short answer, please.

Sharif Mahdy: It would be the YESS program.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Nighbor, I have a question about EI I forgot to ask you earlier. I brought up seasonal workers, but didn't get a chance to ask my question. Should the government expand EI to reduce the precarious nature of the work they do and strengthen the social safety net?

Obviously, people want to be able to work year-round, but that just isn't possible in some fields, because of our climate. I mentioned tree planting earlier, and you clearly can't plant trees in January.

With that in mind, I'd like to know whether potential EI reforms should be aimed at strengthening the social safety net. Of course, I would love for us to be able to participate in remanufacturing, even tertiary processing, but at the very least, measures are needed to keep people in their communities, in remote areas where the forestry sector is very active.

The question is for Mr. Nighbor.

[*English*]

Derek Nighbor: We would be among the first to support that. It's what we're looking at now as we look at a potentially protracted trade dispute.

For us, on lumber, it's \$8 billion a year. We're not just going to find another market for \$8 billion. It took us about 40 years to get to \$1 billion-or-so in Japan. We need creativity here. We've learned a lot through COVID, through the CEWS program and through wage top-ups. We in industry with our union partners are prepared to be very creative here. It's a call to everybody on all sides. We're happy to work with you. It's time to be very creative and flexible on these solutions if this thing drags out.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

[*English*]

Next, we have Mr. Reynolds for five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Reynolds.

Colin Reynolds (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming here today. I really appreciate it.

My question is for Mr. Nighbor.

Is the forestry industry actively recruiting youth right now?

Derek Nighbor: Yes, very much so. We recognize that there are different pools of talent. I think of a group like Women in Wood, which is now home to about 3,700 women. It's a network that started as a sharing group that is now a group that provides support for professional development. They're in their 10th year. We have indigenous programming through OYAP and PLT Canada, for exam-

ple. I know that we have a number of members who brought in Ukrainian refugees.

It's a very segmented approach. My advice on the recruitment piece is that it be targeted and, where possible, regionally based.

Colin Reynolds: What challenges is the forestry industry facing in youth recruitment? What is the biggest challenge?

Derek Nighbor: Right now it's the cloud of brutal markets and the trade dispute with the U.S. that some days makes it feel like it's.... Well, it's just bad right now. That's our biggest barrier right now. Forestry has been through issues before. We're still 200,000 workers, despite all the challenges and all the different disputes and issues over the last couple of hundred years in Canada, so we're going to be here on other end of this. We might look a bit different.

My focus is also on new emerging areas. I've talked about drone technology. We're an industry now that has almost as many lab coats as safety vests. We have biofuels, biomaterials, mass timber, prefab and modulars. One area I talked about earlier was in terms of connecting with young people on the sustainability and on the community component, and that this is good for the community and the environment, and then also tapping into some of the very unique, cool things that are emerging in the industry that weren't part of our grandma's and grandpa's forest sector.

Colin Reynolds: Given how critical the forestry industry is to the Canadian economy, employment and youth employment, do you feel that the forestry industry is being adequately represented in trade negotiations?

Derek Nighbor: We're on team Canada here. In saying that, I would remind people that we have more full-time jobs than steel, aluminum and auto combined, and we are across the country—300 communities strong. There's a lot of pressure. There's a lot of concern, and there's a lot of chaos out there. We're going to continue to be on team Canada when we talk about those issues.

I think the best way we can all stay on the same page as team Canada is by having good communication coming back to industry and labour as negotiations continue. We don't need to know everything, but we need to know where we stand so we can stay on team Canada and not give the Americans what they want, which is a divided Canada.

● (1300)

Colin Reynolds: Is the forestry industry being properly consulted in the trade negotiations?

Derek Nighbor: Again, I'll be really direct: We had a tough couple of weeks coming out of the Prime Minister's meeting in the White House. We were very surprised not to be mentioned in the readout. We were very surprised. That was a departure for us. Again, there might be a good strategic reason for that, but for two weeks, there was no communication.

My advice, again, staying on team Canada, is that we want to work with the government on solutions. We're reasonable people. We've never had this industry more united from coast to coast. We've never had greater alignment between industry and organized labour on an issue, so let's work together. Let's keep the lines of communication open.

Colin Reynolds: Okay. Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Mahdy.

Do you find that youth expectations exceed the reality of the job market?

Sharif Mahdy: Thank you for the question.

I don't think youth expectations exceed the reality of the job markets. I think young people are really well aware of how massively the economy is changing right now. We're working with young people, as young as people in grade 9, who are talking to us about concerns over tariffs and affordability. In the past year or two, the expectations have adjusted to meet the reality of where we're at with the economy right now.

Colin Reynolds: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to cede the rest of my time to my colleague Laila Goodridge.

Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to move a motion to resume debate on the motion I moved on Thursday, October 23, 2025, which reads as follows:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Auditor General of Canada be invited to appear before the committee for two hours to speak and answer questions on the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System report by November 28, 2025.

The Chair: Ms. Koutrakis, did you have your hand up?

An hon. member: No, this is a dilatory motion.

The Chair: We have a motion to resume debate. Does the committee agree to resume debate on the motion? If that is agreed, then I would go to Ms. Koutrakis.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4 [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The committee has agreed to resume debate in the time left.

Witnesses, this is a procedure that is allowed during a committee. I need to deal with this item in the time left.

I am going to Ms. Koutrakis on the motion.

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to remind our colleagues that the Liberals will be voting no on this motion. The reason is that this is most likely an issue that is going to be discussed at the public accounts committee

as well. I don't have that on good authority, but my experience tells me that it will likely be the public accounts committee that will be inviting the Auditor General to its committee.

We spent quite a bit of time in our previous meetings putting together a calendar that would have us start working on the next study, which is very important, and that is the study that was put forth by our good colleague Madame Gill. I'm just asking the committee to be mindful of the calendar and of the important work we're doing as a committee to make sure that we are not adding extra dates prolonging this committee's studies, which are so important.

I'm appealing to committee members to think about this. Maybe this is something we can allow the other committee to look at. Any member at this committee who wishes to question the Auditor General—and we all know the procedures—can always request to be a substitute on that committee when the Auditor General appears, and they can ask questions at that committee at that time. We could then proceed with the calendar, which we all so vigorously discussed in previous committee meetings and came to an agreement on, and continue the studies that we agreed to.

• (1305)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

Before we continue with this, the witnesses can leave. We're over the timeline. We have a few more moments of the committee's time, but it's unlikely that we'll get back to the witnesses. I would like to thank you for appearing before the committee with your testimony. Feel free to leave at will.

With that, I have Ms. Goodridge and then Mr. Joseph.

Ms. Goodridge.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is incredibly important that we have the Auditor General come. Last week, a report came out on the state of the early child care spaces that demonstrated that the government wasn't meeting the commitments it made or its own timelines.

It's incumbent on us... I appreciate that the Liberal members have shared their concerns about the disruption of the calendar. I will point out that this is a very modest request for one meeting. This is not something that is going to blow up the calendar, as the Liberals are suggesting. This is a multi-billion dollar project that was taken on and off-loaded onto the provinces and territories. We are four years in and it has taken four years to get some of the basic reporting data to come in. The reporting data is inconsistent. We heard from the Auditor General when she was at the public accounts committee last week that not every province is even tallying the information. We don't know the state of this.

As the member opposite stated, we don't have clarity that this is going to be studied at another committee. She is going off assumptions. It might happen, but we have the authority and we are charged by the taxpayers of Canada and the voters who sent us here to take care of taxpayer dollars. This is a \$35-billion project, and I believe a lot of parents expect us to have results on this. It is incumbent on us to do this.

I would ask that we suspend for two or three minutes, Mr. Chair, so we can have some discussions.

The Chair: I will get to that.

Before we suspend, I want to remind committee members that the committee, in business, spent a good bit of time on and arrived at a unanimous decision on our calendar, but the committee makes decisions as it moves forward. The calendar was populated by a unanimous decision. I would just ask that you take that into consideration while recognizing that the committee, by unanimity or majority, can choose its direction.

I'm going to suspend for four minutes.

• (1305) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1315)

The Chair: The committee has resumed.

I am going to return to Ms. Goodridge because that's where I was when I suspended. Then Mr. Genuis had his hand up.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is that it? Okay.

Mr. Genuis, you're next, and then I believe Madame Gill might have had her hand up.

Garnett Genuis: Chair, I have just two quick observations on the calendar.

I noticed that we had pencilled in budget day as a likely cancelled meeting.

The Chair: No.

Garnett Genuis: Is that not likely to be cancelled anymore?

The Chair: No, we're in the morning. It was never... I'm sorry; that's just for clarification.

Garnett Genuis: There was a previous draft of the calendar, though, that was—

The Chair: No, we're in the morning slot and it was not my intention to cancel.

Garnett Genuis: I think we do then have one flex meeting—just to flag that. We can minimize disruption to the calendar by using that. It sounds like that was your intention anyway.

My colleague's motion referenced the end of November. I think we can adjust that if we need to. I do notice that we have a lot of ministers scheduled in November, and we certainly don't want to disrupt those. We would have November 4 potentially available to us to help create some additional space if members want to do it. That's not to prejudice the conclusion, but just in terms of the impact on the calendar, we do have that space available.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

The motion is on the floor. Is there any discussion on the current motion as it is?

Mr. Joseph, go ahead on the motion by Ms. Goodridge.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Mr. Chair, I want to follow up on my Conservative colleague's behaviour towards the witnesses. They were still here when the Conservative member proposed her motion. I would at least like the Conservatives to explain why they did that.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Joseph.

There is the opportunity for any member sitting in—

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: There's no interpretation, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Is it working now?

Each member has their floor time allocated and Ms. Goodridge followed Commons rules and committee rules in returning her motion to the committee.

Is there any further discussion on the motion?

Ms. Koutrakis.

Annie Koutrakis: I'm just looking at the time, Mr. Chair. Until what time do we have resources?

The Chair: We have two more minutes.

Is there discussion?

Annie Koutrakis: I just want to return to my previous comments where I said that we spent quite a bit of time at committee discussing having two studies happen concurrently. We have our agenda in place already on the calendar.

I did reference earlier that likely the public accounts committee will be speaking to and having the Auditor General to speak on her report, so I don't see what the additional benefit would be for the Auditor General to also come to HUMA when we already have so many important studies in the queue. We're inviting witnesses shortly, and we want to hear how the programs we have in place at the federal level can help.

The temporary foreign worker program has been in the news quite a bit. That is the next study we are going to be looking at. I think it is a much better use of the committee's time to start listening to witnesses on that study than to have the Auditor General come to speak to her report when we know—at least, it's most likely—that public accounts will be looking at that and having her speak to that committee.

I don't see what the benefit is of duplicating that work at our committee, so I am appealing to my colleagues at this committee to vote this motion down.

• (1320)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill.

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If everyone is finished debating the matter, can we proceed to the vote?

[English]

The Chair: Are you moving to vote on the motion as it is currently?

[Translation]

Marilène Gill: Yes, exactly.

[English]

The Chair: It's dilatory. You cannot move that motion.

We will resume with our speakers.

Ms. Goodridge.

Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think it's absolutely atrocious that the Liberals are trying to filibuster and that they don't want to have the Auditor General come. This is 35 billion dollars' worth of spending from their government, and they're afraid of what the Auditor General has to say.

I would like to move to a vote. I agree with my colleague from the Bloc. I hope the Liberals will end this filibuster and allow us to get on to the business at hand.

The Chair: Debate continues with Ms. McKelvie.

Jennifer McKelvie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It was a wonderful opportunity to come here today and join in the conversations around youth employment. I think it's great that the study continues. It sounds like you have many good studies coming up in the queue, especially with temporary foreign workers. I think this is a really important point to talk about right now.

I've heard from colleagues about looking beyond a one-size-fits-all on that program. It would be really great to prioritize listening to witnesses in this regard across the country, from coast to coast, as they go through that, as well as all the many other studies that you have going on right now. I know that housing is a big priority for this government. It was unfortunate, I think, that I didn't have time to speak to that last witness and ask questions of the forestry sector about how they're getting ready for our work around modern methods of construction in the forestry sector. We know that we want to buy Canadian and use Canadian lumber. It is an important industry.

It's just very unfortunate that we went into this debate early and I lost my opportunity to ask those questions. I'm hopeful that we can continue to prioritize our time in a good way around the questions that matter most to Canadians right now, because that's what they expect from us.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Fancy, this is on the motion.

Jessica Fancy: Thank you very much.

I'd just like to reiterate that, similar to what we had discussed in one of our previous meetings in regard to the Auditor General already giving the report to the public affairs committee and in regard to working for three different meetings to work out the timeline for the committee, we were really hoping to get the temporary foreign workers program study started—I know that's a priority for our colleague from the Bloc across the way—as well as to look for different rural-centric and regional approaches to that program, which I think would be of benefit right now, considering the weaponization that the Conservatives are putting on the strain with the temporary foreign workers program.

I really feel that my colleague Ms. Goodridge has a point in regard to her own portfolio as shadow minister or critic on some of the things in the Auditor General's report, but I don't think it's a sufficient use of our resources as a committee, when we already have a set schedule, to try to do someone else's work for them—

• (1325)

[Translation]

Marilène Gill: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Just a moment, Ms. Fancy.

Go ahead, Mrs. Gill.

Marilène Gill: I would like to challenge the chair's ruling. A moment ago, I asked whether we could proceed to the vote. You rephrased my request, Mr. Chair, and that's when someone put their hand up to speak, thereby ending the voting process. I had asked for the vote to be called, so I don't think the debate should have carried on.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gill. I made the decision that calling for the vote at the time was not in order, given the debate that was going on. Are you challenging the decision of the chair? It's not a decision that can be challenged.

[Translation]

Marilène Gill: No one else was on the speaking list.

[English]

The Chair: Madame Gill, you are now out of order. You cannot challenge the decision.

I'll go back to Ms. Fancy on the motion.

Jessica Fancy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

What I was talking about at the end was that although I feel that some information that will come from the Auditor General's report will help bolster some of our already successful programs—I commend my colleague from across the way in highlighting that—but as it is her job to be the shadow minister or critic in regard to youth and child care—I don't feel that the resources of this committee should be used to do someone else's work for them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Koutrakis.

Annie Koutrakis: I would like to get some clarity as to what we are debating right now. Following the comments of Mr. Genuis, where he suggested perhaps November 4, are we continuing to debate the original motion?

The Chair: There was no amendment made. We're still on Madam Goodridge's motion, unless there is a consensus to change something. We have two more minutes, and then we are out of time.

Madam Koutrakis, you raised the question.

Monsieur Joseph.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Mr. Chair, the issue of youth employment is very important. We were still discussing it when, all of a sudden, the member opposite proposed her motion.

My question is this: Was the discussion with the witnesses already over? We still had four witnesses, and we left them hanging, without even dismissing them or saying goodbye, so that this motion could suddenly be moved.

The work we are doing is very important, and we need to be respectful towards Canadians in doing that work.

I will repeat my question: Can our friends and members opposite—they are our friends too, after all—explain why they behaved how they did towards the witnesses?

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Koutrakis, I think we have one more minute.

Annie Koutrakis: I just wanted to take the opportunity to respond to my colleague Mrs. Goodridge, when she said the Liberals

are filibustering because we don't want to hear from the Auditor General.

I just wanted to remind everybody here, and all Canadians who are watching, that it was the Liberal Party of Canada that came forward and brought this very important program, the early learning childhood \$10-a-day—

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Annie Koutrakis: The average is \$16, but it's still a lot less than it was.

If there was any party or any government that was very much behind this program, it was the Liberal Party of Canada and our government. We will continue to make sure that for every child who needs to have a safe space for early learning and affordable day care, we will continue to be there, and we will continue to make sure the program exists, as it has in my own home province of Quebec.

Much of this program was mirrored after Quebec's program, and I'm very proud, because as a single parent at the time, with two young children, it helped me in my difficult times of having to seek employment and make sure my children were safe and were getting the care they needed in their early childhood.

For anyone out there—

• (1330)

The Chair: Thank you, committee members.

We're losing interpretation. We cannot continue without translation. With that, I would adjourn the meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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