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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Ahmed Hussen (York South—Weston—Etobicoke, Lib.)): Good afternoon. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 19 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, September 23, 2025, the committee is resuming its study of Canada's Arctic strategy.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and have the possibility of also using the Zoom application for remote access.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for our meeting today.

From the Government of Northwest Territories, we have the Honourable R.J. Simpson, MLA and Premier of the Northwest Territories.

From the Government of Nunavut, we have the Honourable John Main, Premier of Nunavut.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions from my colleagues.

I now invite the Honourable—

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier—Gloucester, Lib.): Before that, Chair, can I ask a question?

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Mona Fortier: All parties have had a conversation. We would appreciate it if you could add one five-minute round for MP Lori Idlout in the first round, please.

The Chair: Absolutely. Yes, that's noted. We welcome the honourable member.

I now invite Premier Simpson to make an opening statement of up to five minutes.

Hon. R.J. Simpson (Premier of the Northwest Territories, Government of Northwest Territories): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for having me here today to speak to Canada's Arctic policy and Canada's Arctic foreign policy in particular.

Sovereignty is not something that can be declared; it needs to be built through presence, partnership and sustained investment. From that perspective, Canada's Arctic foreign policy is more than just a diplomatic document; it's a call for the country to meet its words with action.

The Government of Northwest Territories was actively engaged in the development of Canada's Arctic foreign policy. I met several times with then foreign minister Mélanie Joly. My colleagues and I appreciated her efforts to meet northerners where they are, including visiting the Northwest Territories and engaging with premiers in Iqaluit. The policy's emphasis on partnership with indigenous governments and territorial governments reflects that work, and the final document shows that northern voices were heard. Since the policy's release, Canada has experienced political transition and rapid geopolitical change.

The Arctic is at the centre of Canada's strategic future. What happens or fails to happen in the NWT will determine whether Canada can meet its security, sovereignty and foreign policy objectives in the north. A secure Arctic is not achieved through military presence alone; it's achieved through thriving communities, reliable infrastructure, economic opportunity and engaged indigenous leadership.

Canada's foreign policy correctly places people at its core. Implementation must continue to recognize indigenous governments and territorial governments not as stakeholders, but as domestic and international partners. Remember, indigenous sovereignty is inherent. Canada's sovereignty is built.

In the Northwest Territories, the greatest barriers to fully realizing the ambitions of the Arctic foreign policy are the same barriers we face across all areas of development: the lack of infrastructure and the extraordinarily high cost of doing business in remote regions. These are not abstract challenges; they affect housing availability, energy reliability and economic participation.

The NWT has much to offer through deeper Arctic-to-Arctic relationships, which have recently been reinforced through a visit to Yellowknife by the heads of mission of Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland, and just last week, our participation in the Arctic symposium, hosted by the Nordic Five here in Ottawa. Our shared interests with regions like Greenland and Nordic countries include climate adaptation, sustainable resource development, indigenous rights and cultural continuity. These relationships must continue to be a cornerstone of Canada's Arctic engagement.

That being said, our physical connections to other Arctic regions are limited and inefficient. There are no direct transportation corridors linking the western and eastern Arctic or connecting the territories to each other in a meaningful way. To travel from Yellowknife to Alaska, you have to go through southern Canada. To connect with Nordic countries, options are seasonal or indirect. Actually, to visit Iqaluit and Whitehorse, I had to become the Premier. I had never been to either territory until just a couple of years ago. These gaps weaken Canada's economic resilience and limit its strategic reach.

This is why a key focus of my government is on major infrastructure priorities, advancing the Mackenzie Valley Highway, developing the Arctic economic and security corridor and reducing the cost of energy, which remains the highest in the country. These are nation-building investments that increase affordability, enable trade, support population stability and strengthen Canada's Arctic presence.

Canada's Arctic foreign policy recognizes that attracting direct foreign investment into northern and indigenous communities is essential to closing the infrastructure gap, and I agree. That gap is simply too large for any one government to carry alone. However, foreign investment must be strategic, aligned with Canada's interests and grounded in strong partnerships with territorial and indigenous governments.

Further, strengthening Arctic sovereignty and security must go hand in hand with improving the lives of northerners. Investments in housing, energy, climate resilience, critical minerals, healing and wellness, and transportation infrastructure are not separate from sovereignty; they are how sovereignty is exercised.

Canada now has a clear international vision for the Arctic, and it is one that the NWT sees itself in. Our challenge is turning that vision into action. Global attention is shifting northward, and geopolitics are changing. The Arctic is no longer peripheral; it is central. The federal government understands this moment. The question now is whether we will meet it together. The people of the north are a great asset to Canada. By working in true partnership across governments, Canada will build a secure, prosperous and sovereign Arctic.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Premier.

I now invite Premier Main to make his introductory remarks for up to five minutes.

Hon. John Main (Premier of Nunavut, Government of Nunavut): *Matna, Ikhivautaq.* Thank you, Chair.

Thanks for the invitation to appear at this committee meeting, especially alongside my colleague Northwest Territories Premier Simpson, to speak on Canada's Arctic strategy.

It's more apparent than ever that Arctic security and sovereignty have become a global concern. The geopolitical uncertainty around Greenland, our neighbour to the east—I believe the closest point between Nunavut and Greenland is around 26 kilometres—has once again put a spotlight on the urgency to protect and invest in Canada's Arctic.

The Nunavut Arctic security and sovereignty strategy outlines that indigenous peoples, Inuit in our case, and inhabitants of the Arctic must be the key architects of any strategy, policy, framework or action plan about the region. That includes ensuring that there are sufficient investments and expansions in the very basic infrastructure that will bring us in line with national standards and expectations. It should come as no surprise to anyone that Nunavut is critically underfunded in this regard. For Nunavut, this is not simply the physical infrastructure needed to be able to defend our territory. It's the recognition and commitment to invest in human security. Nunavummiut, which means Nunavut residents, must have their basic needs met, including access to safe, affordable housing; reliable, affordable food supplies; and health care, education and training closer to home. The cost of living in the territory is simply not sustainable.

We welcome such federal programs as the Canada groceries and essentials benefit, which help, but those programs don't necessarily put into account the huge discrepancy in cost differences between southern and Arctic communities for food staples. Another example of a federal program that doesn't fit well in the Arctic context for Nunavut is the clean fuel regulations. Under the carbon tax, because there was recognition that the territory didn't have many alternatives to diesel use, Nunavut had a carve-out and exemption for fuel used in power generation, for flights north and for heating. We need the federal government to continue to recognize the unique challenges we face and adapt programs accordingly.

Mr. Chair, one in four Nunavummiut identify as being part of the hidden homeless. In Nunavut, 44% of people are severely food-insecure. How can we explore national Arctic security without ensuring that the people of the Arctic are safe and secure themselves?

We need to ensure that history does not repeat itself. The legacy of the Cold War and the DEW Line sites that still have a footprint in some of our communities remind us that we need to learn from past mistakes and do better. I am here today to advocate for the human aspect of security in Nunavut and across the Arctic as the federal government develops its Canadian Arctic strategy. However this strategy is finalized, it must include provisions to invest in Nunavummiut. There must be commitments and investments to raise their quality of life, not just for geopolitical safety but also to keep the promises made in the name of truth and reconciliation. Nunavut communities and Nunavut residents need to be strong and resilient to defend the Arctic.

I encourage members of this committee to balance the realities of conventional security with a commitment to the people of the region. Let's invest in them as much as in the ways we procure and transform our national defence strategies. Any dual-use and major projects to this end should include conditions to create opportunity and betterment for Nunavummiut and their communities.

As I mentioned, we need to acknowledge the real and painful history around Arctic sovereignty and avoid the mistakes of the past by listening. Nunavummiut are the knowledge-keepers. They have the lived experiences, the knowledge and the stewardship of the land and hold the expertise needed. Let northern voices guide you and let Nunavummiut be given access to the same support, standards and opportunities to thrive as other Canadians.

• (1540)

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, I want to thank the members of the committee for their attention and commitment to understanding the complexities of Nunavut and the Arctic as you work on this critical strategy. I appreciate your time and the opportunity.

I'm happy to answer any questions.

Matna, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you to both premiers for their opening statements.

We will now go to questions from the floor, beginning with MP Michael Chong.

You have six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills North, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing in front of us today.

I noted that in your opening remarks you mentioned infrastructure and the need for infrastructure. Today, I'd like to focus my questions on highways in the north.

Since 1988, Canada has had a national highway system. It was first endorsed and defined by the council of ministers, but when you look at what that highway system is, particularly in the north, it's a bunch of gravel roads. That's part of our national highway system. This is all data from Transport Canada's website. I looked at our national highway system in the Northwest Territories, for example, and I note that it goes to Wrigley, Yellowknife and Inuvik.

First of all, I'm wondering if you could tell us what exactly is the highway to Wrigley. Is it paved or unpaved? For the benefit of people watching, according to the latest data I have, about 1,687 kilometres of our national highway system is gravel. It's unpaved. That's what is defined as part of our national highway system.

I'm wondering what this part of our national highway system is. Is it a paved surface? Is it unpaved? Is it two lanes, one in each direction, or multi-lane? What is that highway?

• (1545)

Hon. R.J. Simpson: The highway to Wrigley is chip sealed for part of it, and part of it is gravel. When you come into the territory, it's chip sealed and two lanes the entire way. There have been ef-

forts made to widen the highway, especially coming out from Alberta, but there are very few sections where you would say we have shoulders on the road.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

Is the highway to Yellowknife paved or unpaved?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: It's chip sealed.

Hon. Michael Chong: Chip sealed as well, and is it one lane in each direction?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: Yes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Is the highway to Inuvik, at the north end of your territory, paved or unpaved? Also, is it one lane in each direction?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: It is one lane in each direction. It's chip sealed.

The Dempster Highway comes out of Yukon. On our side of the border, I understand, it's a pretty good highway. On the Yukon side, it's the exit to their territory, far away from their major centre, so I think there's a little less maintenance on that side.

Hon. Michael Chong: Is it largely gravel at that point?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: Yes, it's gravel.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

It's gravel, and that's part of our national highway system, folks.

I note that in Nunavut, in the mainland part of Nunavut, there is no part of our national highway system. Our national highway system ends in Flin Flon, Manitoba, and in Thompson, Manitoba. That's the furthest north it gets, south of Nunavut. As far as I can see, there is no part of our national highway system in the territory of Nunavut.

Is that correct, Mr. Main?

Hon. John Main: Yes, you're correct. It's quite an unfortunate fact that in Nunavut many of the basic pieces of infrastructure, such as highways, simply don't exist. The closest in terms of the mainland portion of Nunavut, the closest we can get in terms of land transport, would be the railhead, which ends at Churchill. I believe that at one point there were plans or a desire to extend beyond Churchill, but that was scrapped many years ago.

Hon. Michael Chong: For the benefit of the members of the committee and people watching, this isn't just a northerner problem. I noted in the latest data on Transport Canada's website that there are 245 kilometres of our national highway system in the province of Quebec that are unpaved and there are 332 kilometres of our national highway system in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador that are unpaved. Clearly there's a lot of work that needs to be done in connecting northern and remote communities to infrastructure.

Our lack of east-west and north-south infrastructure within our own country is increasingly revealing the vulnerabilities of our national economy in light of what's been happening with the threats coming from our largest trading partner and ally, so I fully support your call for more infrastructure for the north, particularly paved highways. That's really important. The modern economy runs on transport trucks and intermodal cargo containers. I think part of the reason things are so expensive in the north is that we can't get product there very easily, and often, particularly in the case of Nunavut, it has to go by plane. That explains in part why things are so terribly expensive up north.

This is a welcome debate that we're going to have here, so I appreciate your feedback on that.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1550)

Hon. John Main: Thank you for the words of support. We welcome any infrastructure investment into those basics. In terms of where we are right now, even gravel would be a huge jump forward for us.

Hon. Michael Chong: Sir, I agree with you. I remember reading about E.P. Taylor's first subdivision in Don Mills and the construction of it. At the time, people were talking about the construction of Highway 401. The criticism of the 401 at the time was that it was going to be built too far outside the city and that it was too far north of the city of Toronto to be a good highway. My view on this stuff is to build it, and they will come. If we build highways from the north to the south that are proper four-lane, divided, limited-access highways, I believe things will naturally flow from those kinds of projects.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We are out of time for that question.

We'll go next to MP Rob Oliphant. You have six minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, premiers, for being here. It's a privilege for us to have you here.

I'm not going to get too much into roads. I've driven on most of them. Give me a good gravel road over a bad paved road any day, like the shale on the Dempster Highway. If you want to drive with me sometime, anyone is welcome, but there's only room for one passenger because the back seat is full of spare tires. That's what you do, and you just assume your windshield will never be the same.

When most Canadians look at a map of Canada, they look at the demographic centres and the population along the southern border, and our minds go there. When I look at the map of Canada, Arviat is in the centre. If you go from Pond Inlet at the top to Point Pelee in southern Ontario, and from St. John's, Newfoundland to Victoria, or Whitehorse, which is west of Victoria, you're in the centre of Canada, and it really is something we have to get into our southern Canadian minds.

I think right now with what is happening with the geopolitical world we're in and the threats to our sovereignty, which we are hearing daily, I would have worries on both sides and in the middle. Those are the threats with respect to Greenland's sovereignty, which then remind us of the vulnerability in Nunavut, but also critical minerals. We don't have the Premier of Yukon here, but we have challenges from Alaska into Yukon, and we have Chinese challenges in the middle with critical minerals and mining. Right now, the north is on Canadians' minds, so we're looking for more input on our foreign policy and how Canada engages in the world with your input.

With respect to that, part of our Arctic foreign policy, which came out of the strategic document from 2019, is to have a better relationship with both the territorial governments and the indigenous governments.

Are we doing better at engaging you on issues that matter to all of Canada, or can we do better? If so, how could we do better to get your full participation? We've had indigenous leaders here from the north as well, but now we have the territorial governments, so particularly, how can we structurally engage your governments in thoughtful discourse on the world stage?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: Thank you for that.

When I think about how we, as a territory, can work with Canada to engage internationally, sometimes I'm at a loss because we're in a situation in which we don't have international exports. There are diamonds, but that's not something the territorial government controls. When I hear other jurisdictions talk about how they're working with other countries, going on trade missions...we're not there yet. We don't have highways, as was just discussed. That's the area where I find it difficult to talk about international relations, because we're still trying to get our foundation built in the north as part of Canada, let alone go out to other countries.

In terms of the engagement with the federal government, I will say that the current administration has been engaging heavily with us, and I feel like we are now being heard and listened to. We just met with Minister MacKinnon to talk about the Arctic infrastructure fund and what that should look like, so these things are being listened to at this point. Some more formalization around that relationship might be appreciated, but we're off to a great start, I would say.

• (1555)

Hon. John Main: I would echo those comments in terms of recent approaches to engaging with the Nunavut government. It's encouraging. My understanding is there's been a bit of a change in tone and, like you mentioned, there's more focus, at the moment, on the Arctic.

In terms of that inclusive approach to democracy, which is named in the Arctic foreign policy, and involving Inuit voices, it's very much in line with what we, as a public government, espouse: We want to make sure that Inuit organizations within Nunavut are given the proper space and recognition. We really view Inuit organizations as our partners in pretty much everything we do.

The only thing I want to add is that I keep on hearing that the Arctic is "having a moment", and my concern is that the moment will pass. What we really need is sustained engagement and investment. You can't undo decades of underinvestment with a moment; you need to counter that with a sustained, well-planned-out plan to build up the north as it should be.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: Can I ask about the Arctic Council? It is our premier platform that we use. We have suspended the membership of Russia because of its aggression in Ukraine. We have six permanent partners, which are indigenous groups. Is there a way for Canada to engage? The presidency right now, the chair is with the Kingdom of Denmark. It has, really, given it to Greenland to operate as the chair. Is there a way we can involve the territorial governments in the Arctic Council in more meaningful ways than we have in the past?

The Chair: Give a brief response, please, because we're running out of time.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I haven't been involved in the Arctic Council. I haven't gone to any meetings. It could just be that I'm in my second year and the opportunity hasn't arisen yet, so I can't speak too much about that here.

Hon. John Main: I would just simply state that we're open to considering ways to engage with the Arctic Council. I'm fairly new to the role of premier, so I can't speak much in terms of past engagements.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

It's important for us to have you here, Mr. Simpson and Mr. Main.

There is one topic that has come up often since we started this study. It's one thing to invest in the Canadian Arctic to strengthen the military presence and national security, but we mustn't lose sight of the fact that the investments that need to be made in communities are even more important.

I want to get your perspective. How essential is strengthening your communities in your territories in the context of the new in-

vestments that the federal government wants to make or is promising to make?

[English]

Hon. R.J. Simpson: Yes, I think it's extremely important. We have national security, which I see as the hard security. Then we have human security, which I think is often equated to sovereignty.

To me, sovereignty is seeing strong, vibrant communities. No one will ever question whether the Strait of Georgia between Vancouver Island and the mainland is international waters. It's built up and there are communities and people there. It's important that we do that, but in the territories we have a long way to go. There's a lot of trauma in the territories, a lot of poverty, underinvestment in basic infrastructure and an inability for residents to access basic health care. That's really what we focus on: creating economic opportunities, so infrastructure investment is very necessary, and complementary to that is the investment in the human security aspects.

Hon. John Main: I would echo those comments. Thank you for asking that question.

If you visit a Nunavut community, you will see with your own eyes issues around drinking water and basic infrastructure, like roads, marine infrastructure, power generation, schools and health facilities. We have a long list of infrastructure priorities that are needed to bring Nunavummiut up to a standard that's on par with southern Canada.

• (1600)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's one of my fears. There's a lot of talk about the international geopolitical situation, and it's becoming an excuse to put the cart before the horse, as we say, that is, to focus on large projects that are the subject of political debate, when at the same time, communities and populations have other needs that are more pressing. I want to make this point because there haven't been many major infrastructure projects in the Arctic since the 1950s, 1960s or 1970. There has been a complete lack of interest from the federal government for a long time.

Mr. Simpson, you just said a little earlier that you don't know whether the government will continue to take an interest in the Arctic. Why has the federal government completely disengaged from the Arctic? What can we learn from this lack of interest in the Arctic so that this doesn't happen again?

[English]

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I can't speak for the federal government, but I think the fact that we have one MP in the Northwest Territories, and only one MP in each of the territories, probably has a lot to do with it.

You're correct. There was investment in the fifties, sixties and seventies, and there were even plans in the seventies to do big, large-scale investments, but those have fallen off. I would also say part of the reason is that it is an expensive jurisdiction to do business in. If the government wants to build something or if businesses want to go in and do something, it costs more, and there's always a more attractive place to put those investment dollars. With that attitude, though, we wind up where we are: where there's not even an opportunity to generate wealth and prosperity in the territory.

Hon. John Main: To build on those comments, I think what's really needed and what is, in some ways, the most difficult aspect to it is that you're not going to be able to make changes overnight. If you make big investments in roads, ports, energy generation or transmission, it will take a long time for those investments to pay off and to be built.

I'm a politician. I think we can sometimes take the short-term view in terms of the next four years and what's needed. That's what I was trying to get at earlier. We need more than a moment; we need decades. We need the team Canada approach, and we need that team Canada approach to apply to the Arctic. It needs to be as non-partisan as possible. That would be my preference: seeing that sustained focus and investment in the north, which is a huge part of our Canadian identity.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Obviously, I like to hear talk of sovereignty, because I'm a member of the Bloc Québécois. We would be excellent allies if Quebec ever became sovereign, but that's another matter.

In terms of the most important investment priorities, do you have any concrete examples of projects that you think should be prioritized? Do you think the federal government listens when you propose projects that you think should be prioritized for funding?

[*English*]

The Chair: Give a brief response, again because we're just over the time.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I'll speak to one project, because it is almost there, which is the Mackenzie Valley Highway. That's the highway that would connect from Wrigley all the way up to the Arctic Ocean and to Inuvik. That would serve to lower costs for the residents in that region, who I think face the highest costs in Canada. It would connect families, connect communities and open up resource exploration and development opportunities. In terms of things that can get you the most bang for your buck the most quickly, I would say look at the Mackenzie Valley Highway.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go next to MP Lori Idlout.

Thank you for joining us today. You have five minutes.

Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut and provided the following text:*]

Qujannamiik Iksivautali.

Qujannamiirumavunga Katimajiralaat Ammalu Qaigasi.

[*Member provided the following translation:*]

Thank you Chair.

Thank you to the committee and to the witnesses.

[*English*]

First of all, thank you so much for including me in this important committee today with the witnesses.

Welcome to both of you. I think it's wonderful to see that you're sharing such common issues between the NWT and Nunavut and to hear you saying the same things I've been saying since I was elected in 2021. It means that what you've shared with us today in committee is not just something I've come up with by myself. It's pervasive and very important. We've heard, for example, that there was a time when investments were much higher. We saw these investments going to housing and to keeping the Arctic secure. I think we need to make it very clear that the Arctic has already been secured by Canada. We need to focus on keeping it, especially with climate change, the opening of the Northwest Passage and the potential that other countries will want to use the Northwest Passage. The purpose of foreign affairs....

When you think about it, why are we focusing on infrastructure projects in this study? I think from some of the examples we've heard from our constituents, our constituents basically live in third world conditions. We live in a first world country, and yet we have our constituents living in a third world state. I'm wondering if you could express a bit more strongly why you're pushing so hard for more infrastructure projects and basic needs.

That's for both of you, but perhaps you can start, John.

● (1605)

Hon. John Main: Thanks for that.

I had my cabinet colleagues here with me this week. At various points during the week, it struck me that a lot of what we're advocating for is the very basics. I mentioned them earlier. They're the very basics. As I answered earlier, gravel roads would be a huge leap ahead for us. An adequate modern drinking water infrastructure for all communities in Nunavut—there are 25—would be a huge leap ahead.

There's a reason we're pushing so strongly or making sure there's this awareness. My concern is that the Arctic could be looked at as a blank canvas, or could be looked at simply in terms of borders and defence. You made a very good point in your preamble, that the Arctic is already secured. There are already Inuit living in the Arctic, as there have been for thousands of years and will be into the future. We need to recognize those terrible conditions that exist in many of our communities. We need to recognize that those conditions can be changed and that we can catch more than one ptarmigan with one bullet in terms of defence interests, community interests, human security, economic interests and economic development.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I will say that we're pushing hard so that northerners can have the same opportunities as people in the rest of Canada. I think things like roads are taken for granted elsewhere. You can see in the highway and rail system from east to west the economic opportunities that has created. That's what we're looking for—economic opportunities and a standard of living on par with the rest of Canada.

I understand that we're rural and remote, and we're not going to have all the services you would find in a city, but as you mentioned, a lot of the services are substandard. We need to do better in Canada.

Thank you.

Lori Idlout: More specifically to Premier Main, let's talk about a couple of examples of projects that the federal government had promised to invest in and that are not completed yet are the Arctic Bay marine infrastructure port and the Qikiqtarjuaq marine port.

I wonder if you could share with us how important the completion of those ports would be for Nunavut, and how Canada could show that it will defend the Arctic by investing in these projects and in airport infrastructure. I know that reliability in the north is quite reduced because of the lack of infrastructure for weather stations and for what pilots must rely on to be able to make sure they can continually land in all the 25 fly-in communities. I know how important it is to make sure we're getting those investments to increase that reliability in order to help reduce the costs of the fly-in communities that we're suffering in with the cost of living in the north.

• (1610)

The Chair: Please give a quick response, if possible.

Hon. John Main: Thank you.

Briefly, in terms of aviation, thanks for highlighting that it is a key need. We have only a couple of our airports where the airstrips are paved. In terms of paved versus gravel, there's that issue. The maintenance of airstrips as well as lengthening them would benefit transport, as well as cost of living in some instances.

In terms of marine infrastructure, that's an area where we want to see more investment. We see it as dual use or multi-use in terms of benefiting defence interests and community interests, as well as the economic benefit from the fisheries.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are going to the second round of questions, beginning with MP Aboultaif.

You have five minutes.

Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Premiers, thank you for appearing before committee today.

Premier Simpson, in September 2025, you made the argument that the “North is already shaping Canada's future” in four ways: “sovereignty and security” through the “permanent presence” of viable communities and military infrastructure, “critical minerals”, “Indigenous economic self-determination” and “climate resilience”.

My question is for Premier Main. Do you agree with that? Are you on the same page as Premier Simpson?

Hon. John Main: More or less on the broad strokes, yes. We're wanting to see a balanced approach. In terms of infrastructure or funding efforts, I think we can't just focus on one aspect of the needs, check the box and say, okay, we'll move off. This is a multi-faceted problem created over a long time.

My belief is that there's a long pattern of underinvestment. To solve that, it takes a sustained effort over time and balanced investment in different areas in our communities.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

Premier Simpson, do you believe that the federal government is on the same page with you and with your vision?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: Yes, I do. I've had great meetings with the Prime Minister and other ministers as well—Minister Chartrand and Minister McGuinty—and I do feel as though we are all on the same page.

I have a pretty big vision for the territory and what it could look like in the future. I recognize our opportunities. To realize that vision, it's going to take some major investments, and I feel as though those major investments are in the pipes.

Ziad Aboultaif: In the short term, do you see that the vision of the federal government is within your vision to solve and that there's something that can be done quickly to make sure the territories are looked after? Right now, they are at the centre of our sovereignty issue.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: Yes. Right now, there's a lot of money allocated for defence. I know that a pre-procurement notice came out today and had some big dollars attached to it for the Northwest Territories. There's an opportunity where the federal government is advancing its vision and also an opportunity for economic benefit to the people of the territory if it's done right. As well, we have some other big projects that I expect are going to advance in the short term.

Ziad Aboultaif: Can you name one of the projects that you believe that will go first to the territories?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: The Mackenzie Valley Highway has certain sections already permitted. We're wrapping up the phase one environmental assessment. It's good to go immediately.

Ziad Aboultaif: This question is for both of you.

What is the time frame in which you think we can have a military presence in the Arctic?

Premier Main, I believe you said that 44% of the people out there feel unsafe.

Do both of you feel unsafe being there? Do you believe that a military presence can be coming in as soon as you and the people expect it to?

Hon. John Main: Just to clarify, the 44% was in terms of food insecurity. That's what I mentioned in my comments.

In terms of military presence, I believe the existing footprint in Iqaluit is going to be augmented. You're asking what the timeline is. I believe that a northern operational support hub to be developed in Iqaluit is at the front of the queue.

We welcome additional investments into additional communities. Just like in southern Canada, we have regional centres or larger communities that have more infrastructure, more resources and generally more wealth, and then we have the outlying communities, which are more disadvantaged economically in terms of infrastructure. We welcome investment that's balanced geographically across the territory.

• (1615)

Ziad Aboultaif: Premier Simpson, that question is for you too, on the same topic.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: No, I don't feel unsafe. Part of the reason for that is if you look at the Arctic, no one is invading the Arctic and coming over the top. There's an old saying that if the Russians invaded, the first thing we'd have to do is send out a rescue party. It's not an inviting landscape for that type of operation.

In terms of how soon, we have the headquarters for the Joint Task Force North in Yellowknife. We have a forward operating location in Inuvik. There's already work happening there, and I know there's more work coming. As well, we have Operation Nanook, which is the military exercise that happens in the Arctic, and that is being expanded, from what I understand.

Ziad Aboultaif: I have one final question. Are there any specific items where there's disagreement with the federal government on any issues up there?

That's for both of you, in 10 seconds each, if you can.

The Chair: Give a brief response.

Hon. John Main: On the agreement with the federal government at this point in time, things are pretty collegial. I'm very encouraged with the overall direction of the actions that will follow the words. I think that's where we'll be watching very closely. If we do run into any areas where we don't agree with the approach, we're going to make sure we voice those, but at this point there's nothing that comes to mind.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I agree.

Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The Chair: We will go next to MP Mona Fortier.

You have five minutes.

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you so much for being here and sharing in person, and showing us the needs but also the realities you have in the north. I have this dream to go one day. I have not had the privilege of going to Nunavut, but I have been to Yellowknife. I have experienced it for a short time, and it is very different. Canadians need to learn that there are two realities of the north and the south, and we can't just copy and paste and send it up north. Thank you for sharing more today.

We were all very surprised to hear, of course, President Trump trying to take some space in the Greenland territory. What's the mood in the Northwest Territories and in Nunavut? How are people looking at what's happening with the south and our southern neighbour? How are we positioning ourselves for sovereignty and security? What's the mood on the ground in your territories?

Hon. John Main: In terms of Greenland, I'll qualify my response and say that I'm not an expert or an authority in foreign policy. Obviously, that's a federal function that we respect, and we work closely with our federal partners in that regard.

The mood regarding Greenland, from what I can gather, is a mix of concern, anger and solidarity with Greenland. Obviously, there are strong cultural links between the Inuit in Nunavut and the Inuit in Greenland. I myself am not Inuk—I'm non-indigenous—but there are those cultural, ancestral and language links. They're our neighbours and it's very unsettling for us, in a general sense, to be hearing that type of talk.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: Nunavut is much closer to Greenland, obviously, but it did bring things a little close to home. Any time you talk about armed conflict on your borders, it is concerning. I know someone who's a bit of a pacifist who went out and booked an appointment to get their firearms licence, so some people are taking this very seriously, and we see the escalation.

I want to comment on something you said earlier, that you can't copy and paste what works in southern Canada and put it in the north. That's the one message I always try to hammer home to the feds: Think about the north and understand the fact that the reality is you can't do it, so always have something that is tailored to the north if you want it to work.

Thank you.

Hon. Mona Fortier: The Arctic is experiencing a lot of change, and we are witnessing today the need for infrastructure and more support in food security and to work with indigenous peoples to protect the land from what climate change is doing. Can you talk to us a little bit about how we need to protect the environment right now in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut?

• (1620)

Hon. John Main: In terms of protecting the environment, we could have a stand-alone meeting on this. One thing that we'd like to do in Nunavut is reduce our carbon footprint in terms of our power generation. Right now, we have 25 stand-alone microgrids, and we're burning diesel 24-7 in all of our communities. We're moving towards more renewables. We'll have our first community-scale solar farm coming online in Nauyasat in the coming months, so that's very exciting for us. That's one example. We realize that diesel fuel is not the lowest carbon option.

One other item I'll mention very briefly in terms of dealing with climate change is that we need to make sure that our infrastructure is resilient and built properly, to spec, so that it can deal with things like shifting permafrost and so that it's protected against sudden floods. That's another huge area that we're dealing with.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I would say that when your house is on fire, you don't worry so much about how you're going to fire-smart and what sort of siding you're going to use. You're worried about putting the fire out.

We're in that position in the territory. We had back-to-back years in 2022 and 2023 of the biggest natural disasters in the territory's history. I live on the shores of the Great Slave Lake, one of the biggest lakes in the world. It had its highest water level on record in 2022 and the lowest water level on record in 2023. In 2022, we had a massive flood in my community, and in 2023, 70% of the territory was evacuated due to wildfires.

We do have very strong environmental standards in the territory, but we're at the point where we need to manage our environment. We need to do fire-smarting and things like that. It really is about that resilience and ensuring we have appropriate infrastructure.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have MP Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I think it's perfectly legitimate to give my turn to Ms. Idlout.

[*English*]

Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik.*

Thank you so much, Alexis, for sharing your time. I really appreciate it.

I want to ask about a specific project that's been supported by the Nunavut Association of Municipalities. The association drew up a resolution asking for the federal government to fund a search and rescue base in Sanirajak.

Premier Main, could you speak to that, to how that would help keep the Arctic secure and to how that could maybe be beneficial to better foreign relations, knowing that Canada is doing what it can to keep the Arctic secure?

Hon. John Main: The Nunavut Association of Municipalities is an important stakeholder to us as a government. We work with it on any number of different issues, including community, public safety,

infrastructure and recreation. It's an important group, and we do take its resolutions seriously.

I'm not going to speak specifically to Sanirajak. I think I'll speak more broadly in terms of the territory as a whole.

We recognize that search and rescue capabilities are important and that safety for harvesters is important. If you look at the map of Nunavut, you'll see that there are no links in between communities. However, there are links. People are travelling back and forth between communities by boat and by snowmobile. That's Inuit traditional knowledge in action. Those trails do exist; the routes do exist. As a government, we have an interest in wanting to support the safety of our residents, no matter where they are. Search and rescue is one of those key assets that we need in every community so that when emergencies do arise, human lives and safety can be protected.

Lori Idlout: This is a question for both of you.

Do you think that the \$1-billion Arctic infrastructure fund will be enough to help keep the Arctic secure?

• (1625)

Hon. John Main: It's encouraging to see that Arctic infrastructure fund being allocated, but I think the proof will be in seeing where the money goes and how it's given out. If it's disbursed widely, I doubt that it will be enough to meet our needs. If it's targeted properly, it's an encouraging first step.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We next go to MP Kronis.

You have five minutes.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you very much for being here. This is an incredibly interesting session, and it's a really important one. I appreciate your candour and your sharing your experiences with us.

One of my nephews is a Rubik's cube fan. Sometimes, when you're sitting there and you can't solve a puzzle, one of the things you need to do is turn the cube around. The incredible thing about looking at this country from the perspective of the north and the perspective of the Arctic is that it helps get us off the idea that we have one neighbour. In the Arctic, you have seven or eight neighbours and China, which is showing an awfully close interest in the goings-on up there these days.

I think the topics you're bringing up around quality of life are very important, but I thought we might take a bit of a deviation from that in one round.

Could you share with us some of the things you see as you look across the ocean and into other countries, through your cultural relationships with other indigenous peoples who are in the northern parts of those countries? Share with us the really valuable things those countries are doing in their north that we should maybe consider doing in ours.

I'm happy to have either one of you start on the interesting projects and things they're doing. How are their norths changing, and what should we be doing to respond?

Hon. John Main: That's a great question. If you look around the circumpolar north and the circumpolar Arctic, and you look at Nunavut, for example, you'll see just a staggering lack of infrastructure and investment.

I spent a brief time in Norway when I was still a student. Look at the highway up to Tromsø. It was extremely expensive for the government. Engineering-wise, it was a huge challenge. They took it on and it's built, and now you have a city there in the high Arctic that is flourishing.

I believe your committee should be looking at these other jurisdictions that have invested in the past decades. It didn't happen overnight. They put in place this foundational infrastructure for their north, and they're reaping the rewards. That's what we from Nunavut have been advocating for. We've been advocating for these types of foundational investments in terms of building the country north. They haven't happened yet. We're looking for them to start sometime soon.

Tamara Kronis: Do you have an example?

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I haven't travelled extensively to the circumpolar world, but I've looked at maps and I see the infrastructure on the maps, and there's a notable gap in Canada's Arctic. When I was down in the United States, in D.C., with the rest of the premiers, I spoke with a lot of our allies down there—we have a lot of allies and a lot of representatives—and even they expressed concern that Canada's Arctic is the soft underbelly of North America when it comes to security. I think we need more security infrastructure. Because of the population density of some of the other Arctic nations, they can do more with things like education. Once we get that infrastructure in place, we can start looking at those.

I'll say we do some things well in the north. I think reconciliation and working with indigenous peoples is one of our highlights that we can share with the rest of the world.

Tamara Kronis: That was actually going to be my follow-up question, because the impact of development and investment in the north will inevitably be population growth. I'm wondering if you're concerned about the special culture of the north in Canada being diluted.

What measures can we take, or what can you do to help preserve that unique culture and your way of life as that development happens?

• (1630)

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I would start by saying I'm not too worried about population growth. You have to be a certain type of person to live in the north, and there are plenty of opportunities. There are already more jobs than there are people, and we can't get people to move north because it's cold. However, there's a lot that we can do and that we need to do in terms of preserving cultures, education, language and all of those types of things.

Given the time, I'll hand it over to Premier Main.

Hon. John Main: As a non-indigenous person, I'm not really comfortable answering that question. However, in terms of dilution of demographics, Nunavut is 85% Inuit in population.

In terms of population growth, though, we are already dealing with the challenges. Our communities, some of them, if you look at them per capita, are the most rapidly growing places in all of the country, and it's organic growth. We have a very high birth rate in our communities—not all of them—so we're dealing with the challenges that come with that, in terms of housing, drinking water, energy, economic opportunity. We already have that population growth happening. If there are foundational investments in infrastructure that bring more investment and population growth to the north, we will make sure we're keeping up with that growth. However, we would welcome foundational investments in infrastructure.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we go to MP Tim Watchorn.

Welcome to the committee. You have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Tim Watchorn (Les Pays-d'en-Haut, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had to go to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development to talk about infrastructure. I'm a civil engineer, so I'm passionate about infrastructure. I think it's very important to talk about it.

I would like to talk about one project in particular, Mr. Main, the Iqaluit Nukkiqsautiit project, a hydroelectric project that will significantly reduce hydrocarbon consumption, thereby making your energy sovereignty more dependent on electricity.

How is the project progressing? Is it progressing to your satisfaction? How is the federal government's \$20 million investment to begin analyzing this project helping you?

[*English*]

Hon. John Main: I'll just state that the Nunavut government is not the proponent of that project. It's being led by an Inuit-owned company, and our energy utility is playing a supporting role. It is engaged, working very closely alongside the proponent.

The need to get off fossil fuels in our power generation is there. We have four major projects that we've identified across Nunavut. Two of them are port and/or road projects, and two of them are energy related—the Iqaluit hydroelectric project and the Kivalliq hydro-fibre link, which would connect us to Manitoba's hydro grid. All four projects are being led by Inuit companies. In terms of economic reconciliation, it's quite striking for us, as a territory, that we have these major developments that are being led by Inuit-owned interests.

[*Translation*]

Tim Watchorn: I think this is a model that should be replicated elsewhere. We're already starting to see it in the west. I think it's very productive for local communities.

You mentioned infrastructure. I'm a member of the Standing Committee on National Defence. We decided to invest heavily in defence, to the tune of \$8 billion over the next five years and \$73 billion over the next 20 years, to modernize our defence infrastructure.

Mr. Simpson, earlier you mentioned dual-use projects. What would be the priority of dual-use projects in terms of investments in the north?

[English]

Hon. R.J. Simpson: When it comes to dual-use infrastructure—and I've had this conversation with Minister McGuinty as well—I don't expect the federal government to know what the communities need for dual-use infrastructure, so they need to talk to us. I don't know what the military needs for its dual-use side of this, the security side, so there really needs to be collaboration.

However, if you're going to have military installations increase their presence in communities, we'll probably need better municipal roads, an upgrade to the water treatment plant, maybe more community facilities for recreation—things like that. That's really where I see the dual-use infrastructure, as well the things like airports and runways. Those are more the typical DND things that they would like to see. We're trying to encourage them to see that there's more to that than just airports.

• (1635)

Tim Watchorn: Premier Main, what are your thoughts?

Hon. John Main: In terms of transportation and infrastructure like ports, roads, power generation and water reservoirs, these are the types of things we see as fitting into the dual-use aspect. We've been having interesting discussions around what part of the dual use needs to come first. Which one is the dog that pulls the sled? Is it the military interest that is the primary driver and then the civilian aspect is a little thing that's tacked on the side, or is it the other way around in terms of how we look at this?

That's where, similar to my colleague, we have been engaged in conversations with the Department of National Defence to try to understand better. We've also been in conversations with our Inuit organization partners in Nunavut to come to an agreement and put forward a shared position on this issue.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go next to MP Michael Chong to start the third round of questions.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again for appearing. There are a lot of interesting topics being discussed here.

I'd like to talk again about infrastructure, because it's come up so much. Specifically, I'd like to talk about waste water and water treatment infrastructure.

You have Yellowknife, Hay River and Inuvik in the Northwest Territories. In Nunavut, you have Iqaluit, Kimmirut, Pangnirtung and dozens of other smaller communities. I once hiked across Baffin Island. I flew into Pang, as they say, and then went up the Weasel River, and I was surprised to see in Pangnirtung that the

waste water and water treatment was all by truck moving between each home and the plant, but my understanding is that other communities do it differently.

I understand as well that in many parts of the north, communities are exempt from the nationally regulated water and waste-water treatment standards and there have been issues with providing safe drinking water with waste-water effluent discharges and the like. In 2021, I think, in Iqaluit there was a scare about the water treatment system when it got fuel contamination in it.

What needs to be done in your communities, whether it's Hay River, Yellowknife, Inuvik, Kimmirut, Iqaluit, Pangnirtung or the other several dozen fly-in communities, to ensure that people have basic safe drinking water and that sewage effluent is managed at national standards?

Hon. John Main: It's a big issue. Our key concern is around the drinking water. Obviously, the waste water is a concern for us, or a need, but the top priority between those two is obviously the drinking water.

What we need is sustained infrastructure funds from our federal partners that are flowed to us in a way that's appropriate for our realities. When you look at building a new water treatment plant, one of the communities I represent, Whale Cove, went through what I believe was nine years of not constant but on and off again boil water advisories.

Recently we got a new water treatment plant, and it's state of the art. It was done with a component of federal funding. That federal funding was provided to us in a way that was flexible. It didn't have a ton of strings attached because it's complicated to build infrastructure in Nunavut where we only have shipping available in limited summer months. We're able to do it as a territorial government in terms of the drinking water; we just need access to the quantity of funds we need. The ballpark we need in Nunavut is about \$600 million as of today.

• (1640)

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I can say that in Hay River, where I live, we need a water treatment plant. The territory is in a position where a lot of infrastructure was built in the sixties and seventies and now replacements are coming due. Things are not the same price they used to be, and it was the federal government often paying for it in the past. We don't have those deep pockets in Inuvik. Because of the landscape there, they don't have underground services. They have a utilidor, which is basically an above-ground piping system that's enclosed. I know they are going through the process of having to replace that piece by piece, and that is tens of millions of dollars, so that's a significant impact on the community.

In places like Yellowknife, underground infrastructure is often just so expensive because it's rock, and to blast through the rock is cost-prohibitive. I guess money is what we need to upgrade all of these things from the old technology.

Thanks.

Hon. Michael Chong: I'll just note that there's a lot of money flowing from the federal government to municipalities in the south of Canada for waste-water and water treatment systems. I know that in my riding and in ridings in the region I represent in southern Ontario, waste-water and water treatment plants have been funded to the tune of hundreds of millions of federal dollars and more over the last decade.

The federal government is in the business of funding waste-water and water treatment systems. I would note that I think it has a particularly unique responsibility to the three territories, because they are not independent sovereign orders of government like the 10 provinces are. They are essentially closer to the federal government and its responsibilities than are the 10 provinces, yet we fund significantly municipalities and municipal systems in provincial areas of jurisdiction.

Chair, I just make that point. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we go to MP Anita Vandenberg.

You have five minutes.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you very much for being here. There are a number of things you've said, particularly about the ability to travel in between...that I think are very striking for us, and thank you for that.

We had some previous testimony about the possibility of development in the north when it comes to AI and data centres. Particularly, I think, the term "free cooling" was mentioned, because of course it's cold and data centres produce a lot of heat, which costs a lot of energy, but then, of course, the first thing that came out was that there would need to be fibre to do that.

I wonder what your opinion is of that. Is that something that would create economic opportunity? Is it something that would be desirable? I would just be very curious to hear your views on that, on data centres and, of course, on sending fibre up to the north.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: We have a fibre line that runs all the way the length of the Mackenzie Valley, and we just completed a link with the Yukon, so now there should be some redundancy there. It was made intentionally larger so that it could carry significant amounts of data, because up in Inuvik there's a satellite station where a lot of data is downloaded and then shipped south. If there are jobs associated with these, that would be great, but I know that in some of the data centres you might have four jobs.

We don't necessarily have the power capacity right now, but I know there is interest, say, up in the Far North, in the Beaufort Delta region, because it is cold much of the year. It has significant amounts of natural gas, and a natural gas well is coming online, so there is opportunity in the north. There hasn't been significant discussion, although there has been some.

Thanks.

Hon. John Main: It gives me an opportunity to just reiterate that we're not connected to Canada from Nunavut in any way. There are no roads. There are no power lines and no fibre lines. We would like to see those come up.

The Nunavut government has multiple projects in the fibre realm. Its subsea cable projects are yet to be built, but we have secured some federal funding towards them. We recognize that connectivity is one of those key ingredients to a better quality of life, whether it's health care or economic development. We're working towards it.

• (1645)

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you.

Okay. It's very important, but maybe not the first priority, and if it's linked to jobs, I understand.

When you have people in a region getting Canadian health care and Canadian social insurance numbers, that makes it very clear that it is Canadian territory. Somebody said something that really struck me and embarrassed me a bit, and I've pulled back from that. One of the witnesses said that we have to be careful that we don't treat people as human flagpoles.

I just wonder, because obviously the people are vitally important, what your view is on that.

I did hear you, Premier Main, talk quite a bit about the need for human security, which, frankly, I think is extremely important.

Could I put that to both of you?

Hon. John Main: Yes. As a non-indigenous person, I think this is an opportunity for me to state that there are duties that fall to every Canadian in terms of educating ourselves about the terrible history of colonization and how indigenous people have been treated by the Canadian government in the past. That includes the history around the High Arctic relocatees. They were moved from northern Quebec to the High Arctic in Resolute Bay and Grise Fiord. Many of their descendants still live there. The term "human flagpoles" is one they still use today with regard to being relocated from one area to another.

There is, I think, a general sense from the territorial government that we want to see investment and that the federal government does have a duty it needs to fulfill, particularly to Inuit. We see that with issues around the non-insured health benefits program, which is chronically underfunded. There is a duty of the federal Crown in that case. It's not being fulfilled, in our opinion, in terms of the quantity of funds towards essential health care services for Inuit.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Brunelle-Duceppe, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Sometimes, there is a disconnect between what is said in Ottawa about a territory and what is actually happening in that territory. Currently, when people talk about the Arctic in Ottawa, they talk about territorial sovereignty, defence, China, Russia, Donald Trump and his ambitions for Greenland. That's what's being said in Ottawa right now. I'm not saying that's wrong, but since you represent the people of these territories, you are certainly in the best position to tell us what is really being said and what is actually happening in your respective territories.

When you meet people at the grocery store, do they talk to you about the same things that are being discussed in Ottawa? That's more or less the question I wanted to ask you, because I don't have a lot of time.

[*English*]

Hon. R.J. Simpson: I will say that, you know, we are still Canadians in the Northwest Territories. We do say a lot of the same things. We talk about Greenland. We talk about the United States. But when we're in the grocery store, we're also talking about the prices.

I'm in the most southern community in the territory, and groceries are probably 30% higher than just across the border in Alberta. In Yellowknife the prices are a little better, but when I go into most communities, I don't know how people can afford to live there. There's a lot of harvesting on the land. People go out and hunt and supplement their diets. In many cases, I would say it would be almost impossible to survive if you just went to the grocery store.

While we do talk about these other bigger issues, there's a lot more focus on people's day-to-day lives and just being able to pay the rent and buy groceries.

Hon. John Main: I would echo those comments. At the grocery store, people are talking about the cost of food. People are talking about housing. People are talking about needing to find employment and about schooling and health care. These are the essentials of life that we're talking about.

We are challenged. Our communities are challenged. I'm not going to sugar-coat it. If you come up to Nunavut and travel to any of our communities, you'll see with your own eyes the challenges facing our residents every day. That's why we come here to Ottawa. We come here to remind, to educate and to invite our partners up to Nunavut. We look forward to welcoming committee members to Nunavut, too, if they ever should come up.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Idlout, you have 30 seconds.

Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik*.

I was very lucky in my first Parliament to have successfully gotten the indigenous and northern affairs committee to come to both Nunavut and the NWT.

They are very impactful visits. I invite the foreign affairs committee to come to a place in Nunavut, maybe specifically Grise Fiord or Resolute. Some of your questions I hear directly from con-

stituents, such as Larry Audlaluk, who lives in Grise Fiord and needs reassurances from this government that he will be protected and that he will have some role in protecting the Arctic.

This one is for both of you, perhaps. I wonder if you could summarize for us why it's so important that it's the people of the Arctic who help keep the Arctic secure and not just the military flying in.

The Chair: Give a very brief response, please.

Hon. John Main: I think it's important, because it's what we've heard from our partners in the Inuit organizations. It's embodied and included in our Arctic security and sovereignty strategy. There needs to be ownership and there need to be supports and benefits for Nunavummiut and for Inuit through security and sovereignty. It can't be something that's imposed on us from the south; it needs to be done in co-operation and collaboration with the people of Nunavut. That's what we're looking for in terms of our federal government and investments that are ahead.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we go to MP Kronis. You have five minutes.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you very much.

I'm happy to get the chance to continue the conversation with you.

We've talked a bit about looking outward and we've talked a bit about the infrastructure needs. I wanted to ask you about the people. I specifically wanted to ask you about your youth and the challenges that are facing your communities right now.

In my communities in my riding, I talk to youth who are struggling, and I can only imagine how much that gets amplified when you add in the extreme isolation and remoteness. Vancouver Island sometimes feels really far away, and it's comparatively close in a lot of ways.

Of course, one of the biggest issues in my community is the addictions crisis. I'm wondering what that looks like in your communities. I want to give you a chance to talk about that a bit and what your needs are. We used to have a minister of mental health and addictions. We don't have that anymore under this government. I wanted to give you the chance to speak about it. Thank you.

Hon. R.J. Simpson: There are a lot of successful youth. I don't want to paint everyone with the same paintbrush. We have a lot of very successful youth who go on to become doctors and lawyers and all these things.

Intergenerational trauma is the biggest challenge that we face in the Northwest Territories, I would say. Half of our population is indigenous. We have the highest proportion of residential school survivors in Canada. The longer I'm in this job, the more I see intergenerational trauma and its manifestations across all aspects of life, and that includes things like addictions and drugs.

Especially in the last five years, we've seen a lot of interest from organized crime and organized gangs that come up to the territory and push hard on drugs. It started in my community, being the closest to the south with a highway connection. We did our best to try to stop that, but it's now expanded into virtually every community in the territory—even those without road access. It's becoming a real epidemic. We had one community where six people died in a week, and there are 700 people in that community, so everyone is impacted.

I'll leave it at that and hand it over to Premier Main.

Thank you.

Hon. John Main: Thank you.

In terms of youth in Nunavut, I'd like to point out that we have a very youthful, young population. If you look at the demographic pyramid for Nunavut, it's very broad at the base. When you look to the future, those youth are going to grow up, they're going to finish school, hopefully, and they're going to move into the workforce. One of the key challenges that we're facing is providing enough infrastructure and enough opportunity for this huge number of youth who are currently living in Nunavut, and making sure that their mental health needs are being taken care of.

We have a very sad and gripping suicide crisis in the territory. Suicide isn't something that we will eliminate or solve through health care alone. The solution needs to be multi-faceted. It needs to be around economic opportunity, educational opportunity and the ability to build careers for themselves and their families.

I don't want to lean on the negative too much. There are so many talented, smart youth across Nunavut. They are the future. They're inspiring to politicians like me. The challenges they're facing are multi-faceted. Again, I want to stress the fact that so much of our population is in the youth demographic, and that puts a lot of pressure on the territorial government in keeping up.

• (1655)

Tamara Kronis: I want to frame it that way because, of course, addictions and mental health issues are not just youth issues. However, when you have that high percentage and proportion of youth, and you need to depend on people, who are in that stage of life, for your future, it becomes hard. What can Canadians do to support you on this journey?

Hon. John Main: I think the team Canada approach to the Arctic, to the north, is needed. We need southern Canadians to understand Nunavut, and, then, we need you as advocates. We have only a single MP—who does a very good job—but we need southern Canadians. We need allies. It can be someone from Toronto or Vancouver who understands the north and who sees the potential, the opportunity and the need to bring Nunavut residents and northerners up to the same standard that can be seen in southern Canada.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Finally, we go to MP Rob Oliphant. You have five minutes.

Hon. Robert Oliphant: I think I am fine. The premiers have had a long day.

I thank you for your work—all the time, but especially today. I hope to get you involved in things like the Arctic Council.

The Chair: I join MP Oliphant and all of my colleagues in thanking you for your appearance before the committee and for your testimony. Thank you for making the time to answer questions today.

We will now briefly suspend the meeting so that we can go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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