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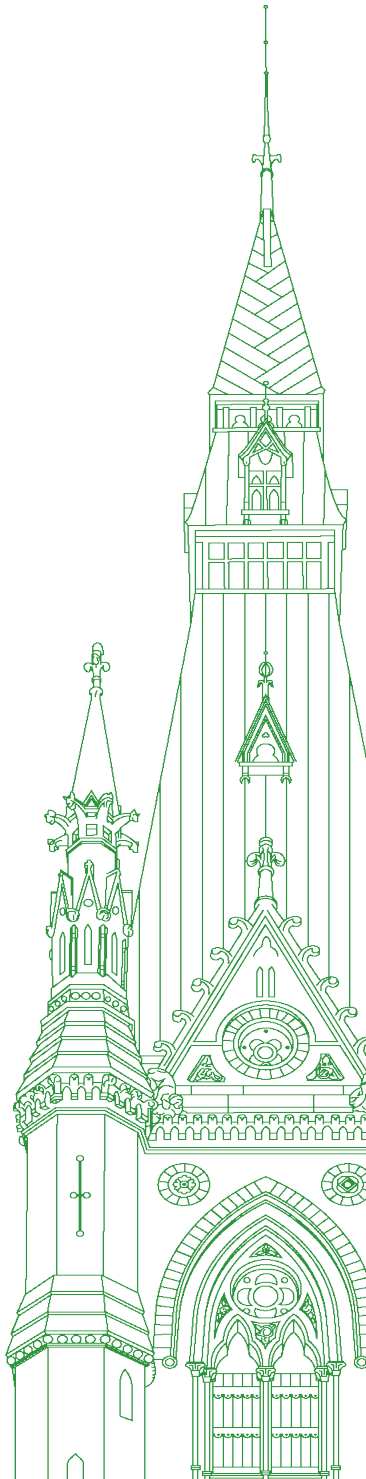

Chair: Terry Sheehan

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Thursday, June 4, 2026

● (0815)

[*English*]

The Chair (Terry Sheehan (Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 36 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We recognize that we meet on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is beginning its study of affordability challenges in northern Canada. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Members may be attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Our witnesses are on Zoom. Welcome.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking. At the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would like to now welcome our witnesses.

We have MRC du Golfe-du-Saint-Laurent, represented by Daren Jones, warden of the MRC. We also have the Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre, represented by Joseph Murdoch-Flowers, executive director.

You will each have five minutes. When you have about 30 seconds left, I'll let you know so you can finish up your thoughts.

Please begin, Mr. Jones.

Daren Jones (Warden, MRC du Golfe-du-Saint-Laurent): Good morning, everyone.

Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs regarding affordability challenges in northern Canada.

My name is Daren Jones, warden of the MRC du Golfe-du-Saint-Laurent, representing communities of the lower north shore of Quebec, a remote and isolated coastal region where affordability is not simply about prices but about transportation, infrastructure, food security, employment stability and basic access to services. The realities our communities face are unique, structural and long-standing. The following points are respectfully submitted to help provide additional context and recommendations from the perspective of the lower north shore.

On the question of employment insurance and ending “the black hole”, the lower north shore economy is seasonal by nature. The fishery, construction, tourism and many public services operate on a compressed timeline due to our climate and geography. It's not a choice; it's the economic reality of our location, yet the employment insurance system continues to impose what workers here call “the black hole”: the gap between the end of EI benefits and the start of the next seasonal work period.

For months, families on the lower north shore have no income, no bridges and no alternatives. This is a structural failure that punishes workers for living where they live and working in the industries their communities depend on. We call for this committee to put in a permanent legislative fix to eliminate the EI black hole for seasonal industrial workers, with particular attention to remote and isolated communities where no alternative employment exists during the off-season gaps.

On the question of interprovincial ferries, the lower north shore is geographically contiguous with Labrador, and our communities have deep historical, economic and family ties across provincial boundaries, yet there are no reliable interprovincial services connecting our shore to Newfoundland and Labrador.

An interprovincial ferry is not a luxury; it's a logistical extension of the transportation network that already exists at the eastern end of our corridor. It will reduce freight costs, improve patient transportation options, support tourism and provide critical redundancies to the *Bella Desgagnés* when it's out of service. We ask the committee to recommend federal support for permanent, multi-season interprovincial ferry connections serving the lower north shore.

Regarding federal divestitures of our ports and airports, the federal government's ongoing divestiture of small ports and airports is creating quite an infrastructure crisis on the lower north shore. These assets are not surplus infrastructure in an urban context. They are essential lifelines. Out of the nine that appear on a recent list for Quebec, seven are on the lower north shore.

When Ottawa transfers ownership of the remote wharfs or airstrips to a municipality or community group, it transfers not just an asset but a full burden of capital maintenance, insurance liabilities and regulatory complications onto communities with extremely limited fiscal capacities. A village of 400 people cannot absorb the capital renewal costs of federal breakwaters. A remote airport that serves as the only year-round link to health care systems cannot be treated as a disposable asset.

We ask that the committee recommend a federal moratorium on divestitures of ports and airports in remote and isolated communities until the proper framework is in place. Either retain federal ownership or maintenance responsibilities, or provide permanent capital endowments, significant enough to sustain the infrastructure in perpetuity. Divestiture without endowment is abandonment.

Regarding food sovereignty and local supplies, our cost of living runs 15% to 20% higher than that of Sept-Îles. Every product on every shelf carries the freight premium of our isolation. Beyond subsidy mechanics, we address food sovereignty directly.

The lower north shore has historically sustained itself through local food systems, fisheries, hunting and harvesting, but the regulatory and economic environment increasingly undermines these systems rather than supports them. Federal investment in local food infrastructure, cold storage and processing capabilities, as well as support for local harvesters, will reduce freight dependency, improve nutrition outcomes and strengthen our economic resilience. Food sovereignty is an affordability strategy, and we ask the committee to treat it as one.

On the question of fisheries supporting coastal communities, fishing is not merely an economic activity on the lower north shore. It is a cultural and economic foundation of our communities, and it is under threat.

Ending the sentinel fishery monitoring program for cod was a direct blow to our region. The sentinel fishery was not only a scientific tool; it provided meaningful employment, real-time logistical and ecological data and a genuine stake in the resources of the fisheries that have lived alongside it for generations. Its elimination impacts both income and knowledge at exactly the moment when cod stock recovery is becoming a real possibility.

We ask the committee to recommend reinstating it or to create a functional equivalent successor program for the sentinel fishery for cod. We also ask for a broader federal commitment to support small-scale community-based fishery diversifications on the lower north shore, including aquaculture development tailored for our coastal conditions.

● (0820)

In summary, my recommendations are as follows.

On employment insurance, permanently eliminate the EI black hole for seasonal industry workers, with a priority application on remote and isolated communities where no alternative employment exists during the off-season.

On interprovincial ferries, provide federal support for a permanent multi-season interprovincial ferry linking the lower north shore to Newfoundland and Labrador.

On ports and airports, declare a moratorium on the federal divestiture of ports and airports in remote and isolated communities until a framework is in place that either retains maintenance responsibility or provides a permanent capital endowment.

On food sovereignty, invest in local food infrastructure, cold storage, processing capacity and harvesting support on the lower north shore, treating food sovereignty as a core affordability and resilience strategy.

On fisheries, reinstate the sentinel fishery monitoring program for cod or a functionally equivalent successor, and commit to supporting community-based fisheries diversification and aquaculture development on the lower north shore.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we have Joseph.

You have five minutes.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers (Executive Director, Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre): Thank you very much.

I will speak in English and French.

The Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre is a food hub in Iqaluit. We are affiliated with a national food organization called Right to Food. Our centre serves the community with multiple holistic programs that provide food access, food skills and advocacy that respond to local needs.

I wish to speak to you today about three topics. The first is the community meal demand. The second is our research on the relationship between food insecurity and economic supports. The third is our vision for food sovereignty in Inuit Nunangat and Nunavut.

On community meal demand, we are most well known in our community for the community meal program. We cook and serve between 300 and 600 meals per day, five days a week. We have observed steady increases in the community meal demand that we are serving every day. We have seen our yearly meal count go from around 58,000 in 2022 to almost 91,000 meals last year. As of yesterday, we have served about 37,000 meals this year.

I'm very proud of the team at Qajuqturvik, who continue to meet the staggering demand for free, accessible, nutritious, quality food. We serve homemade meals in a comfortable setting where people joyfully eat and build community together. We believe that the increase in demand for meals speaks to the increasing economic challenges that people in our community face.

[*Translation*]

We have a research partnership with Dr. Sappho Gilbert, a researcher at Harvard University. She has studied the relationship between economic support measures, such as the Inuit child first initiative, and the demand for our daily meal program. We consider this demand a sign of food insecurity. In other words, if people are food insecure, they're more likely to participate in our daily meal program.

Our research shows that, when money is deposited in community members' bank accounts, food circulation soon follows in town. This provides temporary relief for our daily meal program, since the demand is then lower.

● (0825)

[*English*]

Our research with Dr. Gilbert supports the proposition that increasing people's incomes leads to decreasing food insecurity.

We offer a number of other food access programs, such as a produce box, a weekly country food offering to elders, an evening Inuit women's program and a range of special events, always involving food, joy and celebration because food is so good.

[*Translation*]

We believe that food sovereignty in Nunavut and Inuit Nunangat must go beyond emergency food access, if we want to support a truly northern food economy. In our view, this doesn't mean that greenhouses or freight containers should be turned into heated gardens.

That's why I'll now describe our vision for food sovereignty in Inuit Nunangat. It's a hunting-based economy.

[*English*]

Hunters and fishers have knowledge, discipline and skills that should be valued in the same way that farming is valued. We want the federal government to invest in creating a paid Inuit hunters' network across Inuit Nunangat. Creating a sustainable hunters' network program would mean paying hunters, covering the costs of going out on the land, investing in the capital infrastructure needed to safely harvest animals using traditional methods, and funding programs that ensure that this knowledge is passed down from elders and experienced hunters to young Inuit.

It also means working with other levels of government to create a regulatory environment where country foods can legally be sold and purchased, and where costs are subsidized until a sustainable market can be created. That would be much more effective than subsidizing the costs of shipping food from down south that is unaffordable and culturally irrelevant to many Inuit.

Significantly investing in employment and training opportunities and in income supports, with additional top-ups for northerners, is also key. We cannot significantly reduce food insecurity if we don't address incomes. Increasing incomes has to be a key part of the new national food security strategy, particularly in Nunavut, where a third of the population lives in poverty.

I hope you will seriously consider this perspective and include these recommendations in budget 2026.

I thank you very much for the opportunity to share here today.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Joseph.

We're going to our rounds of questions, and first off, we're going to the sponsor of this motion, Bob Zimmer.

Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you for coming, witnesses, on this affordability study.

Affordability is something you live with every day, and I appreciate the difficulty, even for you personally, of buying groceries in a place like Iqaluit and even further north. Look at a bag of groceries. It's already expensive in northern B.C., where I live. It's surprising how expensive it has become, but for you it's often probably double or triple that.

Affordability, simply put, is the financial ability of individuals or households to pay for essential goods and services such as housing, health care and food without experiencing financial hardship or compromising their ability to meet other basic needs.

Joseph, is food affordable in Nunavut?

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: No.

Bob Zimmer: Well, there you go.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Bob Zimmer: I have some other documents. The Prime Minister said last election, as quoted by Brian Lilley on September 16, 2025, “Canadians will hold us to account by their experience at the grocery store, when they are paying their electricity bill, when they or their children are looking for a place to live.” That is what Carney said, and it goes to exactly the definition of affordability.

By that measure, has the Prime Minister been successful thus far?

● (0830)

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I'm not going to comment on this particular Prime Minister. This is a long-standing issue that has been going on over multiple governments, Conservative and Liberal.

What we have observed is increasing demand and increasing income inequality, and the way we observe that in particular at the Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre is by the community meal numbers that we have seen increasing.

Bob Zimmer: I want to thank you for the work you do. You provide meals for those in need of food in your own community, where it's not cheap to do that. I appreciate your time and effort and your volunteers. Before I forget to say it, I just want to say thank you for your efforts.

You talked about previous governments. Nutrition north was an effort by our previous government to combat high food prices. It started off with good intentions, and it's done some good work. It's lowered the prices of some necessities, like milk and bread, and other foods at the grocery store, but it hasn't been perfect, for sure, and there are still some out-of-control prices in the north.

I have a document here, “Evaluation of the Nutrition North Canada Horizontal Initiative”, from December 2025. It says, “For example, in 2022, in Nunavut, 76% of Inuit experienced food insecurity.” Are you seeing a disparity between Inuit who are from Nunavut and those who come in who work in Iqaluit? Are you seeing a disparity in that sort of affordability? Is it hitting Nunavummiut more than visitors to the community?

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: Food insecurity disproportionately affects Inuit in Nunavut. It's for this reason that we advocate.... Inuit are disproportionately facing food insecurity. The culturally relevant food for Inuit is country food. Inuit want to eat country food that is locally harvested, such as caribou, seal, muktuk, clams and berries from the land in the local food economy. That is where the major focus of support for food security and food sovereignty in Nunavut must be, rather than on continuing to subsidize a southern-based diet. That goes to the retailers rather than directly benefiting Inuit harvesters and fishers.

Bob Zimmer: I appreciate what you said. You mentioned incomes earlier in your statement. I was up in the Baffinland iron mines earlier this spring when it was very cold but beautiful. We talked to many young workers there who are Nunavummiut. They said they really liked their jobs. That gave them not only the ability to earn incomes, but also the ability to go back home and eat a traditional diet. They could afford skidoos. They could afford side-by-sides. They also had the time to do it. They had two weeks on and two weeks off. They had a solid two weeks to get their harvest and provide for their families. They had houses they could afford.

To me, that was a good answer to the affordability challenge question. What is your answer to bringing incomes up and the economy up in Nunavut so that affordability becomes a lot easier of a question to answer?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, Joseph.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: There needs to be a diversity of opportunities, including those that are culturally relevant. This is why we advocate for a salaried hunters' network. It costs a lot of money to go hunting and fishing. The equipment costs a lot. We don't want hunters to have to make a choice between having a job at Baffinland and having a job hunting and fishing.

Hunting and fishing have a value to the community that goes way beyond just the piece of meat we're providing to our community. It's about connection, culture, wellness, suicide prevention, health and environmental knowledge. It's about all of those things, so we advocate for increased incomes in that direction in wage economies, but also in the hunting economy.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will go to the MP for Yukon, Brendan Hanley, for six minutes, please.

Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I'll continue with questions for Joseph. I certainly appreciate both of you being here for this very important study. I thank my colleague Mr. Zimmer for advocating for this very important study.

Mr. Murdoch-Flowers, it sounds like you have a very holistic vision, and you immediately made that connection. The relationship between income, economic sovereignty and food insecurity is not a mystery to us. You're in Iqaluit. You've seen a high increase in demand. Iqaluit has grown substantially over the last many years.

Can you talk about the connection between the growth in what you've seen in terms of income changes and changes in poverty...but also the relationship in the Baffin area at least, if not the wider area in Iqaluit, as being a centre, a capital, and therefore a reflection of the situation around the communities as well?

● (0835)

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I apologize, but I'm not quite sure I understand exactly the question being asked.

Brendan Hanley: It's about recognizing that Iqaluit in itself is, for instance, a nutrition north community, as are all the communities around the Baffin area.

Are you seeing movements of people to Iqaluit as a centre that might be related to need—housing needs and infrastructure needs—and poverty around the Baffin region, if not the wider region? Does that affect food demand in Iqaluit and demand on your centre?

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: First, I'll start from the position that Qajuqturvik's mandate really is local. It's Iqaluit-focused. That's what our mission is. It's what our mission statement focuses on: food security in Iqaluit, the capital.

Second, when we serve the cornerstone program, the community meal program, we do this in a way that is barrier-free. People come in, and we don't ask questions about who they are or where they are from. We don't have demographic information, so I can't speak empirically to that question. Anecdotally, yes, we hear about migration to the capital for various reasons, but I'm sorry; I can't definitively connect the increasing numbers at the food centre to that.

Brendan Hanley: That's fine.

Did you have an opportunity to participate in either the regional round tables that the Minister of Northern and Arctic Affairs was hosting or the summit that was held here in Ottawa a few months ago? Certainly, your ideas are reflective of what we heard through those fora.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I believe the summit was at the Chateau Laurier. No, Qajuqturvik chose not to participate in that summit; we declined the invitation.

Brendan Hanley: I would just offer this reflection, then: Your ideas are very consistent with some of the feedback the minister has been receiving, so this is well-received constructive advice.

I'm going to pass my time over to Mr. Greaves to finish this round.

The Chair: You have a minute and 15 seconds.

Will Greaves (Victoria, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Good morning, colleagues, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

My question is also for Mr. Murdoch-Flowers. Thank you for joining us, sir.

As you may be aware, earlier this year the Prime Minister announced an investment of $1 billion in the Arctic infrastructure fund to help build and expand the most important transportation infrastructure in the northern part of our country. I'm wondering if you could speak to how you think that money could best be allocated in the north to help address the supply chain challenges and cost of living issues there, particularly related to food affordability, as you've spoken to this morning. What could that money do to help reduce the cost of food for people in Iqaluit and other northern communities?

● (0840)

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I believe the Qikiqtani Inuit Association has provided some good work to us on investments in infrastructure—transportation infrastructure, small craft harbours and so on. That's transportation infrastructure in terms of airport upgrades to increase efficiencies of transportation to the Arctic, and then small craft harbours, deep-sea ports and so on for the marine economy.

In terms of infrastructure investments in the Arctic, there is the local food infrastructure fund, which we benefit from at Qajuqturvik for support of the hunting economy. We have applied for and received money that encourages us to participate in the hunting economy. I have a couple of hunters on staff who are excited about that.

In terms of—

The Chair: We have to go to the next questioner, but I'm sure this can come out later in questioning. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us today. I must say that, as the member of Parliament for a northern region, I understand their situation. By the way, I would like to extend my greetings to Mr. Jones, the warden of a Basse-Côte-Nord RCM located in my constituency.

We didn't talk about this, but perhaps we should explain that, in our case too, Mr. Jones, the Basse-Côte-Nord is an enclave. It's a bit like Nunavut, in the sense that there isn't any transportation. We're supplied by a ferry, which doesn't run year-round or on a regular basis. The problem isn't just the price of food. It's also access to food.

I have a great many topics to discuss with you. I'll certainly name a few, and I'll let you talk about the ones that you want to address. You represent all the Basse-Côte-Nord communities. However, if you have any information to add, please feel free to send it to the committee. My colleagues and I will take it into account in our report.

I'm thinking of the post office, for example. I know that, even for you to take part in today's committee meeting, you had to get organized. We can't send a headset to Basse-Côte-Nord in a week. It takes at least three weeks. Only Canada Post delivers mail there.

I'm thinking of the deduction for remote regions. A number of people in my constituency have talked to me about this issue. This deduction hasn't been indexed for years. Yet just about everything in the government is indexed. The deductions are designed to help northern residents in remote regions, but they aren't indexed. I think that this would be a good idea for all of us to work on.

We also have the seal hunt. You spoke about fishing, but we have the seal hunt in our area. I'm also thinking about licences. I found it interesting to hear you talk about the sentinel cod fishery licence. This government restriction is jeopardizing the fishing economy in our area.

Housing is another issue.

We also need to think about safety. We have many forest fires as well. So almost everything in our area is open to development. This is true for airports and wharves, but also for safety. Perhaps you could comment on this too.

I've contacted the Minister of Transport a number of times, but I still haven't received a response regarding the wharves in our area.

We talked about airports, but the wharves are also affected. We hear about defence and strategic infrastructure. However, at the same time, access to the land is being cut off in regions where people should live.

I could keep on talking about all matters relating to indigenous people. We have two indigenous communities in our area too.

We also have air passengers rights. The government is currently threatening these rights by turning over to the private sector all matters relating to complaints previously handled by the Canadian Transportation Agency. From now on, subcontractors paid by the airlines themselves will handle these matters. So we're wondering how people will be able to receive compensation. We know that this is extremely important in our area. Cancellations and delays take place almost every day.

I've said a great deal, but now I'll give you a turn to speak. Of course, you can send additional information to the committee in writing.

I have a lot to say, Mr. Chair.

I'll let you speak, Mr. Jones.

Daren Jones: Thank you, Mrs. Gill. I also have a great deal to say.

I'll give you an example. I'm in La Romaine this morning to take part in your committee meeting by video conference. I've taken the helicopter three times this week, and it was late all three times. There are always small changes, but that's fine.

I'll give you another example. The residents of the town of Chevery have access to gasoline delivered to Harrington Harbour by a Harnois company boat. I didn't choose Harnois, but this company delivers our fuel. The Harnois boat doesn't go to Chevery, so the locals must send the fuel from Harrington Harbour to Chevery. The Chevery residents must pay an additional tax of 35 cents per litre to cover the cost of transporting the fuel to Chevery.

When it comes to food, I'm thinking of Saint-Augustin and Pakua Shipi, two communities located one kilometre apart. Studies were carried out in both 2002 and 2004 on the possibility of creating a bridge between the two towns to increase access, since there are many ties between the two places. A number of Saint-Augustin residents work for the Pakua Shipi community.

We also had to carry out a study on forest fires. You referred to this problem, Mrs. Gill. Saint-Augustin residents have about two hours ahead of them, since the town is surrounded by forests. If the tide is out, evacuating people becomes a problem. The Saint-Augustin community may even be basically forced to watch the town go up in flames from the water's edge. They have no way to get to the other shore, to Pakua Shipi, which has a wharf and an airport.

When it comes to transportation out of the town, the hovercraft doesn't operate 24 hours a day. This means that, if an emergency takes place in Saint-Augustin and a patient needs medical attention, the patient can't be transferred immediately to the airport. Fortunately, we have a good team of responders in Saint-Augustin. We're able to stabilize the person until we can get them out of town.

In addition, people from the Pakua Shipi community come to our area to go to the bank, the grocery store, and so on.

Saint-Augustin has a fire truck, but Pakua Shipi doesn't. So if a fire breaks out in that community, there isn't any way to send in a fire truck.

There are a number of challenges.

For example, the crane on the *Bella Desgagnés* vessel broke down at the start of the season, and the vessel had to return to Sept-Îles. The problem was that it returned to Sept-Îles with all the goods, such as tomatoes, potatoes, oranges and milk. When delivered, these products aren't always as fresh as when we buy them at the grocery store in Quebec City or Montreal. However, we have no choice but to take what we have.

● (0845)

Marilène Gill: It's better to have Grand Pré milk than fresh milk. At least, if the delivery doesn't work, we have supplies.

Daren Jones: That's right. Also, when the delivery doesn't go through, we use helicopters to transport the goods.

Sorry. I think that I interrupted you.

Marilène Gill: No. It's just that I could see the clock ticking. I was looking at the chair and thinking that maybe I would get lucky.

We can come back to this later and talk about other topics.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Next we have our special guest, Tamara Kronis, MP for Nanaimo—Ladysmith.

Please go ahead.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for welcoming me to this committee.

Mr. Jones, my questions are also going to be for you.

As I was listening to you speak, I was hearing echoes to some degree of life in my riding. I often tease my colleagues that they have planes, trains and automobiles, but we add seaplanes, ferries and helicopters to get here. Nanaimo, where I live, is actually the largest city on Vancouver Island, at just over 100,000 people, and people are surprised that I often cannot take a cellphone call in my driveway and frequently have to pull over to the side of the road in order to finish conversations with people.

I see my colleague Madame Gill nodding.

I want to give you an opportunity. If you had an urban federal MP visiting and they spent three days in your area and saw everything you wanted them to see, what do you think would surprise them the most?

Daren Jones: In three days, we may not get out of the community due to transportation services.

What would they see? They would see 14 communities on the lower north shore, seven of which are not connected by any road system. They are connected through helicopters, boat taxis and so on. They would see the everyday struggle to get just everyday, essential services, such as food, for one. Getting out to medical appointments is number two. There is beautiful scenery. Let's add that the lower north shore is one beautiful place to come to.

I'll give an example right now. This is my fifth day on the western edge of the lower north shore, and I've been on three planes, had three helicopter rides and had one boat ride. I still have to go to Kegaska after this today, which means I have to fly to Natashquan, because there's no airport in Kegaska, and I have to come back to Kegaska via road. That's the reality of living here.

They would see people who want to grow their own food, make a sustainable place to grow and hunt, and get back to fishing. As Mr. Murdoch-Flowers has mentioned, we have those communities there, and they want to get back to the ground. I grew up here, and my Sunday dinner was the treat of getting a chicken or a piece of pork, but the rest of the time, food came from the water and the land. It's about getting back to that.

As we start to have more agricultural knowledge, we have the grounds to grow food, but we don't have the grounds to store it. We have all these projects, but when we come down to ask for a community storage shed or cold storage to keep the fruits and vegetables we grow, that's where our problems come into play.

● (0850)

Tamara Kronis: That's a great place for me to ask my second question.

Where I live, we too are very focused on food sovereignty and food security. There are many federal programs focused on subsidizing costs, but we hear over and over again from people living everywhere in Canada, especially in remote communities, that people would like to be able to provide for themselves.

I just want to give you a chance to talk a bit about, based on your experience, what policies would help remote communities like yours become less dependent on subsidies and more economically self-sufficient.

Daren Jones: First of all, I spent the day yesterday at Tête-à-la-Baleine, which is another isolated community here. There's a fantastic lady there who has a farm called the Rigolet. She has all of this land that's ready to grow food, but she wants a subsidy to build a cold storage and preparation unit so she can hold the food all winter. She can grow carrots, potatoes and turnips—the root vegetables we have. The biggest fundamental obstacle she ran into is that after she applied for a subsidy and got word back that this was great, a false hope was built up and then all of a sudden it vanished.

I guess my ask would be that if we don't fit the criteria, you say no right away so we can find other avenues, because we're waiting on responses sometimes for months. If the answer is no, let it be no. We're all adults. We can handle the no, but let us get our own things, even if that means going to the private sector and having the private sector build it and then we rent it from them. We're constantly chasing these subsidies, and if there's no money available, let us know. We are entrepreneurial. We want to feed ourselves. We want to do these things, but we are always roadblocked. We hear, "Hey, why don't you apply for this subsidy?" and then it never comes.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have the MP for Labrador, Philip Earle.

Philip Earle (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll be directing my questions to Mr. Jones. If I use his first name, it's because we grew up together. I'm from Labrador. He's from Blanc-Sablon. There is no border there, despite it being Quebec and Labrador.

Mr. Jones, we both know the reality of the region that you represent. I really appreciate you being here today as a witness.

As my colleague from the Conservative Party stated, regardless of where the region is, we have many similarities and challenges in Canada. Obviously, what you talk about from the lower north shore is very similar to some of the communities that exist in coastal Labrador in particular.

There's some uniqueness of programs directly related to the lower north shore that I have familiarity with. You know that I come from the airline sector. I ran the airline that serviced that particular region. Nutrition north Canada is a program that we heard about a few minutes ago, and it has significant funding from the Government of Canada.

The uniqueness of the lower north shore, as you would understand it, is that that particular program is administered through the STQ in Quebec to equalize freight costs in the summer and winter. That is to say, during the summertime, the food goes in on a ship. In the wintertime, it goes in by an airplane. It's flown in for about three months of the year.

Can you talk to us a bit about what you see on store shelves relative to prices? Do prices go up in the winter when food is being flown in compared to the summer, or is the program that's administered by the STQ working for the people of the lower north shore?

● (0855)

Daren Jones: Thank you for the question, Mr. Earle.

Overall, we see some price equalization there. However, some of the time it comes in through private carriers, so we see a little price increase there. If you look at the communities that are serviced by them, they are somewhat normalized. Any change to that program would certainly hinder us.

This program has been offered elsewhere in Canada. Let's just say that if you put in a road system and still need a subsidy.... That's when food prices went up, actually—when we had more access.

Overall, we're seeing somewhat of a stable thing. There's not much change from winter through to summer.

Philip Earle: As you and I would know—I think it's important for our colleagues to understand this—in the wintertime, food is trucked from Havre-Saint-Pierre to Fermont and down to Blanc-Sablon and the communities there.

I was a bit surprised that you didn't talk about Route 138, which stops right now in Kegaska. If that particular road was constructed to connect all of the lower north shore, taking it into Old Fort and Blanc-Sablon and giving a connection to the island, how do you see that as benefiting the economy of the lower north shore and bringing down costs? Do you want to speak to us about that for a few minutes?

Daren Jones: I will.

To touch on Quebec for one second, they came out with a study saying that Quebec is aging and we're aging out well. I can tell you that the study produced in Quebec has been our reality for the last eight years. We are one of the quickest declining places in Canada right now—I would say in Quebec, just to be safe. Our median age is above 58, and so far we've seen a decline of 8% of our population.

What would the road do? The road would bring back our youth, exploratory opportunities and tourism. We have one thing we can offer down here, and that's quite a beautiful coastline. That road would change the way we do everything. It would reduce the cost of the ferries and boats that we currently get subsidized. It would reduce the cost of transportation. Mr. Earle just pointed out the length of driving to get food around in the winter. We wouldn't have a dependency on aircraft to get our people to....

I'll give you an example. The Lourdes-de-Blanc-Sablon airport is in fog due to the fact that we're on the Strait of Belle Isle. Let's say you had to drive up there. About an hour to the west are Saint-Augustin and Pakua Shipi. They're more isolated communities where fog doesn't really get in that often. We can drive a person up there and get them on the plane and out to their appointment.

We are aging out. By 2050, 18% of our population will be gone due to passing away. The road would bring back the vitality and tourism we need. I'd say we can become the next Fogo Island if we give it a chance.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

MP Gill, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Of course, we would need a road, if the federal government ever wants to help out with this. It would even be nice to have an interprovincial connection between Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. I should point out that the ferry that currently makes the connection and goes to Blanc-Sablon, in our area, is paid for by Newfoundland and Labrador. I'm not supposed to complain that Quebec doesn't pay for the ferry. In any event, this interprovincial connection doesn't exist.

I think that, as the warden, you're quite interested in development. We talked about the road, which would bring tourists to our area and would also entice people to come and live here.

In terms of development, you're also extremely interested in all aspects of mariculture or aquaculture. I would like to invite my colleagues to come to Rivière-Saint-Paul and Salmon Bay to see what Ms. Buffitt and her family are doing in our area.

I think that this type of development could provide support for our region. On the one hand, this would promote food sovereignty. On the other hand, this could encourage people to come to all parts of our region. That way, we could make a loop. We're talking about the road because it would really enable us to make a loop with Newfoundland and Labrador. From there, it would be possible to go on to Gaspésie or the Maritimes.

Mr. Jones, I'll let you have the rest of my time.

● (0900)

Daren Jones: I completely agree with you, Mrs. Gill. Projects such as the one in Salmon Bay could easily be replicated seven times in various other regions of Basse-Côte-Nord, and I think that this is a low estimate. I do believe that we could develop farms on this scale in the area and attract tourists. I've even had these discussions with Ms. Buffitt, who said that we could develop this. It's simply a matter of subsidizing the start of the project. Once the start is ready, we would be set to go. We can support a sizable economy ourselves just by selling agricultural products that people need all over the world.

For example, I went to Harrington Harbour, where crab is currently processed. It's packed in crates. It goes from Harrington Harbour to Rimouski, then on to Boston. The next stop is Boston, Massachusetts. It isn't even delivered to Canada.

This is just one example. The world is asking for these products, and we have them in abundance. So we can forge our own path in this area.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Eric Melillo, you have five minutes.

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

I want to start with Mr. Murdoch-Flowers.

If I'm not mistaken, you mentioned earlier that there is support for local hunting and harvesting to help create food sovereignty and a more culturally appropriate diet. That caught my attention, because I know the government has in place a harvester support grant, which aims to support that right now.

I'm curious. Could you speak about whether or not you see that grant as being helpful right now? Should it perhaps be enhanced, or should the program be brought forward in a different way? You mentioned—and I agree with you—how important it would be to ensure that those in the north have sovereignty and are able to provide food for themselves.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: Are you referring to the grants that are available through the nutrition north program?

Eric Melillo: Yes.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: We don't directly benefit from the harvester support grant. I believe that this piece of the nutrition north program is administered to the indigenous organizations, the Inuit organizations. It is Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated that receives that money and then distributes it to the regional Inuit organizations. Then I believe it goes down directly to hunters and fishers—individual Inuit who are members of those regional Inuit organizations.

The support we receive directly from the federal government for the hunting economy comes via the Agriculture Canada local food infrastructure fund money, which is for organizations. It's not specifically for indigenous organizations but for non-profits and charities, such as us.

Anything that supports getting Inuit the tools they need to go hunting and fishing is something we support.

Eric Melillo: I appreciate that answer.

We'd point out as well a concern we've heard about nutrition north more broadly many times throughout the course of this committee. I've had the honour of serving on it for many years now. There's been a lot of discussion around how narrow nutrition north is and how it goes to the retailers, when perhaps it should go to the transportation companies or to the individual consumers themselves. There's been a lot of discussion about how to tinker with nutrition north. I think what we've been hearing here today is that across the north there are affordability challenges, certainly with food but also beyond food.

Is it perhaps more beneficial to look at bringing up wages, whether it be through economic development, as my colleague mentioned earlier, and looking at those growth opportunities, or even, with the government spending we have now on nutrition north, perhaps repurposing it into something more clear, such as an increase to the northern allowance? Then those living in the north could have access to funds but have more freedom in how they're spent and more transparency to ensure that they're actually going towards the things they need.

● (0905)

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: As I mentioned at the outset, the Qajuqturvik Community Food Centre is part of a national food organization called Right To Food. I believe my colleague Jasmine Ramze Rezaee spoke at the finance committee last week about the advocacy pieces we do in partnership with the poverty action unit at Right To Food. We focus on things like the groceries and essentials benefit, the Canada disability benefit and the working age supplement and have a target for the elimination of severe food insecurity by 2030.

The perspective we bring to that advocacy is that Inuit want to have access to what everyone else wants to have access to—food where we choose ourselves what we're going to eat. That includes market foods, but it also includes country foods. In order to get there, we need to support the programs that give hunters and fishers the opportunity to choose hunting and fishing as a viable career option.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have the MP for Nunavut.

Lori, you have five minutes.

Lori Idlout (Nunavut, Lib.): *Qujannamiik*, Chair.

Qujannamiik to both witnesses for sharing such great testimony.

My questions will be directed to Joseph Murdoch-Flowers.

I really appreciate what you mentioned earlier about some research that Qajuqturvik has done. I'm hoping you will agree to share the research with the committee.

I want to focus on the testimony you shared regarding the hunter salary network that you're proposing. I know, for example, that the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement already has a similar model where, through an income security aspect, they pay salaries to hunters. I wonder if you're aware of that program and if you can speak to it.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I'm not familiar with the James Bay program. I am, however, familiar with the Ilisaqsivik program in Clyde River. I went to Clyde River last summer to observe their program, to learn from it and to hopefully adopt some of the ideas they implemented there in order to bring them back here.

Essentially, the Ittaq program in Clyde River is a program where they employ five hunters full-time. The hunters go out for days at a time and bring young people with them to go hunting and fishing. They bring the catch back and share it with the community. The benefits of this type of program, as I alluded to in my initial remarks, go way beyond simply bringing back meat. It has the effect of supporting Inuit culture and supporting Inuit wellness.

Lori Idlout: Thank you so much for that. I can appreciate why you're focusing on Inuit wellness.

Basically, what we've seen in Nunavut is a lack of recognition of the strength of Inuit and the economy that we're expected to try to use. What I appreciate about the focus on hunters is that you're advocating for using or supporting a system that recognizes the strength of Inuit hunters and fishers.

I wonder if you could talk about the Inuit child first initiative and where you have seen a difference in people's lives. From your research, for example, is it true that when people had access to a consistent income, there was a reduction in people in Iqaluit coming to the food bank?

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: I provided the slides of that research with Dr. Sappho Gilbert to the clerk of the committee, so you should all have access to that document.

With Dr. Gilbert, we looked at a number of different income supports—the Inuit child first initiative money and COVID supports. We observed that on the day of the deposit of funds for these supports into people's accounts and the week following that, food centre use declined significantly. The one that had the greatest correlation, I suppose, was the Inuit child first initiative money distributed via the hamlet grocery voucher program. I believe that was last year.

Yes, the correlation is very strong.

● (0910)

Lori Idlout: If I still have time, I would definitely love to hear more about Ilisaqsivik and what it does. Do you think this could be replicated in other communities across Canada?

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the clerk has received your slides. They're with translation and will be distributed.

Go ahead and take 30 seconds or so to finish up.

Joseph Murdoch-Flowers: Thank you very much.

Ilisaqsivik is a non-profit charity in Clyde River that has developed over the years. It has grown and capitalized on various research partnership opportunities that have translated into hunting and fishing jobs. They now employ five hunters and fishers. They have equipment that's paid for, insurance and salary money. All this goes into supporting a program that is all about hunting, fishing and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge among Inuit.

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of our presenters. That was very informative.

We are going to suspend briefly in order to get ready for our next panel.

● (0912)

_____(Pause)_____

● (0915)

The Chair: Welcome back, everyone. I'll get everyone to settle in.

Before I introduce our next witness, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witness.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. As you are participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking. You're on Zoom, so you have a button on your screen to select floor, English or French. Questions will be asked in both official languages. I'll remind you that all comments go through the chair.

Now I'd like to welcome, from Aurora Geosciences Ltd., Gary Vivian, a professional geologist from Yellowknife.

Are you in Yellowknife right now, my friend?

Gary Vivian (Professional Geologist, Aurora Geosciences Ltd.): That's correct.

The Chair: Okay. You have up to five minutes to make an opening statement, if you please.

Gary Vivian: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to address the committee.

To make everybody in the room happy, I do not have five minutes of opening comments because I'd rather answer questions.

I have been living in Yellowknife since 1977. I am a professional geologist. We work from Mary River all the way to the Casino mine in the Yukon. I have extensive experience dealing with Dene, Métis and Inuit cultures. I'm hoping I get questions on some of that, but the affordability question has been huge in NWT and probably Nunavut for many years. I hope I can answer all of your questions.

I really don't want to take up any more time. I'd rather answer questions, if that's okay with the chair.

● (0920)

The Chair: I see a lot of nodding heads at the committee, so thank you, my friend.

We're going right to questions. MP Zimmer will go first.

Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Gary, for appearing at committee. It would have been nice to have you down here in Ottawa, but I know that's quite a trek.

Gary, we're having an affordability study today. I mentioned the definition of affordability before, but I'll say it again, because why is a miner at an affordability study in Ottawa? Affordability is the financial ability of individuals or households to pay for essential goods and services, such as housing, health care and food, without experiencing financial hardship or compromising their ability to meet other basic needs.

I have an article here from May 6. It's from the Yellowknifer: “NWT’s GDP continues to contract, largely driven by declining resource extraction”. It says:

> According to Statistics Canada, the NWT was the only jurisdiction to experience a decline in gross domestic product (GDP) for 2025.

> Statistics Canada says the NWT had the weakest economic performance in 2025, falling by two per cent....

Gary, how is the Northwest Territories doing economically?

Gary Vivian: That's a wee bit of a loaded question, Mr. Zimmer, but thank you for that.

I truly believe that in order to have an economy, you need a good base economy, and that's based on resources. I think that's our strength. Our strength in the Yukon, NWT and Nunavut is our resources, specifically mineral resources.

The diamond mines have been depleting for a few years, and if you looked over the last four or five years, you'd see that the GDP from resources has been dropping significantly. We have not been thinking about what the next step in resource generation would be, and it creates a huge problem. If you're not looking for mines, you'll never develop mines.

Bob Zimmer: That's all about exploration, Gary, isn't it? That's often a measure that most people who aren't miners don't understand. Exploration has the advanced team for actual mining to take place, and we know that Canada is one of the most difficult jurisdictions around the world in which to mine. It takes 19 years from start to finish—from when a mine starts to when it actually starts producing a resource and can profit.

I'll go on. It was strange to me, Gary, knowing the economic situation, that one of the first announcements the Prime Minister made was that he was going to turn 30% of the Northwest Territories into a park. That was an initiative from environmentalist groups, some of which are from foreign countries. They are contributing $75 million. That's the seed money from environmental groups. One is the Pew foundation, from the U.S. This was a combined effort, with $300 million coming from the Canadian taxpayer.

This is my next question: If the economy is doing so poorly, do you think it's a good idea for the Prime Minister to announce that he is turning 30% of the Northwest Territories into a park?

Gary Vivian: Well, when you look at protected areas, parks and conservation areas, you see that probably 30% of the territories is currently removed from any exploration opportunities, so I would argue that we're there already.

There's a problem when you announce those sorts of things. I'll use Thaıdene Nëné as an example. That was a 33,000-square-kilometre park that Łutsël K'é and the federal government suggested be removed from exploration. What they did was basically alienate probably one of the best areas in the Northwest Territories for an IOCG-type deposit. I don't want to go into—

Bob Zimmer: Gary, what's IOGC?

Gary Vivian: It's iron oxide, gold, copper. It's a bit like what Broken Hill, or BHP, has in Australia. It's one of the largest deposits of critical metals in the world.

What the federal government does is it decides on areas that they want to alienate. Then they do what they call a MERA—a mineral, energy and resource assessment. The problem is that as an advocate, you're also using your people to alienate that land. I believe that should be done by private industry, not by the federal government. I think you would then have a fairer MERA.

We actually raised a public concern on alienating all of that land in perpetuity, because that's essentially what happens: A significant sector is removed to help reconcile and deal with the economy of the NWT.

● (0925)

Bob Zimmer: Could you maybe clarify something for this room? I talked to some of the leaders there, and they were under the understanding that they could still develop resources once an area is put under protection.

Once a territory or a park is put under these protections, taking the 30% as an example, can resources be developed in that area?

Gary Vivian: If it's federally withdrawn, they cannot, no.

There is a territorial park around the federal park, which is how they reconciled freezing the 33,000 square kilometres in perpetuity, but the territorial park still has significant issues where you can develop inside. It will be outside of permitting to deal with that. It's still a significant problem, and it alienates industry.

Bob Zimmer: For context, how many mines are still going to be operational by the end of this year in the NWT?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds to answer, Gary.

Gary Vivian: I don't want to be negative, but I would be shocked if there's even one.

Bob Zimmer: From what once was recognized as a diamond hub, really, around the world, we're down to zero operational mines in the Northwest Territories.

Gary Vivian: That's correct.

The Chair: That's all the time we have. Thank you very much.

Next we will go to MP Hanley for six minutes, please.

Brendan Hanley: Thank you very much for being here, Mr. Vivian. It's good to know that the breadth of your experience is transnorth. I picked up on your reference to Casino, so maybe we can go back to that a little later.

The picture that Mr. Zimmer was describing in Northwest Territories is certainly a challenging one, because the diamond mines all had a predictable end of life. We're now realizing that end of life, one of them maybe a little sooner than we had hoped. I would say there is a real reset occurring. Part of that was reflected in some of the recent announcements the Prime Minister made in Yellowknife—and not just the defence commitments to bolster and build on the forward operating bases in Iqaluit, Yellowknife, Inuvik and Goose Bay, but the commitment to begin work on the Mackenzie Valley Highway after what the Prime Minister described as 40 years of thinking about it.

How do you, as a seasoned geologist, see this real determination to invest in infrastructure as opening up possibilities for economic development, which, as Mr. Zimmer correctly points out, is directly related, ultimately, to affordability in the north?

Gary Vivian: Thank you for the question, Mr. Hanley. Just before I answer it, I'll say that we have an office in Whitehorse as well.

This is a critical piece of establishing what I consider the base economy in the territory and in Nunavut as well. It would be nice if we could build roads everywhere, but obviously we can't. If you look at the cost of doing exploration just in the NWT and Nunavut, you'll see that it's between four and six times more expensive to do exploration in those two territories than in any place down south. It's all about infrastructure.

The famous phrase from *Field of Dreams* is “If you build it, [they] will come.” The bottom line is that they also need a business case for the road, so they're trying to address the best orientation for that road to effect the most advanced projects that have not come through the full permitting system yet. We, through Aurora, have been helping the Tłı̨chǫ, the Akaitcho and the YKDFN to try to determine which are the best business cases for those roads, with the most important issue being caribou. You would be absolutely correct in saying that if a road can go through a community and if exploration companies can use it to offset costs, having a community on that road is extremely important. However, having a road to cut down the costs of air travel and of everything else is significantly important.

● (0930)

Brendan Hanley: One example we've been discussing quite a lot in the Yukon—and it's very close the Northwest Territories border—is the North Canol Road. That's an example of what you're talking about. The North Canol is an established road. It's actually a public highway in the Yukon, but it's in need of serious upgrades in order to facilitate access to the tungsten deposit at Fireweed, as well as to, ultimately, a very promising district—including for gold—for revenue.

I wonder if you're familiar with that area. I'm sure you are, particularly with your presence in the Yukon.

Gary Vivian: Yes—very much so, Mr. Hanley. Thank you for that lead-up, because the North Canol Road is extremely important.

There are at least five or six opportunities along that NWT-Yukon border—Cantung, Mactung, the Fireweed stuff and lithium. Those opportunities are becoming much more expensive because the North Canol Road has not been upgraded, and it is in definite need of an upgrade. There's no doubt about that.

Brendan Hanley: The key question, though, is how we link these resource opportunities, whether we're talking about the Northwest Territories or Yukon, to local economies, local economic development, procurement opportunities and ultimately participation that reaches down to the community level.

In reflecting on the notion that this is an affordability study, how do we ensure that the benefit will ultimately be the increasing of prosperity at the community level, including procurement and job opportunities for the young people in the north?

Gary Vivian: I have—

The Chair: I'm sorry. That brings us to the end, but I'm sure we can get that out during other questions. If not, could you send that in writing to the committee? Thank you.

We will go to MP Gill for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to use my turn to move two motions. These are notices of motions.

With your permission, Mr. Chair, I'll read the first motion:

> That the committee conduct a review of Amnesty International's report, The Housing Crisis in Indigenous Communities in Canada. The example of Manawan (2026); that, to this end, the committee invite the Minister of Indigenous Services, representatives of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), as well as departmental officials; that the committee hold a minimum of four (4) meetings on the subject; that the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House; and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

The second motion is as follows:

> That, following the decision in Cowichan Tribes v. Canada and the Supreme Court of Canada's refusal to hear the appeal in the case of J.D. Irving, Limited et al. v. Wolastoqey Nation, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study on the impact of the two judgments on property rights in Quebec and Canada; that the committee allocate a minimum of four (4) meetings to this study and report its findings and recommendations to the House.

Those are the two motions. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Vivian, my apologies. We're trying to carry out all the work at the same time. I'm sure that you understand. You're in a sector that I would describe as economic development. I also come from a vast and mining-rich region in northern Quebec.

You spoke about the need for road infrastructure. Not only is it good for development and for the autonomy of the people who live in these areas, but it's also a matter of safety, of course. It's also a way to lower all the costs involved in living in these areas.

I would like to hear a bit more about the opening up of these regions, which obviously have potential for the people who want to live there and for economic development.

● (0935)

[*English*]

Gary Vivian: I have to apologize. I can understand English only. I'm very sorry.

The Chair: There's an interpretation button down below.

Gary Vivian: I'd been looking for that. I see “Participants”, “Raise Hand”, “More”—

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. I would like to know whether the sound tests were carried out with Mr. Vivian and whether he was told how the interpretation works in the committee before the start of the meeting.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to suspend—

Gary Vivian: I just found it. It was under “More”.

The Chair: Okay. Please turn that on.

We'll get MP Gill to ask the question again.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Vivian, were you told earlier how the interpretation works? It isn't your fault. This happens all the time, but we try to avoid it. Did anyone explain to you how to proceed?

[*English*]

Gary Vivian: I have interpretation put on, but—

The Chair: I'm going to suspend for a moment so the technical people can help you.

● (0935)

_____(Pause)_____

● (0935)

The Chair: We're back.

Go ahead, Ms. Gill.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll ask my question more quickly so that Mr. Vivian can have time to answer it.

As I was saying, I'm the member of Parliament for a northern constituency where a great deal of activity takes place, particularly in the mining sector. We know that economic development sometimes leads to road construction. We also need roads for other reasons as well. This can benefit the public.

You spoke mainly about opening up certain regions. I would like you to elaborate on what this can contribute to our study. You spoke about critical and strategic minerals. These minerals are also found in my constituency. I would like you to tell us, if we step outside the realm of mineral exploration and development and really get to the crux of the study, how this can benefit the public.

So, I would like you to talk about the opening up of the region and, if applicable, the current and future contributions of companies.

[*English*]

Gary Vivian: I think I can answer that one fairly well because we're dealing with that issue with the Tłı̨chǫ and Akaitcho in the NWT.

I truly believe that roads need to connect communities because communities will benefit from the mine infrastructure that needs to happen. As I said, it costs four to six times more to do exploration in the north—and probably in northern Quebec too—than it does in the southern part of the provinces. Having communities connected to mining infrastructure creates significant abilities both for communities to benefit from opportunities provided by the mine and for the mines to access the communities.

I totally believe that any infrastructure should include communities along the road that can help benefit mines, because mines will then benefit the communities. To me, the business opportunities in the communities will increase significantly if there's road infrastructure to those mines, rather than access by air.

● (0940)

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Do you have anything else to add, Mr. Vivian? Instead of making a lengthy presentation, you decided to take more time to add some perspectives to all the issues we are focusing on, which include the costs of food, heating and transportation. We have just talked about that. That encompasses a lot of things. Do you have any suggestions as well?

I know that your perspective may be highly specialized. However, I understand that you worked in a number of northern regions, so you have certainly seen some issues. It must be said: When the mining industry comes to town, like in my region, it can lead to some challenges or cause a few issues.

What can businesses do to avoid making certain problems worse in the communities? Of course, there are benefits, but can you also tell us what can be done to get the communities to accept the projects and get involved in them, so that this type of industry that is setting up shop in these lands also works to their advantage? I am thinking about indigenous communities in particular.

[*English*]

Gary Vivian: Whether it be with Dene, Métis or Inuit communities, the opportunity lies with the mining companies themselves to create engagement and transparency at the very beginning.

One thing I would say about the permitting system in NWT and Nunavut is that it's a co-management system, so you can't really progress without the engagement of the communities. Business opportunities are part of that engagement. As long as a company engages early and often, those opportunities will continue to happen as a mine develops.

I would suggest that if you look at the Tłı̨chǫ and the Akaitcho in the diamond mining area of the NWT and ask the people there about mine closures, they will tell you that it will definitely hurt them when those mines close down and they lose the benefits they have received from them. The four diamond mines that were operational at one time in the NWT were all established under a co-management system that allowed indigenous businesses to be involved in the development of those mines. Early engagement and opportunities for Dene, Métis and Inuit are absolutely critical aspects of any mine development now.

If there is road access, it significantly lowers the cost of exploration, even if it's a winter road.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have MP Eric Melillo.

You have five minutes.

Eric Melillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To our witness, thank you for being here.

I come from northern Ontario, which Ms. Idlout always reminds me is not as north as the territories, but it's still pretty north. It features a number of similar challenges when it comes to food costs and remote communities and has a lot of resource opportunity. There is a lot of gold, lithium, critical minerals and chromite. Of course, we have the Ring of Fire, as everyone knows, in northern Ontario.

Despite all of that opportunity under our feet, a lot of the northern communities, particularly the remote communities, continue to live in poverty, quite frankly. Across the north, there are countless youth getting into drugs. They've died of overdoses. Many have taken their own lives. Quite frankly, it's a suicide crisis.

I was on the phone with a chief last week to, yet again, offer my condolences for another youth who had taken their life because they didn't believe there was any opportunity in the north. They had given up, and quite literally there was gold under their feet.

It pisses me off. I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, but it does. I get frustrated when we have people pushing an antidevelopment message without understanding the social cost of that.

I would like, sir, for you to speak to what the development of mines in the north would bring, far beyond just the economics. Of course, if you increase wages, people can afford more things. They can afford more food. Could you speak to the overall social well-being that would be lifted by increasing mineral exploration and mineral development in the territories?

● (0945)

Gary Vivian: I agree with all of your statements regarding Ontario. I have significant experience in northern Ontario as well. I am an Ontarian by birth, but I have lived in the NWT for over 45 years.

Social well-being is a critical aspect that mining companies need to get a grasp on, to be quite honest. If you used the Tłı̨chǫ and the Akaitcho in the NWT as examples, they could speak very well to the social well-being of having opportunities at the mines. The two-in, two-out operation has worked very well, and it creates great social well-being for them.

The problem is that when there are only two or three operational mines, it limits the amount of capacity for a community to supply. That's why having businesses that also provide opportunities to the mines such as fuel, concrete and all of those things.... Those are all delivered by indigenous businesses in the NWT. Those are the opportunities that I think communities and the mining companies need to start spending more time trying to develop.

I think social well-being from a mine can create great opportunities in the communities. We see that in the four Tłı̨chǫ communities and in all four Akaitcho communities that have been involved with the diamond mines. Social well-being is a good opportunity for mine development.

Eric Melillo: I appreciate that very much.

You spoke about the infrastructure gaps, and I understand them very well. When we look at what the world needs in terms of resources, the world wants more resources. Canada has resources, but there's a lack of exploration, as you pointed out. Can you speak more to what policies beyond infrastructure hold back resource development in Canada?

Gary Vivian: Wow. That question could take more than five minutes to answer. It's a question about really meeting the need of today, and that's affordability.

Specifically, it's the permitting system. I would think that the permitting system in the NWT is one of the best in the world, but it is not easy. It's not simple, and there's not an easy process to get through it.

The thing that worries me a little is streamlining permitting. Now that you have all the indigenous communities onside with the permitting situation, how do you go in and streamline permitting? You're telling them that you want to advance something quickly. I'd like to be a fly on the wall when that happens, to be quite honest.

I don't think that's an easy answer. It's actually a harder question. I truly believe that the long-term effect of bringing a mine into production is the fault of permitting and the fault of having no infrastructure.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have MP Earle.

You have five minutes.

Philip Earle: Thank you, Chair.

I really appreciate the testimony, Mr. Vivian, and the questions from my colleagues on both sides. Please don't take my questions as being negative towards mining.

I'm the member of Parliament for Labrador, where we mine for nickel, copper and cobalt. We have the second-largest iron ore mine in the world. I know you know it very well.

I'm drawn back to your earlier testimony and to some of the leading questions that talked about 30% of land being set aside to do anything but mining. You'd be familiar with that. In Labrador, the Inuit gifted back to Canada a significant portion of land in the north. It became a national park to drive economic value for Inuit, Canadians and the world.

Relying on UNDRIP and the mandate of the duty to consult and free, prior and informed consent.... I want to ask you some questions around that, because I'm drawn to an opportunity on the border of my riding in Lac Brisson or Strange Lake, where geologists like you have gone in to look for rare earth elements. There are a lot of them there. They forgot a very important policy, and Inuit have said, “Not now.”

Tying this back to the mandate and scope of this study, how do we get this right so that people who live in those communities and see an opportunity to work on an exploration project have a job tomorrow? Sometimes, because of the failure of a company leading a project, they're unemployed, and that certainly impacts affordability.

● (0950)

Gary Vivian: I'm sorry, Mr. Earle. I'm trying to understand your question. Are you asking me about the short-term nature of jobs in exploration?

Philip Earle: No, I'm looking for your knowledge. You introduced yourself as having worked very closely with first nations and indigenous people. You're a geologist who's done a lot of work in the north. I'm telling you that it's my experience that many of these companies don't get it right. It leads to the anticipation of having employment, but because it's not done right, it leads to the disappointment of losing a job.

How can we do better?

Gary Vivian: My simple answer to that is something I said earlier. NWT and Nunavut have a co-management system wherein companies and indigenous communities—I hate to say "indigenous" because it's Dene, Métis and Inuit—have the opportunity to meet and have honest conversations about what's being done by the mining company. That's an opportunity for questions and concerns to come out. The communities have to get those addressed during the process of establishing a mine. If those aren't addressed properly, you will always have an issue between the mining company and the community.

I think the co-management system that has been operating for 30 years in Nunavut and NWT has built a really good base for industry and the communities to get together when establishing a mine. They actually come closer to being partners than having a relationship, to be quite honest.

Philip Earle: I have about a minute and 15 seconds left.

Drawing again on experience, let's say a small community of 150 people has a small grocery store, and half a dozen geologists show up to do a project and buy their supplies from that local store. If the project goes on for four to six weeks, by extension, sometimes because of supply and demand, this drives up the price in that particular grocery store.

Is there a better way geologists or junior mining companies can find a supply of food so that, one, it benefits the community and, two, it doesn't impact the cost of living in that community?

Gary Vivian: That's a bit tough. The bottom line is that a lot of those smaller communities only have air transport to supply food and other major needs like fuel. Either it's a small barge across Great Slave Lake or someone is flying into the community. I think the only way you can address that is with better infrastructure, like larger planes that can access smaller communities to get food in at a cheaper rate—though nothing is cheap when you're flying.

My biggest thought about how to lower the cost of food for people in communities with exploration is by using the exploration people themselves. There's an economy of scale. We do it in Dél̨nę. Every time we fly out there, we take food into the community.

There are opportunities, but they're hard.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Gill, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My colleague has given me an opportunity to talk about a topic that may be related and that is of great interest to mining regions, and falls within the current study.

In Quebec, we also welcome these projects. A lot of people commute back and forth to work in our communities. However, the wealth does not benefit the communities. In a way, we are happy to have these projects. Some people will get jobs in these projects, but most of the people are set up in camps and stay there for only a few weeks. Obviously, their salaries are very good. My riding is home to the wealthiest RCM in Quebec, Caniapiscau, which is located right next to Mr. Earle's riding, that is, the riding of Labrador. We share the Labrador Trough. The fact remains that we would like people to stay in the community, for mining workers to stay in the community, precisely so that they can enrich the community. We also want people in the community to be able to find work, both non-indigenous and indigenous people, of course.

How can we keep a lot of this wealth in the communities so that they can grow? Of course, we do not just want them to survive; we want them to be able to grow and benefit from this development.

I know you talked about co-management. I find that extremely interesting as well. I will give you the rest of my speaking time to tell us about that.

● (0955)

[*English*]

Gary Vivian: That's a great question, because we face that all the time in the north—in NWT and Nunavut. How come we're flying in and flying out people who live in Halifax or those other places? The GNWT made a mistake when it allowed that to happen. The mines should have enforced the idea that if they want to work at the mine site, they need to live within a certain distance. We have communities that could actually support that. The biggest problem is that the mines aren't enforcing it.

Part of the commitment to a community should be asking for people who work at the mine, the mine staff, to live somewhere within a radius of the mine site and not flying them in from 600 miles away. That's the way you get value in the communities. It's a way you can grow honesty and integrity in the communities.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Marilène Gill: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Next we have MP Kronis for five minutes, please.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Canada talks a lot about protecting land and developing critical minerals. I want to ask you about how those goals fit together.

My colleagues across the table have been asking you about better ways to accomplish our goals to provide for sustainability and affordability in the north. In your experience, do you think it would be beneficial for us to first know what mineral resources are present in the north before governments decide to permanently close large areas to development?

Gary Vivian: That's a pretty simple question. Thank you for that. I would say yes.

There are obviously some areas that are so archaeologically significant to the communities that they want them to be no-go areas. Industry certainly understands that, but there are way too many opportunities where significant pieces of land are removed without a proper assessment being done before that land is removed in perpetuity. Removing that land in perpetuity removes benefits to the community.

There should be a better assessment for putting that land, in perpetuity, out of touch to industry. In a lot of cases, it's not being done.

Tamara Kronis: You talked about elevated expenses in the north. What happens in this environment where everyone knows that 30 by 30 is coming? What happens when companies aren't sure whether land will be available for development in the future? You've talked about a steady decline in exploration over the last few years. How does this—"threat" is not the right word—promise of 30 by 30 and the closure of areas impact exploration in the north?

Gary Vivian: I would sort of agree with you: It does create a threat, to be quite honest. It's not something that's taken lightly by industry if there's an opportunity that something can be removed. That's why I think it's extremely important that specific areas have land use plans. If land is going to be alienated, it needs to be up front and very clear.

I would give Nunavut a tremendous amount of kudos for what they did in their selection of lands. Even though they recognized that a lot of the areas they picked were good economic areas—greenstone belts and those sorts of things—they are the owners of those pieces of land, and what happens on those lands is decided by them. They're actually going through a new land use plan.

The bottom line is that land use plans are critically important, but having areas where there's no land use plan, where somebody or some community can come out and say they want to conserve a piece of land after somebody has already staked there, is what I'd say gives the NWT a bad name, in a lot of ways.

I sent a quick PowerPoint to Paul Noble, Mr. Zimmer's assistant. I'm hoping he might share it. It shows for 2007 to 2026 what actually happened for exploration in NWT, Nunavut and the Yukon. The NWT has done nothing but go down. The largest interim land withdrawal, probably in North America, is the Akaitcho one. It was put on to basically hold industry as a pawn while they got land claims settled. That's been going on for almost 20 years now. That's not good.

● (1000)

Tamara Kronis: You also talked about the important role played by the Dene, Métis and Inuit in the Northwest Territories in terms of economic development and resource development. There is huge potential for those communities to benefit from mining jobs, contracts and business opportunities.

Can you share with the committee your thoughts on how we can make sure that conservation decisions don't accidentally close the door on future opportunities for those communities in the Northwest Territories?

Gary Vivian: I truly believe that the only way you can effectively introduce conservation is to make sure that communities understand the benefits that could be removed if you alienate a piece of land. That's what I'm saying about proper MERAs. You need proper mineral, energy and resource assessments on land before you freeze it in perpetuity, and communities need to understand what benefits they might get from that.

I would also say that mining is not the same as—

The Chair: Thank you very much. We have to go to our next questioner.

Gary Vivian: I'm sorry.

The Chair: That's quite all right. You're very knowledgeable.

MP Greaves, you have five minutes.

Will Greaves: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Vivian.

I'd like to pick up on the theme of infrastructure that you've been touching on. It's really fascinating to hear about your long experience living and working in the north. I'm sure that in that time you've seen a lot of change.

We know that the level of public interest in the north has varied over time. We know that the level of governmental interest in the north has varied over time. We know that the north has often found itself at the intersection of large global or macro forces, whether those are geopolitics, global economic trends or, for example, the impacts of global warming and global climate change, which have such a profound impact on northern communities and northern infrastructure.

I would expect that in the context of your particular field of geology and mining, where there's so much change happening in terms of the landscape of the north—the physical soils, the permafrost thaw, etc.—you are aware that the government is focused on investing in northern infrastructure, but the focus is very much on dual-benefit or multi-use infrastructure that will help meet the needs of the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces and northern communities, which of course have been significantly underinvested in with regard to critical infrastructure over many decades.

I'm wondering if you could share your perspective on what would be the best types of investments for dual-benefit, dual-use infrastructure in the north that in your view would help serve not only the needs of local communities but also the needs of industry, the needs of geoscientists such as yourself and—if you're able to add this—the needs of the defence community in northern Canada.

Gary Vivian: Obviously, the Canadian government is talking about an Arctic economic and security corridor. I think the biggest benefit to that for communities is that it would touch communities. That road or corridor infrastructure has to get as close to communities as possible so that we can join them and make them socially better. Those are the words from the Tłı̨chǫ nation, to be quite honest, and I think the Akaitcho would agree. I think joining communities is number one.

The business case for that road is that there's going to be economic payback on it, so who's going to pay for it? It's going to be the mining companies that have to send concentrate out on that road either north to Grays Bay port or south to Yellowknife, whichever way it has to go. There's use pay on that road.

There hasn't been any infrastructure in the north that hasn't been paid for by the mining companies. I'm thinking of Yellowknife or Hay River. The rail and hydro for Hay River were paid for by Cominco after they were put in by the feds.

There are opportunities here, but I would say road infrastructure is the thing that's going to cut costs the most and provide the biggest benefit.

● (1005)

Will Greaves: That anticipates my next question, which is about inviting you to reflect on how the federal government might best spend the $1 billion that's been allocated for the Arctic infrastructure fund to support lowering costs and increasing affordability for northerners. It sounds like your answer might be investing in road infrastructure, but I'll give you an opportunity to elaborate, if you'd like.

Gary Vivian: I'm the past president of the NWT and Nunavut Chamber of Mines. I've been doing this for about 35 years. I would say between some sort of energy infrastructure and road infrastructure, it's clear to me that if we want a business case scenario for corridors with payback and benefits to communities, the most important is probably road infrastructure.

Will Greaves: Drawing on your experience as a professional geologist, somebody who I imagine has spent a great deal of time working on the land, working in communities and working on different kinds of sites, I'm wondering if you could speak to how climate impacts—and I am thinking specifically of permafrost thaw, although there may be other relevant impacts—have driven the cost of these infrastructure projects up. We know they've increased the cost for industry in the development of new mine projects, but likewise, they will increase the cost for government to invest in infrastructure like roads.

Can you reflect on that in our final 20 seconds, please?

Gary Vivian: I would say, quickly, that certainly climate change has played an effect in cost, but the bottom line is that every project now—even advanced stage exploration projects—is asked to submit a cost for monitoring permafrost, and the road will be the same thing. I know that process. The significant part of putting a road across tundra is going to be evaluating permafrost. That's always part of the permitting process.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have a wee bit of time.

Mr. Zimmer, I believe you wanted to ask a quick question. If anybody else wants to ask a quick question, I'll allow it.

I don't see any nodding or anyone raising their hand, so you have a couple of minutes.

Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity.

Gary, again, thank you for coming.

For context for the viewers, in terms of region size, we were talking about protecting 30% of the Northwest Territories. That might seem insignificant to somebody who is not living there, but the Northwest Territories is the third-largest region in the country, at 1.346 million square kilometres, so 30% of NWT is very significant in geographical size.

I want to go back to something you said before. Exploration has been on the decline in NWT since 2007, and you said this isn't a new problem and that the Northwest Territories has a bad reputation. Why is exploration in such sharp decline in the Northwest Territories, Gary?

Gary Vivian: That could probably take longer than five minutes to answer, but there are probably two or three major issues here.

The first one would be that the permitting system is extremely extensive. I will agree and say that we have the best permitting system in the world, but it's not easy, and it's not cheap to get through. A lot of companies have been worried that when they come here, they need to have an environmental permitting person on their staff. It's not simple for a junior mining company to come here and apply for a permit. They basically need an environmental engineer to submit their permit.

I would say the biggest thing with the NWT is the decline from 2007. I provided Mr. Noble two PowerPoints yesterday. The bigger one shows the decline since 2007, and the biggest thing that happened was the Akaitcho interim land withdrawal. That is a land claims problem. We basically have a land claims problem in the two largest areas of the NWT, so that's a significant problem.

● (1010)

Bob Zimmer: I appreciate what the Prime Minister had to say last election. He said he was going to develop our economy “at speeds we haven't seen in generations”. It's one thing to be hopeful that that actually happens, and I'm sure you would agree. It's one thing to say that, but for that to happen is a completely different thing.

I will ask this as a last five-second question. Do you see that happening in the next couple of years?

Gary Vivian: What I want people to think about is that we have spent 30 years developing a permitting system that's probably the best in the world. It's robust and absolutely difficult to get through. It's creating very safe operational mines.

Do I see streamlining permitting as a simple answer? I don't see how it's going to work. I don't see how you change a community's input into this by saying that we're going to simplify it without having a significant amount of education on where we've gone in the last 30 years and where we're trying to go in the next 20.

There's only one other thing I would like to say, Mr. Zimmer. You talked about NWT and Nunavut. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the Yukon, and you're going to give 30% away. That's a significant piece of land that's coming out of those three territories.

Bob Zimmer: Could you repeat the last 30 seconds? There was a glitch in the video. Just repeat your last two sentences.

Gary Vivian: I was just speaking to the fact that you raised [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] big, but 40% of the land mass in Canada is in the three territories, and you're going to do 30%. It doesn't matter. You're not going to get that land in the provinces. It's going to come from the three territories, and that's 40% of the land mass. That's an unequal amount.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That brings us to the end.

Thank you very much to the witness.

We are done.