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Chair: Robert Morrissey





## Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Thursday, February 5, 2026

• (0830)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)):** Committee members, the committee is back in session. The committee moved to turn the session public, so we're now in public.

I have three people with their hands up: Madame Larouche, Madame Koutrakis and Madame Desrochers.

Madame Larouche, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

First, I'd like to reiterate that the request under Standing Order 106(4) was sent 48 hours in advance, which is the equivalent of two sleeps. That means I respected the deadlines; we respected the deadlines. We agreed to discuss my request under Standing Order 106(4), and I know there have been discussions on the Liberal side as well.

Journalists, particularly in Quebec, are currently getting calls from hundreds of seniors who haven't received their benefits for nine months—as we can see in the letter—because of the problems with the Cúram computer system. We don't have the figures; we have no way of knowing.

I received a message from an employee of the Minister of Jobs and Families, who said that if anyone had problems, they could write to her. However, that's not what's needed.

I made a request under Standing Order 106(4) and tabled a motion to shed light on the exact number of seniors who are having difficulties with the processing of their pensions.

We want the committee to invite Patty Hajdu, Minister of Employment and Families, along with officials, and Joël Lightbound, Minister of Government Transformation, Public Works and Procurement and Quebec Lieutenant, to appear for two hours each and answer the committee's questions about the Cúram software. The goal would be to develop a quick and effective action plan to resolve any issues concerning the processing of old age security claims and to provide an update on past and future cost overruns. We also ask that the ministers appear no later than February 26, 2026.

Seniors who are waiting deserve answers, as do public servants, who rated the Cúram software one out of 10. We're just looking for answers.

[*English*]

**Caroline Desrochers (Trois-Rivières, Lib.):** I'd like to suspend, please.

**The Chair:** Pardon me? I didn't hear you.

**Caroline Desrochers:** Can we suspend, please? We have not seen the motion. It's being distributed.

**The Chair:** We'll suspend for—

**Caroline Desrochers:** We really have to stop doing this. Come on.

**The Chair:** Committee members, we'll suspend for two moments.

• (0830)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (0835)

**The Chair:** The committee is now back in session. We're out of the suspension.

I just want to be clear on a couple of points.

The 48 hours' notice is simply a direction to me as the chair, Ms. Larouche, to call a meeting. It does not give you priority to move anything. The Standing Order 106(4) letter that I received is duly and correctly signed. The chair then must, within 48 hours, schedule a meeting, and the meeting must occur within five days.

We had not gotten to that. This was a regularly scheduled meeting, but the committee, as in all committees, by majority or consensus, can alter the agenda of the meeting. A motion was moved to go in public. We began in camera doing a review of the study. The motion to go in public was approved.

That's where we're at. You had your hand up, and then I had Ms. Koutrakis. We are now in public.

Madame Larouche, I believe you had the floor when we suspended, but you were referencing a motion you wanted to make. Then I was going to go to Ms. Koutrakis and Ms. Goodridge.

Go ahead, Madame Larouche.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** As I was saying, the motion's purpose is simply to shed light on a situation whose details are still largely unknown. I think the minister needs to be accountable to seniors and needs to come and explain herself.

One journalist received hundreds of calls from people who have been waiting for their benefits for nine months. At first, it was said that there was no problem. It was then said that there were 30 cases, which accounted for 0% and some change. It's now being said that the ratio could be as high as 2%. Some years have slightly fewer and other years have slightly more, but let us say that 500,000 new people retire on average. Two per cent still represents over 10,000 people. We have gone from "no problem" to 30 cases and then to 2%. What's the reality? That's what we want to know, plain and simple.

It's clear that this is a serious problem. There have been discussions among the whips of all political parties, a meeting has been requested pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and a motion is now being proposed.

Yesterday, I spoke with FADOQ, a major group in Quebec. They were saying that the calls were just starting to come in. It's clear that the fact that it's been in the newspapers may be encouraging people to say that they haven't received their pension or that they haven't had any problems. It's important to talk about it to be able to shed light on all this.

I'd like to point out that the Cúram computer system is also being tested but that other federal benefits, including employment insurance benefits, will be covered by that system. To prevent issues from repeating for the people who are going to need their benefits, let us shed light on this now, before there are more cases.

Let us find solutions for Cúram by talking to the Minister of Jobs and Families and the Minister of Government Transformation, Public Works and Procurement.

I think the committee can do that. We propose holding two meetings, one with each minister, to shed light on this and find solutions. We can then see what the committee's next steps will be.

I think those two meetings, those two hours with each of the ministers, are crucial. Not all seniors are rich, and some need their pensions to pay for their housing and groceries. If a cheque hasn't come in for nine months, it's possible to end up in a poverty spiral. That's not what we want.

I think we can do this as adults and ask the ministers questions. So far, the answers to the questions we have asked in the House have varied a great deal. The proposal we were given was simply to say that if people have problems, they can write to the department. That's basically what was said in the email I received. That isn't a notice of meeting. Let us meet and talk. We need the ministers to come and explain the situation to us so we can find solutions.

● (0840)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

Madame Koutrakis, go ahead on the motion.

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

I'm wondering if our colleagues would be open to a friendly amendment only for the date: for mid-March instead of February 26. We're in agreement with everything but the date.

The reason for this is that we have been tasked by the finance committee to get back to them by February 27. February 26 would be too close for the BIA, so we're just wondering if there would be a willingness to do March 10.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** I'll have to discuss that with my colleagues.

Mr. Chair, can we suspend to discuss this friendly amendment?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** We'll suspend for two minutes.

● (0840)

(Pause)

● (0840)

**The Chair:** The committee is back in session. There was a discussion surrounding the date proposed by Madame Koutrakis.

Do you want to formalize that, Madame Koutrakis? The discussion was on a friendly amendment, so we can get the will of the committee.

**Annie Koutrakis:** Yes. I would like to hear from our colleague, Madame Larouche, if she is okay with a friendly amendment. I said "mid-March", but we can say "no later than March 12".

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** No later than March 12 is fine by me. I understand that we have to question people about the budget. That said, we don't want this to take too long, because we want to move on to the next studies. We have to give ourselves time so that the recommendations can be implemented as quickly as possible. I think that's a friendly and reasonable compromise.

**Annie Koutrakis:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Do I see a consensus on the amendment to the motion?

(Amendment agreed to)

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Madame Desrochers.

[*Translation*]

**Caroline Desrochers:** We would like to propose another amendment, which is that the committee invite to testify, for one hour—

[*English*]

**Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC):** We haven't voted on the first amendment.

**Caroline Desrochers:** I thought there was a consensus, so go ahead.

**The Chair:** Yes, there was a consensus. I was reading a consensus on the date, which was an amendment. Now I'm open for discussion on the motion of Madame Larouche as amended.

Ms. Goodridge had her hand up.

• (0845)

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

I'd like to thank my colleague from the Bloc—

[*English*]

**Hon. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.):** I have a point of order. I have two, because I have a procedural problem.

The first is the concept of a friendly amendment, which does not exist in our Standing Orders, and the clerk may clarify that.

An amendment has been moved by Madame Koutrakis. I believe if you have consensus, it still needs to be noted as an amendment that has been passed. Then we can move back to the original motion. We already had an indication of a second amendment, but we should dispose of the first amendment first.

I just think for the matter of the public record—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Oliphant, for the intervention.

We were dealing with what we term in this committee—we've used the term before—a friendly amendment, and the committee, by consensus—

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** On a point of order, could I ask where in the Standing Orders it exists?

**The Chair:** It was within the committee. The committee, by its consensus, can move that procedurally.

It was an amendment to the date, so let's just call it an amendment to the main motion. Does that satisfy everybody? It was an amendment to the main motion that there was a consensus on.

Now we're back to the main motion as amended.

I have Ms. Goodridge and then Ms. Desrochers.

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is absolutely important to make sure we're studying because, frankly, the Phoenix pay centre debacle has left people still struggling to get paid. This is something that we are starting to hear.

I had someone reach out to my office back in August to share their concerns, because they had had an exceptionally long delay in getting their OAS. They had decided to extend getting their OAS to 67, and when they applied to get it, after talking to their accountant and financial planner, 150 days later they still hadn't received it. Each time they had to reach out, they were typically on hold 25 to 30 minutes, and it was very stressful.

This particular senior contacted our office not necessarily because she was in urgent need but because she was really frustrated with the system and knew full well that others, who perhaps didn't have the same luxuries and privilege she did, were going through this and had all kinds of frustration. This is really important to look into.

There are many news reports of this happening in Quebec, and people have gone to journalists because—this is my guess—they're

not being listened to. These people have tried going to their Liberal members of Parliament and haven't been able to get any kind of answer. I know that when we brought this forward, we weren't able to get any kind of answer.

Perhaps this is a really important piece for us to look into to make sure this isn't the next Phoenix pay centre and make sure that all the ducks are in a row, because if we're planning to roll this out to other programs and other places where Canadians will get paid by the government, we want to make sure there are no bugs in the system. I still have people in my riding who work at 4 Wing Cold Lake who get overpaid and underpaid, all because the government decided to roll out a broken system that was the Phoenix pay centre.

**Caroline Desrochers:** Your government rolled it out.

**Laila Goodridge:** Our government told you not to.

**The Chair:** Madame Desrochers, on the motion that is now amended, do you want to continue?

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to propose an amendment to the motion asking that each minister testify for one hour as opposed to two hours. This is a very focused, targeted discussion on one issue. We're having the ministers testify for one hour on the budget implementation act, which is much broader, and that has proved sufficient, so I'd like to propose one hour for each of the ministers, accompanied by their officials.

**The Chair:** Are you moving an amendment?

• (0850)

**Caroline Desrochers:** I'd like to move an amendment.

**The Chair:** The motion has an amendment, so we will proceed to debate the amendment by Madame Desrochers

Go ahead, Mr. Genuis

**Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC):** I'll just point out that I don't know if these amendments around the time that ministers are invited to appear are necessary anyway, insofar as ministers can't be compelled to appear.

If the minister comes back and says, "I'm going to appear for one hour", we can all have whatever feelings we have about that. I would prefer that we have ministers for two hours on the BIA, but ministers will decide in any event.

**The Chair:** Is there any further discussion?

Madame Larouche, go ahead on the amendment put forward by Madame Desrochers.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** Mr. Chair, we'll see how long the ministers will appear for. I think that two hours go by extremely quickly; they have to make their opening remarks, and we ask them questions. In this case, the costs have skyrocketed by 277%, which is no small matter.

Minister Hajdu will be appearing, but I'd like to reiterate that we want to know what's going on and what impact it's having on seniors. We have gotten wildly different answers so far. I think that if we can try to shed light on the situation and find out the number of cases, that will be something.

I'd like to remind members that there was a cost overrun, as I said. In 2017, the cost was expected to be a little over \$1 billion, but it has risen to almost \$7 billion. That means the cost skyrocketed by 277%, which is enormous. That would be the focus of the questions we would ask Mr. Lightbound.

There have been other software programs whose costs have skyrocketed in the past. The House took the time to do things right. That means it will be good to look at cases with other software, for example; I think that's really important, because there have been a few in the past.

For that reason, I would keep the proposed two hours. To me, that's important. There was a friendly amendment that means we're going to give them more time before they appear; they have until March 12 to come testify. We have been co-operative, we have spoken with our counterparts, and I know that the three parties' whips have spoken to each other. On our side, we have been acting in very good faith from the start.

However, I wonder. As I said, at the start, we were told that there weren't any cases, but the answer changed after the fact. I think there's a form of bad faith there. I don't want to keep going back to this indefinitely, but you said at the outset that the 48-hour deadline hadn't been met. The notice of receipt was received on Tuesday at 1:53 p.m. It's necessary to give 48 hours' notice to call a meeting under Standing Order 106(4).

We have done this in good faith so far. I think the amendment states that the ministers have until mid-March to appear. For the rest, I would leave the motion as is, to give us some options.

It's possible that the ministers can come and testify for two hours, so we shouldn't limit ourselves by asking them to appear for one hour. They're going to come shed light on the skyrocketing costs so that we have a real idea of the number of seniors affected. I'm afraid that, with one hour, we won't be able to cover the 277% increase in costs. It was initially said that there weren't any cases; it was then said that there were 30, and, finally, it was said that the cases were in the order of 2%.

For all those reasons, I would keep the two hours provided for in the motion, and I wouldn't limit that to one hour.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I have Ms. Falk and Madame Desrochers on the amendment.

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

I'll just say how disappointed I am. I feel like this is typical Liberal behaviour. We want to see accountability and transparency. We're just asking for ministers to come. I know that past motions have been passed at this committee with timelines to have ministers appear. That has not happened. I absolutely think two hours is a fair ask.

We will be voting against the proposed amendment by the Liberals, which reduces transparency and accountability for their ministers.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Falk.

Madame Desrochers, you had your hand up.

**Caroline Desrochers:** We're happy to go with the original motion.

**The Chair:** Do you want to withdraw?

**Caroline Desrochers:** Yes, I'll withdraw the amendment so we can move on and properly use taxpayers' time.

• (0855)

**The Chair:** You need unanimous consent to withdraw your amendment.

Do we have unanimous consent?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** We will now vote on the motion of Madame Larouche as amended.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 9; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

**The Chair:** Committee members, I would like some direction. Is it your wish to return in camera until 9:15?

**Garnett Genuis:** We wouldn't have time.

**The Chair:** The minister is appearing at 9:15.

**Garnett Genuis:** How long does it take to get in and out of in camera?

**The Chair:** It takes five-plus minutes.

**Rosemarie Falk:** That's not what happened before. It takes a good 10 to 15 minutes.

**The Chair:** What are your wishes? Do you wish to suspend until 9:15?

Ms. Falk.

**Rosemarie Falk:** Thank you very much.

I would like to move a motion right now.

I will say, for Madame Desrochers, that if the Liberals aren't ready to make a decision on this, just let us know.

I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2)(a), the committee undertake a study of at least six meetings on housing starts in relation to federal programs in Canada; that the committee invite the Minister of Housing and the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to appear separately for at least two hours each; that the committee invite other witnesses selected by its members to appear; and that the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House.

We know housing starts are down, and we haven't had an opportunity at this committee to study housing—a massive portfolio—in this session. We would like to do that immediately after completing the study regarding the Bloc's motion we just passed—the Standing Order 106(4) letter.

If the Liberals want a moment to discuss this, that's fine. We understand that the minister is coming here in 15 minutes, and we would like to honour her time while she is here at committee.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Falk.

The motion moved by Ms. Falk is in order.

**Rosemarie Falk:** I'll just add that it was put on notice. Every member should have it. I believe it is in the digital binder.

**The Chair:** I have Madame Desrochers next; then it's Ms. Koutrakis and Mr. Genuis.

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the member for bringing up this issue.

Our government has taken its responsibility with respect to building more affordable housing very seriously, and that's why we are moving forward with Build Canada Homes. I would ask the member to take a look at her data, because housing starts are actually up.

It's a complex problem. There are different issues in different cities. I think it's a very worthwhile and relevant subject for this committee to study. However, we'd like to suspend so we can review the motion.

**The Chair:** Okay. We'll suspend for several minutes.

● (0855) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

● (0900)

**The Chair:** Come to order, members. The committee is back in session.

Madame Desrochers had the floor when we suspended.

● (0905)

**Caroline Desrochers:** I'd like to thank my colleague for her motion to study housing starts and housing-related issues. As we said before, there is a housing crisis and it's important that we make the time necessary to discuss it and get to the bottom of it.

I would like to propose a couple of amendments to this. I think then we can find some consensus for moving forward.

First of all, we propose that the committee undertake a study of no less than four meetings. We don't have to set a cap, but it's no less than four meetings. At the end, we'd like to add an amendment saying that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

**The Chair:** We now have an amendment to the motion of Ms. Falk on the floor. The discussion will now move to the amendment of Madame Desrochers.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** Mr. Chair—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I remind those at the back of the room that this committee is in session. Please be quiet.

**Rosemarie Falk:** I have a point of order, Chair. It's very noisy in the back and it is hard for us to hear.

**The Chair:** Yes, I agree.

I'd ask the members at the back of the room to simply respect that the meeting is in session. We're dealing with a subject matter before the final hour.

We have an amendment to the motion of Ms. Falk, put forward by Madame Desrochers.

I believe, Madame Larouche, you had your hand up.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** Actually, Mr. Chair, I had trouble hearing because of the noise. I understood the first amendment, which proposed to hold four meetings, but there was talk of a report. I just want to understand.

**Caroline Desrochers:** It has to do with Standing Order 109. We're asking the government to table a response to the report.

**The Chair:** Do you agree, Ms. Larouche?

**Andréanne Larouche:** I'm not saying that I agree at this point. I just didn't understand the amendment.

Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Is there discussion on the amendment of Madame Desrochers?

Mr. Genuis, go ahead on the amendment.

**Garnett Genuis:** Chair, very briefly, our view is that the six meeting minimum is appropriate.

Over the break especially, I've been visiting university campuses across this country. I've been on about a dozen campuses in five different provinces asking young people if they are better or worse off than their parents' generation. Overwhelmingly, young people tell me that they feel they are worse off than their parents' generation. The two key reasons are challenges to affording homes and challenges to finding employment.

We have begun and will continue to do a very robust study on youth unemployment. I think having the study on housing as well, which is of sufficient length and robustness, is appropriate in light of the feedback I'm getting from young people about how challenges to affording homes and accessing jobs are critical priorities for them as they think about their present and future.

With respect to Standing Order 109, it's been presented as one amendment, so we will oppose the one amendment. That doesn't preclude the committee from deciding it wants a government response later. It does not have to be in the initial motion for the committee to request a government response. I suspect we would request a government response. That's the normal thing to do when there are recommendations in a report.

Certainly, we're not supportive of this amendment, principally on the grounds that we don't agree with the first point, and the second point is just not necessary.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

We'll go to Madame Desrochers and then Madame Larouche.

**Caroline Desrochers:** I just want to say something about the number of meetings.

[*Translation*]

We're not going to die on the hill of six meetings or four meetings, even though I think this is an important issue. However, I just want to note that we're currently talking about housing starts, a fairly limited topic, and there's a desire to hold six meetings on that. That doesn't bother me, but what's going to happen is that we'll do the same thing as when we started the first studies. In other words, we're going to constantly add things and start going beyond the scope. That's the only thing.

When we talk about housing starts, we're also talking about labour availability and municipal and provincial regulations. At the federal level, we obviously don't have a magic wand, and we don't have control over all the factors that are making housing starts what they are right now. We have programs designed to accelerate that.

I'm open to hearing what others have to say about this; perhaps Ms. Larouche has something to say.

• (0910)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Desrochers.

Madame Larouche, go ahead on the amendment.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** Again, I think this is an interesting topic. I'll see how it goes. I think we'll be able to vote on the motion in the next few minutes.

Ms. Desrochers, I think that conducting this study, as with the study on the Cúram software, is a good use of public funds. If I were a senior and I heard you say that we need to speed up the process regarding the Cúram software, since we need to make good use of public funds, I think I'd be a bit angry.

As we know, costs have increased by 277% since last June. For that reason, I think that conducting a study is a good use of public

funds. That's also true for the study that will look at Build Canada Homes.

I'll see what happens after. I'll let my colleagues debate the motion, but we'll be able to vote in the next few minutes.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Oliphant, go ahead on the amendment.

**Hon. Robert Oliphant:** On the amendment, I want to speak very strongly in favour of a government report, and that's as a parliamentarian, because if this is an important study, which I believe it is, and if you're going to take that many weeks to do it, you will necessarily, I am sure, come up with recommendations, and the executive branch of government should have to respond.

This is actually the way Parliament and the executive branch should work, so if you really believe this study is important and you think the housing crisis demands parliamentary inquiry as well as government engagement, you will ask for a response. That requires the government to take this parliamentary report seriously, so as a matter of course, parliamentary committees should automatically put it in.

Equally, as Mr. Genuis said, it could be added later, but you can shape your report knowing the government will have to respond. It gives you direction on how to do that, so that becomes important. As well, the committee could remove it later if you decide you don't have any recommendations, but I really hope, as a Canadian, that this committee will have recommendations.

I strongly support the amendment that we require the government to have a report.

**The Chair:** Thank you, but as it is currently structured before the committee, the amendment has two parts. If Madame Desrochers were to ask for unanimous consent to remove the part on the number of meetings, that would be an option, and then the committee would be voting on the amendment, which simply references what you articulated, Mr. Oliphant.

Mr. Genuis.

**Garnett Genuis:** It's 9:13 and the minister is here, so I suggest we have two options. One is that if there is unanimous agreement to proceed with the six meetings and the reference to Standing Order 109 and adopt the motion right now, we can do that, but if there isn't, I suggest we proceed to hearing from the minister.

**The Chair:** I agree, Mr. Genuis; it was articulated well.

Do we have agreement on the amendment with the number of meeting dates, which is also adding a reference to the report?

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

**The Chair:** Do we have the same consensus on the motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

**The Chair:** With that, as we are in public, at this time we will move to the second hour of the committee's agenda.

I would like welcome Minister Patti Hajdu, Minister of Jobs and Families. Also with us this morning, from the Department of Employment and Social Development, we have Paul Thompson, deputy minister; Robert Wright, deputy minister of labour and associate deputy minister of employment and social development; and Cliff Groen, associate deputy minister of employment and social development and chief operating officer for Service Canada.

Welcome, Minister. You have the floor for up to five minutes for an opening statement, if you choose to do so.

• (0915)

**Hon. Patti Hajdu (Minister of Jobs and Families):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a joy to be with you here on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe first nation. You've made an introduction of the deputies who serve the vast department of ESDC, and I'm really grateful to have their presence here.

Thank you very much, gentlemen.

Listen, I know this committee has been studying the work that the government is doing to make everyday life affordable and to make a real difference in the day-to-day lives of Canadians. The purpose of my visit today is to talk about budget 2025, which delivers generational investments to build Canada strong, protect our communities and our way of life, and empower Canadians by making life more affordable.

In the face of uncertainty, there are many things we cannot control, but the measures we have in the budget aren't just numbers for the families; they are lifelines in a time of great uncertainty. They reflect a simple truth: Every family deserves stability, dignity and the chance to thrive.

[Translation]

High-quality child care shouldn't cost a fortune. That's why we created the Canada-wide early learning and child care system.

[English]

Today, nearly one million families are benefiting from more affordable, high-quality early learning and child care, which saves families thousands of dollars every year. I'm pleased to say that all provinces now have agreements that have been extended across Canada beyond March 31, 2026. Across the country, parents spontaneously come to me and talk about how affordable child care has changed their lives. When affordability and the cost of living are top of mind, child care is one of those costs that families have seen go down, with families saving up to \$16,200 annually.

For women, access to affordable child care has meant directly supporting their labour force participation by reducing barriers to going to work or school and strengthening families' economic security, while supporting productivity and growth. In fact, there are 74,000 more mothers aged 25 to 54 of young children in the labour force since 2019.

We've seen this in Quebec for years. When child care is more affordable, more women work, families are more secure and the economy grows. Now we're seeing those benefits expand across the country because of continued investments by the federal government and provinces and territories into building a Canada-wide early learning and child care system. It's true collaboration across the federation, because it's not just an affordability measure; it's about boosting productivity and our economy.

The kinds of stories we're hearing across the country—and I'm sure you've heard them in your riding—echo the story of Kendra from Carlyle, Saskatchewan, who said that the \$10 a day child care program has allowed her family to send both kids to day care and enabled them to grow their small business within their community. Without this program, she said, it wouldn't have been financially feasible for them to take this leap. That's what affordability means: social infrastructure that supports parents, strengthens supports for families and opens the door for the next generation.

We've talked a lot about food and food insecurity this Parliament, and we all agree that children should never be hungry at school. That's why budget 2025, upon the recommendation of many organizations, including Food Banks Canada, makes the national school food program permanent. When children have nutritious meals, they learn better, and when parents know that their kids are fed, it reduces stress at home.

[Translation]

This annual investment of \$216 million will help up to 400,000 children a year take part in school food programs. For a participating family with two children in school, that can mean annual savings of \$800.

[English]

The experts have said that this measure is monumental. Parents have told me that it's the difference between sending their kids to school worried and sending them with confidence, knowing that they have the necessary tools to thrive. It's not just low-income parents. Many parents send their kids to school, and sometimes lunches are forgotten. That day can be a very hungry day for a kid who needs fuel for learning.

We're going further, though, with the Canada groceries and essentials benefit. The government is increasing the former GST credit by 25% for five years, starting in July 2026. This will help Canadians manage the rising cost of everyday essentials.

To support families in immediate need, we're providing \$20 million to the local food infrastructure fund, helping food banks and community organizations all across this country deliver more nutritious food. To tackle the root causes of food insecurity, we're developing a national food security strategy that will strengthen domestic food production, support producers and improve access to affordable, nutritious food across the country—again, all actions recommended by food banks.

I have quite a bit more.

● (0920)

**The Chair:** We're at five minutes.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I will stop there, then, Mr. Chair. I would love to talk today about the work we're doing to support apprenticeships as well.

**The Chair:** Madam Minister, you can do that during the question and answer rounds.

We will now go to the first round of questions.

Mr. Genuis, you have six minutes.

**Garnett Genuis:** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Minister, the budget said the following, which, as you know, we've raised a lot of concern about:

Budget 2025 announces the government's intention to propose legislative and regulatory amendments to address integrity issues related to private educational institutions by generally limiting access to the Canada Student Grant for Full-time Students to students attending public educational institutions and not-for-profit private institutions within Canada.

As I have pointed out, this proposal in the budget would eliminate funding for students who are pursuing essential vocational training, which is available at only private institutions, as it happens. I want to note that the budget implementation act, which we're discussing today, does not implement the provisions that were foreshadowed in the budget with respect to this. It makes some changes, but they are very different from what is in the budget.

Is the government still committed to the policy as articulated in the budget, or has the government decided to change course on this?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** The government is committed to making sure that when young people purchase education, that education is accredited and is valuable in terms of their productivity and their work experience. This—

**Garnett Genuis:** I am going to jump in to insist on a specific answer to a very simple question. Is the government committed to the budget provisions as specifically laid out on page 217 of the budget and as I just read? Is that still the government's policy?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** The government's policy is that we will ensure that the way in which we invest through Canada's student supports means that quality education is the outcome.

**Garnett Genuis:** Minister, you're a minister of the Crown. It doesn't seem to me that it would be that difficult to say whether you stand behind the budget or you don't stand behind the budget.

Do you stand behind the specific provisions on page 217 of the budget, as I just read out? Do you stand behind those provisions?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** As I said, the focus of the government is to deliver supports to students so that the expenses they incur for education are actually resulting in quality education that results in labour attachment.

**Garnett Genuis:** Right. That's a great objective.

Do you agree with and stand behind the policy as laid out in the budget on page 217?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I will repeat that the focus of the government is to make sure that when students utilize Canada's student learning supports, it will result in education that is valuable to them. We have seen an increase in institutions that—

**Garnett Genuis:** Minister, it's incredible to me that you can't give a simple answer to the question about whether the government still stands behind the policy.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** This is the simple answer, sir.

**Garnett Genuis:** The simple question is this: Does the government maintain and continue to have as its policy what is articulated on page 217 of the budget? It's just yes or no. Do you stand behind that policy announcement in the budget?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** The work the government is doing is to ensure that the federal student financial assistance provided to students is utilized in institutions that will provide quality education.

**Garnett Genuis:** That's just not an answer to the question. I think the public can see that.

Deputy Minister Thompson, perhaps you won't mind me putting you in the hot seat. You often speak on government policy. Even though you're not responsible for making it, you're responsible for implementing it.

Is it your understanding that the section I just read from on page 217 is still government policy?

**Paul Thompson (Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development):** We have the full intention to implement the budget measures as they were laid out by the government. I would note that—

● (0925)

**Garnett Genuis:** Okay. Thank you. That was a clear response. I disagree with it and I'm disappointed by it, but it was a clear response. The government still intends to implement those provisions.

Do you know when the government expects to implement the provisions I've just read out, given that they were not included in the budget implementation act? That question is for the deputy minister.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Listen, I think we all understand that pieces of legislation have to pass in the House for the budget to pass so that Canadians can get the relief that everyone has been saying is so essential.

**Garnett Genuis:** The provisions I'm talking about are not in the budget implementation act. Mr. Thompson has confirmed that they're still government policy. Does the government have a timeline for proposing those measures?

Again, we oppose the provisions explained in page 217, but I think students would like to have some certainty around when their grants will be cut. What's the plan there?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Well, it's difficult to project a timeline when we see the kind of obstruction in the House for everyday pieces of legislation—

**Garnett Genuis:** You haven't even put these—

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —including the BIA, so I wouldn't want to put a date on it—

**Garnett Genuis:** —provisions forward.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —since some of the levers are in your hands.

**Garnett Genuis:** We can't be accused of obstructing provisions that have not been presented in the House.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Well, I would imagine that—

**Garnett Genuis:** Can I just try to ask one more question in the minute I have left?

Minister, why do you think food cost inflation here is twice the level of that in the United States?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Well, I think we've covered this question in the House quite a bit. We have a number of conflating situations in Canada, including, as you would know, the tariffs we've been experiencing as a country. I think you're from the western part of this country and you yourself can speak to some of the cattle farmers, who are—

**Garnett Genuis:** Minister, how do you think—

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —actually feeling quite despondent.

**Garnett Genuis:** —tariffs are impacting food inflation?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Look, there are a number of impacting—

**Garnett Genuis:** Which tariffs specifically?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** The focus here is on the things that we can control, as I said in my speech, and there's no doubt—

**Garnett Genuis:** Yes, but I'm asking about food inflation specifically.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —that Canadians are feeling the impact of food inflation, but I will tell you what it's not, if this is where you're going. It is not, as many economists have shown, related—

**Garnett Genuis:** You're the minister. I am not asking what it's not. I'm asking what it is.

Why is it twice that of the United States?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Well, food inflation in Canada is directly related to the number of foods we must import and to the growing challenges of climate change.

[*Translation*]

**Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.):** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Is there an issue with interpretation?

[*Translation*]

**Natilien Joseph:** The interpreter said the word “inaudible”. That says it all. My colleague can't mess around by talking fast and cutting off the witness.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Joseph.

I would ask all participants to be respectful that the meeting must be interpreted. That's what I shall say.

You have one second.

**Garnett Genuis:** I have one second. Okay.

Why is food inflation in Canada double what it is in the United States?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** What I'd say is that time and time again when this government puts forward measures to help with the affordability issues for Canadians, we see the opposition delay, stall and use tactics that actually reduce the ability of Canadians to get those supports. That's what I'm focused on: what we can control and how we can help families.

**Garnett Genuis:** That's not an answer, though.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Genuis. Your time is up.

Thank you, Madam Minister.

We have Madame Desrochers for six minutes.

Again, I would remind members to respect the interpreters.

[*Translation*]

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Minister.

I also want to thank the officials who are attending the meeting.

[*English*]

First of all, thank you for the important work you are doing. I want to commend your leadership in ensuring that budget 2025 preserves the really important programs that provide the social safety nets that Canadians expect in difficult times. They have made Canada what it is today, and I think those are really important.

We know that budget 2025 was a balancing act, and it's wonderful what we've been able to accomplish. I'm thinking about Canadian child care, the national school food program and making it permanent, the dental care plan and, most recently, the groceries and essentials benefit, which is going to benefit over 12 million Canadians.

I'm wondering, Minister, if you could talk a bit about how impactful and how targeted the measures are in the groceries and essentials benefit.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I think you're hitting on something really salient for Canadian families right now, which is that they know we're in a trade war. They also know that the world is changing. They have a high degree of anxiety about what's going to happen to their own circumstances and those of their friends and neighbours, and Canadians have been pulling together all across the country.

It's amazing to see, for example, if you go into your local grocery store, how much produce is now being grown in Canada. That's why I think this announcement of the groceries and essentials benefit is not just about tax relief for Canadians and support for low-income Canadians, but also about investments in our own capacity to grow our own local food.

I think of the Windsor-Essex area, which has giant farms that provide all kinds of produce for the country, and how that area might be able to utilize some of the supports of the government to redouble its efforts. I also think about small producers in my own region. I am in northern Ontario, which is not a hot spot for agriculture, but we have local cattle producers, pork producers and greenhouses. In fact, Sleepy G Farm, which I am a shareholder of... Well, it's kind of a food share, actually. You buy a food share, and then you get it all throughout the summer. These are the kinds of local farms that are really excited about the announcement, because it's going to help increase their capacity not just to produce food, but to store it and distribute it through local food economies.

That's the intent behind the latest announcement. It's support directly to low-income families, but it's also support to the entire ecosystem so we can have a stronger system of sovereignty when it comes to food producing at the local and large industrial scales.

● (0930)

**Caroline Desrochers:** Thank you very much for this.

I forgot to say that I'll be sharing my time with my colleague from Compton—Stanstead.

Since we're talking about agriculture, I think I'll pass it over to her.

[*Translation*]

**Marianne Dandurand (Compton—Stanstead, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Ms. Desrochers.

Minister, thank you for being here.

As you know, I represent a largely rural riding. My riding actually comprises a large portion of the city of Sherbrooke, that is, several boroughs, and 35 rural communities with populations ranging from 100 to a little over 9,000. It's facing an aging population and a declining birth rate, and there is definitely a labour shortage, which is severe in the regions, particularly in agriculture, tourism and manufacturing.

I really welcomed the part of the budget that mentioned going to work on regionalizing immigration, which reflected a particular concern for not only rural or remote regions, but also for businesses affected by tariffs.

Recognizing that economic immigration is primarily the responsibility of the Government of Quebec, back home, how does your

department use federal levers to increase the number of workers in the regions?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** There is Quebec's approach, which we respect. It's true that there's a labour shortage in some regions, such as very rural regions. It's the same in my area, for example, in northwestern Ontario.

[*English*]

That's why we have to be very careful as we calibrate what we do with immigration.

There are, for example, across the country, a number of pilots called northern and rural immigration pilots. In Thunder Bay, Ontario, we have one. The intent is not to attract temporary labour, but permanent residents who have specific skills that can help small and medium-sized...scale and grow.

It is an uneven story across the country on immigration. In some communities there are many newcomers, and communities have called for tighter controls on immigration. That's exactly what this government is doing, but in other communities there is a severe shortage.

I met with a particular company outside of Quebec City that produces stainless steel, one of our only producers of stainless steel, and it is utilizing some temporary foreign workers whom they would like to make permanent, because the temporary foreign workers have been there for many years and have specific skills related to their business. The company's name is Julien, and it has very sought-after stainless steel worldwide.

This is the work we have to do together to make sure those levels are right, that Quebec maintains its independence and its immigration approach and that we focus on pulling together in these very rural areas where we see a shortage of labour.

[*Translation*]

**Marianne Dandurand:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Dandurand.

[*English*]

Before we move on, I will remind members that if the interpreters cannot translate properly, I will suspend the meeting, because participants must be able to fully engage in both official languages. When one member is talking over the other, they cannot translate. We will suspend if that occurs.

● (0935)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here.

You're here to answer our questions on quite important topics, but this is also an opportunity to reiterate how much Quebec has led the way in a number of areas you mentioned, particularly child care. I'd like to point out that early childhood centres are a Quebec model that was put in place by a woman, Pauline Marois. As we have seen, it's the envy of not only other parts of Canada, but also other parts of the world; it has inspired other places around the world.

It's an interesting model that has proven its worth and helped lift women out of financial insecurity. Economic studies have shown that this model has really enabled women to return to the labour market and participate in the economy, so we believe in it wholeheartedly.

You talked about child care in your opening remarks, so I wanted to reiterate Quebec's uniqueness in that regard.

Before I ask you my questions, I'd like to come back to temporary foreign workers. That's one thing in the agricultural sector, but there are other sectors, such as the manufacturing or machining sectors, that don't have the same standards as the agricultural sector.

Last Monday, people came to Parliament Hill, including representatives of small and medium-sized Quebec businesses, members of the Alliance main-d'œuvre étrangère, the Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec, the Conseil du patronat du Québec and Manufacturiers et exportateurs du Québec. They came to ask the federal government to reduce the current restrictions on the temporary foreign worker program. Obviously, there's also the whole issue of coordination that needs to take place between Ottawa and Quebec City. That directly threatens the success and survival of Quebec companies. They're calling for a grandfather clause and transitional measures to enable businesses to adapt and avoid adding to the difficulties they face.

I have met with these people, but I'd like to know what your response is to the request they made on Monday on Parliament Hill.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** As I said, this is a very pressing and very important issue for rural areas. I have also had meetings with those companies.

[English]

I have heard from them directly.

You're also right that this is a relationship between Quebec and the federal government. We stand ready to assist Quebec in the direction they wish to go to attach some of these temporary foreign workers in a more permanent way to these businesses.

What businesses are saying is that they have, in some cases, been using the same worker as a temporary worker for six, seven or eight years. The challenge they have is that they don't want another replacement temporary foreign worker; they want to be able to incorporate this worker into their business and enterprise permanently, and to make their families, who are often here and living with them—all of them paying taxes—permanent residents. This is the challenge that businesses are expressing. They also want a short-term solution, though, in terms of not losing a person and extending their temporary status while they work on permanent status.

These are conversations that are happening right now between the Province of Quebec and the Government of Canada. We will act in accordance with Quebec's wishes. This is really a Quebec-led process, and we stand ready to assist Quebec in the direction they choose.

[Translation]

**Andréanne Larouche:** This will be something to keep an eye on. It's a matter of survival for certain businesses in the regions.

I would now like to come back to Bill C-15 and the respect for Quebec's jurisdictions. How is the government ensuring that the implementation of Bill C-15 respects Quebec's exclusive jurisdictions, particularly in the areas of family, social services and education?

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. You're going to have to tell me what Bill C-15 is. I don't have my list of bills here.

**The Chair:** It is the budget implementation act.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much.

There are many bills, so I don't have the number at hand, but what I would say is that the GST rebate will apply to all people who are getting a GST rebate.

Yes, I see members opposite laughing, but as a minister of a large department, I stay very focused on the work that I'm delivering for Canadians, and memorizing numbers of bills is not really the top priority for me. The top priority for me is making sure I deliver for Canadians in the responsibility areas where I'm being asked to do that.

Thank you very much again for the question, Madame Larouche. All of the work we do is in compliance with the direction of Quebec. In particular, the GST credit will apply to all Canadians who are entitled to it.

• (0940)

[Translation]

**Andréanne Larouche:** You talked about the goods and services tax credit. Because rent has to be paid every month, as with groceries, there are people who say it would have been a good idea to have monthly payments to really help the families who are struggling a little more and certain organizations that support them, for example, to help them set a budget.

What do you think of that suggestion? Should the credit have been reviewed so that it would be paid on a monthly basis?

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We are always interested in how we can help families. This was a recommendation of the national food bank associations, and we have implemented exactly what they've asked for.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Larouche.

Ms. Goodridge, you have five minutes.

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister and officials for being here today to speak to this.

I want to start out with the school food program. You guys have been boasting about it feeding 400,000 kids. Is that accurate?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Let me get my numbers here. That is the target for the program.

**Laila Goodridge:** ESDC recently commissioned \$1 million of research into the school food program to see how many kids it actually feeds after admitting that the claim of 400,000 was basically guesswork. Why?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Whenever we work with provinces and territories, we are reliant on their reporting of data, so part of the work is to ensure we get the data we need from provinces and territories. I will say that all of the provinces and territories are working closely with the department so we can assess how this additional boost to any school food programs they might already be delivering is helping.

The other thing I would point out is that the school food program is a reflection of many calls by many advocates to fix the patchwork of systems that exist across the country.

**Laila Goodridge:** I appreciate this. As a mom, I don't want to see a single kid go hungry. I don't know any parent who wants to see any child go hungry, especially at school. We know that is critically important.

What is, however, very concerning is you rolled out a \$1-billion project and boasted about the fact that you were feeding 400,000 kids, and then you had to commission a study for \$1 million to prove how many kids were actually getting fed. Why not spend that \$1 million on just feeding kids?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** You say that you deeply care about kids going hungry, yet you vote against every measure that helps parents feed their kids.

**Laila Goodridge:** I vote against wasteful government spending.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** In your own riding—

**Laila Goodridge:** No, Minister, respectfully—

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** In your own province of Alberta, this program is helping to feed 58,000 children, and in your own province of Alberta, parents are saving \$13,700 per child per year in child care, which you also voted against.

**Laila Goodridge:** Minister, that only helps the parents who are going to access child care. This is one of the big problems: You guys announce big programs and announce big spends, but you don't make sure the kids who actually need them the most are the ones getting them.

In my home province of Alberta, I'm very proud of the work the Government of Alberta has done in creating new spaces for child care, in ensuring that low-income families have access to these supports and in ensuring that utilization is there for child care. I'm also really proud of the fact that Alberta has had a school food program for decades.

However, you have done nothing as a government to make sure the people who need this support the absolute most are the first ones in line. That concerns me.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** It was a pleasure to work with Minister Nicolaides to extend the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and to talk about the essentiality of this program not just for parents or young people who are getting the quality child care that puts a parent's mind at ease, but for the economy of Alberta and Canada.

There is incredible research, and I want to thank Madame Larouche for giving me the history of Madame Marois. It is so important to recognize that this is about decades of advocacy, largely by women, to ensure quality care, and it turns out to be the social infrastructure for growing economies.

● (0945)

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you, Minister.

According to your own government's data, there are approximately 6.6 million school-aged children. You guys have designed a school food program that feeds 400,000 kids. It's a guesstimate on your part—a guess.

We know that right now there are 700,000 kids going to food banks every single month. That leaves a gap, based on your guess, of 300,000 kids.

What's up? Why is there such a disparity?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Well, this program was never meant to replace school food programs that already exist in provinces. The challenge was that different school boards had different regimes. Some school boards were not able to afford a school food program at all. The federal government agreed with the provinces and territories to help out, because we agreed with the premise that no kid should be hungry at school.

It's not meant to replace provincial programs; it's meant to augment provincial programs.

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you, Minister—

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I want to thank the provinces for doing this work, because I think everybody agrees that growing brains are essential to the next generation of successful adults.

**Laila Goodridge:** Absolutely.

I have very little time left. You've had time to consult with your officials, I'm sure.

My colleague Mr. Genuis asked about food inflation. You said that it's tariffs. Which tariffs are impacting food inflation?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I think the real question Canadians have—

**Laila Goodridge:** No, you said it's tariffs. I'm asking specifically which tariffs impacted food inflation. You said it. Are you just speaking, or is there an actual answer here?

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Goodridge. Your time has gone by.

We'll move to Madame Koutrakis for five minutes.

**Annie Koutrakis:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here today, for answering all the questions and for helping Canadians have a better understanding of what this government is doing to make sure that we are there every single day for the challenges they face and that we have their backs.

Minister, we hear so much about youth employment. I know that in your opening remarks, you ran out of time. I was wondering if I could give you the opportunity to continue with your commentary as it relates to skills, trades and all the various support programs that are in place to help with the youth employment issue.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much, Parliamentary Secretary, for your assistance on this file. It's a big file. It's such an important file to Canadians and in particular young people, and certainly, as we've heard, to families and children.

You're right to ask about youth unemployment. We are very focused on what we can do in the short term and the long term to bring down youth unemployment. Youth unemployment is obviously a challenge for young people, and sometimes there are experiences they might be missing out on that will help build their résumés and careers.

This summer, for example, we're increasing Canada student jobs by 40,000. There will be 100,000 Canada student jobs across the country, including in many of my colleagues' ridings. Despite the fact that they vote against this program, they are avid users of it. I hope that means they recognize how important it is to the young people in their ridings.

We have also increased the student work placement program. It will create 55,000 opportunities for students in 2026-27. This program is very important, because it provides students with paid work experiences in their area of study. Research shows that this results in better attachment to workplaces and provides workplaces, in a way, with the ability to test run a young person, who often blows their socks off and ends up with a permanent job with a particular employer.

Finally, we will be continuing to support many programs through the labour market transfer agreements and through direct delivery to a variety of different hard-working and well-serving organizations around the country that help with very specialized, challenging situations that youth find themselves in.

**Annie Koutrakis:** Thank you for that.

Minister, during periods of economic uncertainty, workers need to know that the system is there for them. Can you outline how recent EI improvements are helping workers navigate layoffs and job transitions with dignity?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** It's such an important question, because, of course, the uncertainty and the impact on specific sectors, like auto,

steel and indeed forestry, lumber and aluminum, have meant that there have been layoffs in certain sectors. Despite the overall numbers that show we're holding steady, one job loss is too many, and many people feel very scared when that happens.

I was on EI in my early years, in my twenties. Many of us in this room either know someone who's been on EI or have maybe used it ourselves. If you've been pregnant, you've also used EI. I've had a baby. At the end of the day, employment insurance is like a long-standing social safety network, and that's why the Prime Minister, early on, decided to strengthen it and create new measures that could support people in the case of sudden layoff.

One thing that happens now that is different is workers can get severance and EI at the same time, meaning they don't lose a dollar of their pay and they don't have to face a waiting period for EI. There is no waiting period at all. There was a one-week waiting period. That has been waived.

Indeed, long-tenured workers are getting 20 extra weeks, because sometimes, as a person who's worked for a long time in an industry or for a specific employer, they need time to adjust.

We also have an additional approximately \$400 million for provinces and territories to help with the immediate readjustment work around navigating the workforce and figuring out how to update résumés, sort out some of the job searching and determine if there is skills training that can be tapped into immediately. We're working really collaboratively with provinces to make sure workers are supported no matter their situation.

● (0950)

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds.

**Annie Koutrakis:** If you had to leave Canadians with one last message, how important is it for the budget to pass in order to deliver for Canadians?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I think Canadians are not looking for animosity, delay tactics and obstruction right now. Canadians are seized with the urgency of this moment.

In fact, it was interesting to hear former prime minister Stephen Harper call for unity, including across the corporate sector, in saying that this is a distinct time in the history of Canada where we see Canadians pulling together who are not asking themselves what partisan stripe they are, but asking themselves how they can help each other.

That's what the budget builds on. It builds on a notion of being there for each other.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Koutrakis.

[Translation]

Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, it's interesting to hear you talk about employment insurance. Today, we were supposed to consider a report on the work in the seasonal industry and the employment insurance program. According to the report, there are a lot of recommendations and things that need to be changed in the system. I hope we'll have the opportunity to come back to it so that it can be adopted. One thing is certain: Given the number of recommendations that have been made regarding employment insurance, there needs to be a real reform and a real modernization of employment insurance. That's what the Bloc Québécois is calling for. We introduced a bill to that effect. I hope we can come back to that report at a future meeting.

My question is about the budget implementation bill, Bill C-15. Why doesn't that bill provide any mechanism for Quebec to opt out with full compensation?

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I couldn't hear the last bit. Just one moment.

[Translation]

**Andréanne Larouche:** I hope you'll stop the clock, Mr. Chair.

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** What was the last sentence?

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Ms. Larouche, can you repeat your question?

**Andréanne Larouche:** Yes, I'll repeat my question.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I understand, Ms. Larouche.

I think the citizens of Quebec are entitled to the same opportunities as the citizens of Canada. The GST credit is a national credit, and it's important for every Canadian to get the same support.

**Andréanne Larouche:** Yes, it's a federal program, but that wasn't what I was talking about when I mentioned the right to opt out with full compensation.

Do you acknowledge that this approach, which is consistent across certain programs that deal with areas under Quebec's jurisdiction, risks creating unnecessary overlap?

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** This government has been very respectful of supporting Quebec's determination of how to provide support to a variety of different citizens. For example, in my own file, which I would know the best, for many direct supports for programming for youth, Quebec is able to have the final say on which programs receive federal funds and how those funds should be used. I've met with Carrefour in Quebec City. They have spoken to me about the many ways in which they use that federal support to support young people, but they also work in full compliance and coordination with the Province of Quebec.

When it comes to tax credits and GST credits, this is something that all citizens receive. We'll continue to make sure there's equity in how that is delivered across the country.

• (0955)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[English]

Mr. Reynolds, you have five minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister, for coming here today.

I just want to clarify something. I don't know if you thought I was laughing about the Bill C-15 thing, but I wasn't, actually. Being the new guy here, I don't know bill numbers either. I said to my colleague, "I'm glad I'm not the only one."

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much for clarifying that. It felt a little personal. There are a lot of bills flying around.

**Colin Reynolds:** I don't know the bill numbers either.

This government is standing in the House every week talking about nation-building projects and the need for more skilled trades workers. One of the biggest issues we have in this country with skilled trades recruitment is retention. For many years, the federal government offered the apprenticeship completion grant, which paid \$2,000 per apprentice upon completion of their program. The federal government also offered the apprenticeship incentive grant. This grant also paid a total of \$2,000 per apprentice, which was given throughout the program. Additionally, there was the apprenticeship incentive grant for women, which paid a total of \$6,000 for women in the trades. These grants helped dramatically with retention. They actually helped me when I was going through my apprenticeship 18 years ago.

Can you explain why, with all the discussion around these nation-building projects and trades worker shortages, the Liberal government decided to cancel these programs in March 2025 and did not bring any of these incentives back in budget 2025?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Thank you very much, Mr. Reynolds, for representing skilled labour in Parliament. It's great to have a tradesperson. There might be others, but you've certainly been very vocal about your experience, and that's helpful. My son is a skilled tradesperson as well.

I'm very grateful that you were able to avail yourself of the apprenticeship grant. Our data has shown that not many people are actually utilizing the grant. It's not driving completion in the way that it was designed.

We have every intention of bringing back financial supports and grants to apprentices. I agree with you that money may be part of the barrier.

We're working with the CBTU and other skilled trades organizations to understand how to deliver that in a way that's really going to break through. In the experience of my sample size of one, which is up close and personal, that journey can be really fragile for individuals when they're experiencing, for example, layoffs and seasonal work.

**Colin Reynolds:** I agree. It can be tough. I went through it myself.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We will be coming back with how that's modelled, based on the advice of apprentices and skilled trades workers.

**Colin Reynolds:** Another program that was offered by the federal government over the last number of years was the apprenticeship support program. This program would pay employers that hired a brand new first-year apprentice up to \$10,000 for a newcomer or someone from an under-represented group, specifically women, or \$5,000 for anyone else. With all the virtue signalling around needing more trades, specifically women in the trades, why has the Liberal government made it harder?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** We are actually relaunching that support for employers in April of this year.

**Colin Reynolds:** The issues around apprentice retention are always with lower-level apprentices, typically first- and second-year. That's because they aren't paid a lot. The grants help them significantly to make ends meet. As I said, they helped me a lot.

Can you explain why, when the government is standing up and praising the trades, apprentices can expect less from this federal government than they did from previous governments...as I expected so many years ago?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Again, the data we have on the apprenticeship grant shows that it really wasn't getting into the hands of apprentices or finished Red Seal tradespeople. We are working with Red Seal trade organizations and apprentices to better understand how we can support people immediately.

I personally think that part of the challenge with the apprenticeship grants was the delayed nature of them. The reality is that sometimes when people are laid off, they need the money right away, not after a particular block of study. We're looking at all options right now to do exactly what you're suggesting—that is, have the right support in place to help people get through first and second year and all the way to Red Seal.

• (1000)

**Colin Reynolds:** Another issue that comes up, and I've experienced it myself, is the delay in EI for apprenticeship. Usually you have to observe the two-week waiting period when going to school. Has that issue been addressed in this budget?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** That issue is being addressed right now through the EI temporary reforms that were put into place to deal with the unjust tariffs. They're not just for tariff-related employment loss; they're for everybody. There's no waiting period at all for anyone who's claiming EI. Of course, we're carefully monitoring the situation to see if we need to extend those measures.

Obviously, we've had really positive feedback from workers, including tradespeople, about these changes. You're right that waiting when you're laid off is very difficult.

**Colin Reynolds:** Have these been permanently implemented, or is this just related to the tariff relief?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** These have been temporary changes that relate to tariffs, and we're examining what to do in the next period of time.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Reynolds. You were well over five minutes, but that was a very valid question that I wanted the minister to answer, as it targets people we should be targeting.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joseph, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Natilien Joseph:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

I think it's a real shame to see that, for the Conservatives, there are programs that didn't exist. I can confirm that in my riding of Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, we have La Cantine pour tous and La Tablee des chefs, two organizations that will benefit from Canada's national school food program. Many children will benefit from meals in our schools.

Earlier, Ms. Larouche spoke to us about old age security. While you're here, maybe I'll give you a chance to speak to those issues. Quebec media recently reported delays and problems with services for seniors who receive old age security.

Can you specify what measures our government is putting in place to ensure that seniors in Longueuil—Saint-Hubert and across Quebec and Canada receive their benefits reliably and on time? That was my first question.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** That work is very urgent, and the department is working on the system to resolve the issue that some seniors are facing. The number of people affected is very low.

[*English*]

As you know, we transferred a very old system—68 years old—to a digitalized system that not only is faster and more accurate, but will also allow for independent application. I think it already allows for independent application online, which overall is going to reduce the workflow for humans and ensure that people can quickly, through a digital portal, access supports in an automated way.

More than 98% of applicants are getting their benefits without delay. That doesn't mean the other 85,000 or so who have complicated situations don't deserve the utmost urgency. That's exactly what the department is doing now. We have an action plan to reduce and eliminate the number of people experiencing delays, some of which are related to missing information. This is a manual process in some cases. Applications are coming in manually that have to be done in a digital environment on a new system.

I would say that the employees are getting much faster at utilizing this new system. Some of this was a training issue, and that training is ongoing. We're seeing increased capacity by department staff.

Finally, if there are any urgent cases across the country, we have been very clear: Please send them our way. We can prioritize cases of urgency. Some of the people represented in that number are not reliant on OAS. It is an additional benefit they're entitled to, and they will get their full benefit. Some people are reliant on OAS, and we want to know those individuals' names, if they approach you in your constituency, to accelerate their cases. We can do that. In fact, we've done that for some folks in Quebec.

• (1005)

[Translation]

**Natilien Joseph:** Could you reassure Quebeckers and Canadians that the government is concerned about the situation?

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Absolutely. Delivering benefits to which Canadians are entitled is really our primary job. That is why Cliff Groen is the lead on the business modernization branch.

Maybe I can have you speak, Cliff, about your focus and the department's efforts to clear this backlog.

**Cliff Groen (Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, Service Canada):** It is absolutely essential that all Canadians receive their benefits on time. That is a fundamental obligation and commitment we have.

Generally, the vast majority of individuals do receive their benefits on time, but we know there are some delays related to certain old age security recipients. We are doing everything we can to address those situations as quickly as possible.

By all means, any urgent situations, we will gladly address, and we very much, on a priority basis, do address them.

[Translation]

**Natilien Joseph:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Joseph.

[English]

We'll have Ms. Falk for five minutes.

**Rosemarie Falk:** Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for taking the time to be here. We appreciate having you come to our committee.

As has been stated already in this meeting, food prices are absolutely out of control. We know that food bank usage has nearly doubled since 2019, and that's with 2.2 million Canadians, including children, visiting food banks monthly.

Almost one in five food bank users has a job, so that means they're working and still cannot afford to purchase groceries. A family of four is paying nearly \$17,600 a year to eat. That's about \$1,000 more than last year. The school food program and the GST top-up help some families. Your government has made things so bad that any relief whatsoever is welcome, but these measures don't actually lower the price of food. They don't fully offset skyrocketing grocery prices, and ultimately they leave millions of Canadians behind.

My question is, what is your message to working Canadians who don't qualify for these programs, don't get any support and still can't put food on the table because groceries keep getting more and more expensive?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** What I would say to all Canadians is that the work we're doing, especially for low-income Canadians, is bearing fruit. In fact, we doubled the working income tax benefit a number of years ago, something your party voted against.

There's a pattern here of talking about supporting people who—

**Rosemarie Falk:** Minister, with all due respect, my question was about the working Canadians who do not qualify for these benefits and who still cannot put food on the table. Their kids are going to school hungry, even though they're working two or three jobs. I've heard this from constituents. They're working two or three jobs and they can't get ahead, but they can't even meet where they need to be.

What is your message to Canadians who don't qualify for the programs your government is putting forward?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** A family with two or three kids is for sure are qualifying for the school nutrition program, because their children are in school.

If you're talking about a family without children, as I said, we have the working income tax benefit, which has been doubled for single individuals. If you're talking about seniors, we've increased OAS. If you're talking about that family—

**Rosemarie Falk:** Minister, with all due respect, I was talking about working Canadians.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Do you mean with children?

**Rosemarie Falk:** Regardless. Even if their kids are in school, what are they doing on Saturdays and Sundays? How are they eating? They're going to the food bank. How is that acceptable?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** It depends on—

**Rosemarie Falk:** How is it acceptable that we have working parents working all the time, and their kids are becoming latchkey children because their parents have to pick up extra jobs so they don't have anybody at home after school? I will note that most of the government-run day care institutions work nine to five Monday to Friday, not extra hours in the evening and not even accommodating shift-working parents.

What is being done? What does your government have to say to working people who don't qualify for the GST top-up or for the school food program? There's a swath of Canadians who aren't seeing any relief from your government. What do you have to say to those Canadians?

• (1010)

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** What I'd say to the residents of Saskatchewan is that it's been a pleasure to work with the minister responsible for early learning and child care. In fact, Saskatchewan just extended a five-year agreement for early learning and child care and has committed, as they always have, I understand, to a fully public system of child care. It truly is a role model for many other provinces.

**Rosemarie Falk:** My question wasn't about child care.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Parents are now paying—

**Rosemarie Falk:** Minister—

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —\$10 a day in that province.

**The Chair:** Order for a moment.

It is the member's time to ask the question, but please give the witness—in this case, it is the minister—a reasonable amount of time to give a reasonable answer. Then you can ask for the floor back.

Please continue.

**Rosemarie Falk:** I'll continue. I wasn't getting an answer for working Canadians. I will follow up with my next question.

How do you and your government justify the taxing of the growing, the shipping and the selling of food when these costs are inevitably passed on to consumers and make groceries more expensive? I know that you and your government say that these are imaginary taxes, which is not true. If you visit any farmer, they will tell you that they are passed on to the consumer. How does your government justify increasing these taxes and ultimately increasing the price of food?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** This argument that the Conservative Party is litigating has been debunked by economist after economist after economist—

**Rosemarie Falk:** How about the farmers who are paying the bills, like their implement bills?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** —and I would just say that, in fact—

**Rosemarie Falk:** They're paying for their machinery. They're paying for their seed. They're paying for their fertilizer.

**The Chair:** Ms. Falk—

**Rosemarie Falk:** They're paying for all of those items, and that ultimately gets passed on to the consumer. I just don't appreciate that this is what's happening.

This has been debunked? That isn't the case. Maybe if the Liberals—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Falk.

**Rosemarie Falk:** —actually went to a farm and spoke to farmers, they would know how this goes.

**The Chair:** Ms. Falk, please respect the chair.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Yes, Madam Larouche. I will suspend if the interpreters cannot interpret.

[*Translation*]

**Andréanne Larouche:** I just wanted to point out that the interpreters are having trouble keeping up. Let us exercise caution.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Larouche.

I will now give the minister a minute to respond without interruption to the question that was directed to her.

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I think a responsible government focuses on the real challenges that our families are facing and the real solutions that help families. What doesn't help families is rhetoric that's been driven repeatedly without any basis in reality. What families want is the help right now.

You have a choice, Madam Falk. You can vote for the kinds of things that your own province is asking for, which are investments in early learning and child care, the \$15.8 million in federal funding helping your province expand school food programs, and the 90 organizations that will hire Canada summer students this year and this summer. These are the kinds of things that families are saying are helpful, and we'll continue to focus on families.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Minister and Ms. Falk, for that lively exchange.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Dandurand, the floor is yours for five minutes.

**Marianne Dandurand:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, one of the government initiatives I'm most proud of is the Canadian dental care plan. At first, many people, including opposition members, said that the plan wouldn't work and that it would be too complex. There are around 110,000 people in my riding. Of those, 32,000 are enrolled in the Canadian dental care plan, which is a very high number.

Can you talk about the tangible results we're seeing across the country in connection with the Canadian dental care plan?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Each new program is very complex; that's true. However, after a while, the program becomes very useful for many Canadians.

[English]

You're absolutely right. Besides child care, this is one of the most frequent things that people talk about to me as a member of Parliament.

In fact, in my riding, if I could just share a small story, a middle-aged business owner couple with a small business didn't have dental benefits and hadn't had dental care in a long time. This is not a couple that you would necessarily think were going without dental care. They had a thriving small business, but "thriving" means it was paying for their daily life and their family expenses. Dental care was not an option for them. They came up to me spontaneously at an event to tell me how their lives had been changed by being able to access dental care.

They are working Canadians. MP Falk was just speaking about how we are supporting working Canadians. Many working Canadians do not have benefits with their jobs. Dental care is not just a nice-to-have. It becomes an urgent need when you're living in pain and you have dental decay.

I met a fellow at the grocery store who was a labourer. Just before the last election, he came up to me and said how his life had been profoundly changed by being able to access dental care. He went so far as to show me his new teeth, which was very moving and funny all at once, because he was so proud of the smile that he could finally show off.

These are stories that I'm sure you're hearing in your riding. This is a generational change. It is a real equity piece, and it was the missing piece from our national health care system that so many people are proud of.

• (1015)

[Translation]

**Marianne Dandurand:** Indeed, it has significant impacts on public health in the long term. From a long-term economic perspective, the health care costs will be lower for the government because people's health, including their dental health, is being maintained.

In a riding like mine, it can be hard to reach certain populations. A lot of benefits are available, but some people are deprived of those benefits because, for example, they don't file their tax returns.

What kind of measures can be taken to make it easier for people to access all the benefits and credits that the government offers? I'm thinking in particular of my riding's more rural areas, where the poverty line can be quite high.

How can the government make it easier for people to access benefits?

[English]

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** That's such an important observation, and it's why I was very excited in recent months to announce the automatic tax filing that will reach some of the most needy Canadians. In fact, I think I saw a headline the other day that there's about \$2 billion in unclaimed Canadian tax credits, whether it's for the Canada child benefit, access to dental care or the many other tax credits that Canadians are entitled to.

It's sometimes hard for people to file taxes, and people can get behind. This new measure to automatically enrol people is a pilot. Of course, we want to make sure that it works well and that it will be useful. This means that Canadians will start to access the benefits to which they are entitled.

This is something, by the way, that poverty activists have advocated for a very long time to implement in Canada. It's because they also know that Canadians are going without the benefits they deserve.

If you think about the Canada child benefit, it's \$7,000 per child, especially for young children. Obviously, that support continues throughout a child's lifetime. That is a giant amount of money for a family living on a low income. If they're not getting that benefit, that's a real detriment.

I don't know about you, but we do casework in our offices. Some of the most moving stories are when someone finally gets through their complicated tax backlog and finds out they're getting \$40,000 in Canada child benefit back pay. In many cases, I've heard moms talk about buying a vehicle so they can get back and forth more easily with their children, or putting it towards a down payment for a house in Thunder Bay, Ontario. That's very feasible.

These are the kinds of stories that I think more Canadians need to know so they know how we can help them get those benefits.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

To conclude, I will give the floor to Ms. Larouche for two and a half minutes.

**Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I was wondering about this as I was listening to other people's questions. If I understood your answer to Mr. Joseph correctly, you mentioned 85,000 people. You said that 98% of seniors were receiving their benefits, despite the challenges posed by the Cúram software. It may be a system that you wanted to modernize, but 85,000 people is still a lot.

In short, I think that's downplaying the situation. One senior who doesn't receive their benefits is one too many who could find themselves in a precarious position. I know we passed a motion for you to return to our committee to discuss this issue, Minister. Since a Liberal colleague has already opened the door, I'd like to ask you for your opinion.

Don't you think that's one too many seniors? Someone from your department wrote to me to say that, if I wanted, we could always have a discussion. However, I think the best way to shed light on this system is for you to appear in committee to answer our questions on this. What do you think about the fact that 85,000 seniors, or 2%, are still too many?

• (1020)

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** I agree. In fact, one senior is too many.

[*English*]

I agree with you. That premise is exactly why I have the department focused intensely on making sure that we deal with these delayed OAS starts.

Let me be very clear that these are new applicants; nothing is happening to applicants who are already receiving OAS. Their benefits are on time and they're processed, but there are certain cases that have been more difficult to bring on board, and the department is very focused on getting through them.

As I have repeated, if there is a senior in particular financial need who needs to get their situation resolved immediately, please bring their name forward. We have contacted your office. You have not provided any names yet, but if you have names of individuals, please give them to us. We will make sure we deal with them immediately.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

Minister, just before we conclude, I have one question.

You referenced the Canada summer jobs program. The part that often gets missed is that the many not-for-profit organizations that run valuable programs would not be able to do that without the funding they get.

Is this going to be applied across the country? It's allocated by riding, so does that mean everybody gets an increase?

**Hon. Patty Hajdu:** Yes. We will see 100,000 jobs this year, which is up from 60,000 last summer. That's to address the specific unemployment needs we see in youth in particular.

You're absolutely right that it's a real asset to not-for-profits across the country and also for small businesses, which have, in some cases, summer surges—maybe in your province because it's a nice place to go in the summer. A lot of students get those opportunities in various sectors, including tourism.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister, witnesses and members.

The committee is adjourned.

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