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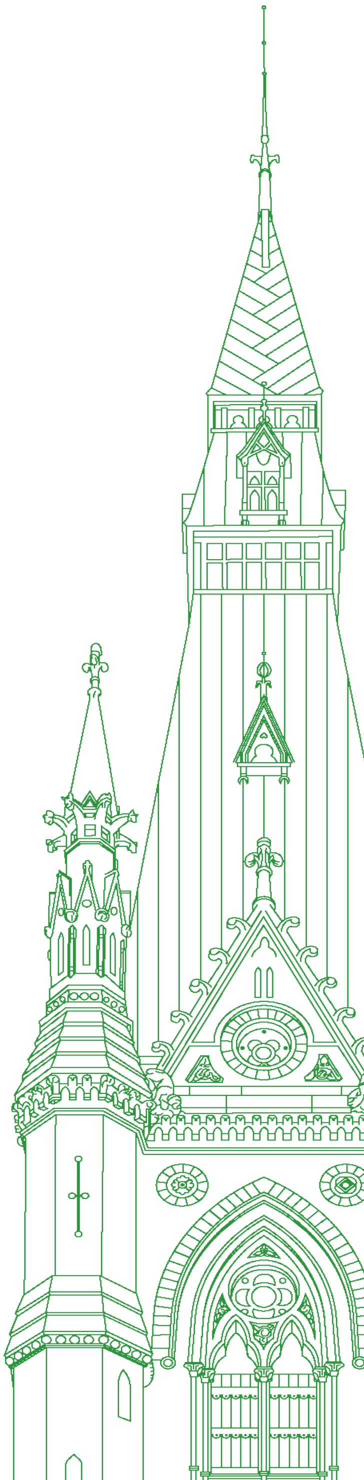

Chair: Kelly McCauley

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

Wednesday, July 29, 2026

● (1330)

[*English*]

The Chair (Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): Welcome, everyone, to meeting number 48 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, also known, of course, as the mighty OGGO.

Before we start, I want to thank members for their interest in the 106(4) meeting today, mostly because I've had some OGGO withdrawal over the last couple of months.

We are meeting today pursuant to a request under Standing Order 106(4) to discuss a study on the situation of the Gordie Howe bridge.

Mr. Albas, I see your hand is up. We will start making up the speaking order.

Please go ahead, Mr. Albas.

Dan Albas (Okanagan Lake West—South Kelowna, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's regrettable that we have to be here today, because I know there are many different events that different members could be at. Events aside, this is an issue of national prominence, and I hope that today's committee proceedings give it its due.

It is incredibly important for us as parliamentarians to have factual information. Obviously, if a minister makes a misrepresentation in the House of Commons, there are rules that allow for us to immediately challenge it and for the Speaker to ask that minister or even a prime minister to come into order. In the House of Commons, it's important for us to have accurate information so we can make good decisions on behalf of our constituents.

When it comes to the Gordie Howe bridge, I welcome the new bridge. This is something the Harper government worked very hard to secure a strong deal on that worked both for Canadians and for the other side. It was decided, because of the politics at the time, to make it so Canadians would fund the bridge, but this was no small undertaking. Since then, Canadian workers have worked very hard to fulfill that end of the promise and to build a great bridge that we can use to the benefit of our economy.

It troubles me that the Prime Minister, in his statement to the press at the Stampede, regardless of what he was wearing, whether it was a cowboy hat or otherwise.... He said what was in the deal and gave specific details of what was in the particular agreement that he had come to with the Trump administration. Then, at a second press conference of his on July 17, he reiterated those same points, and what we found out from the media was that was not the case at all.

Some Liberal members took umbrage with the fact that Conservatives were pointing to these media reports, and they said that we were spreading misinformation. That turned out to be untrue. It turns out that the Prime Minister made statements that directly contradicted what was in the agreement, and he did so multiple times.

Unfortunately, the rules of the House do not apply at the Stampede, and they do not apply at a prime minister's press conference, but this is a democracy, and our rules do apply in this chamber. It's important for the opposition and for Liberal members themselves to hold the government to account to make sure that Canadians are being given factual information so that we can make good decisions.

The fact that these statements were contradictory and that Minister Robertson, the minister responsible for infrastructure, told media that he will not be releasing the fiscal impacts of this side deal arrangement with the Trump administration on revenue raises a whole host of questions.

I believe that, firstly, we need to make sure we have proper transparency. Holding a hearing is a first step towards that. Having the Parliamentary Budget Officer model the financial impacts the side agreement will ultimately have on the Canadian taxpayer, who has funded....

I have to give the Canadian taxpayer full credit. We all collectively felt this was an asset that we needed to have. To see the Prime Minister capitulate to the American side and then to see him try to give a false view of it, whether it was from a lack of personal knowledge—I don't think we can say that of someone of his position and background—or, worse than that, whether it was a plan by the Prime Minister to convey incorrect information on purpose.... To me that's unfathomable as well. I believe the highest office in our country deserves to have the highest standards, and I think we as parliamentarians should demand better of our officials.

Canadian taxpayers have paid lots of money for this. We all know that there are challenges in dealing with the American administration, but Canadians—the taxpayers—are due an explanation as to why this agreement was ratified, why the Prime Minister gave contradicting statements and why we only found out through the media. Lastly, we need more transparency, including with financial modelling.

As we've heard from professional economists from across the sphere.... There's a National Post story this week that says there are so many announcements and so many impacts to the fiscal framework with zero transparency, and even the Parliamentary Budget Officer is having difficulty reconciling what the government says in announcements with what actually happens. That's incredibly disheartening for me as a parliamentarian, because I care about this place. I believe we can make good decisions if we have the right information.

● (1335)

I hope that all members will be supportive of the following motion. I move:

> Given that the Prime Minister capitulated to American demands regarding Gordie Howe International Bridge toll revenues and subsequently provided inaccurate information to Canadians about the deal, and given that many serious questions remain about the impact of the deal on Canadian taxpayers and businesses, the committee:
>
> a. order the Department of Housing, Communities and Infrastructure to produce all drafts of the “Proposed Agreement in Principle” for the new deal related to the Gordie Howe International Bridge within two weeks of the adoption of this motion;
>
> b. send a request to the Parliamentary Budget Officer to conduct a net present value analysis of the Gordie Howe International Bridge;
>
> c. conduct a study of no fewer than five meetings into this matter, provided that the committee invite the following witnesses to testify separately for two hours each:
>
> a. Dominic LeBlanc, Minister responsible for Canada-U.S. Trade,
>
> b. Gregor Robertson, Minister of Infrastructure,
>
> c. François-Philippe Champagne, Minister of Finance, and
>
> d. officials from the Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority; and
>
> d. in the interim, report to the House that it calls upon the Prime Minister to incorporate transparency, accuracy, openness and honesty in all public communications regarding the Canada-U.S. relationship to ensure that Canadians have the reliable information they need to navigate the real-world impacts of this strained relationship.

I hope this committee will treat this issue with as much seriousness as it deserves and that it will not simply be dismissed. These are basic questions of transparency, something that Canadians should always expect of their government and of their parliamentarians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Foreseeing a motion, I did make a speaking order. Just so everyone knows, I have Ms. Lantsman, Mr. Lewis, Madame Gaudreau, Mr. Gill, Mr. Danko, Ms. Desrochers, Ms. Rochefort, Mr. Gasparro and Ms. McPherson.

● (1340)

Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): You forgot Madame Lalonde. I sent my name to Natalie.

The Chair: Okay. We will add you.

We'll start with Ms. Lantsman.

You have the floor.

John-Paul Danko (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Mr. Chair, can I request that we suspend for a minute? We haven't had this provided in advance, and we'd like an opportunity to have a quick discussion before we proceed with the rest of the meeting.

The Chair: Sure.

● (1340)

____________________(Pause)____________________

● (1340)

The Chair: We're back.

We'll start with Ms. Lantsman, please.

Welcome to OGGO.

Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you very much. This is exactly the right opportunity to be in Parliament. It's exactly what Parliament is for. I appreciate being a part of this committee. It is nice to see some colleagues in person, although I know there are other important things going on in constituencies, so it's a shame we have to be here.

Look, on this issue, there have been many questions swirling for the last number of weeks about a multitude of stories that have been told on the same topic. That's the Gordie Howe bridge. We'll go back a second: Canada built that bridge. It was our idea. It was our initiative. All of the risk was on the backs of Canadians. It was our tax dollars that built it. We paid 100% of the almost $6.5-billion cost of that bridge.

We are expected—and were expected by the deal signed by former prime minister Harper—to get 100% of the revenue. We've learned from the multitude of stories that the Prime Minister is giving 50% of the toll revenue to Washington. That's not exactly what he told us when he was asked the question in Calgary. He said, “We get the revenues”, implying that toll revenues would not be split until the debt of the entire bridge—that's $6.5 billion of taxpayer money—was paid.

We now know that was false. I think Canadians have a number of questions around why that is. We've learned that Canada will now split the revenues fifty-fifty, despite being the only country that put $6.5 billion in. If that is not the case, then I'm sure members of the committee will provide all of the documentation to this committee about all of the details of the deal, to make that clear to Canadians. At the end of the day, we're here on behalf of constituents and Canadians from all our different regions to get to the bottom of this and get to the answers.

The Prime Minister was supposed to be the guy in the room where things happen. He was supposed to be the negotiator on all of this. We're wondering why it took Conservatives and a number of different media stories—all of that pressure—to have the agreement released.

We want just a simple answer to why the Prime Minister didn't answer the question in the way that the agreement is spelled out. We certainly want to know the impact on the fiscal framework. I know that government members of this committee voted not so long ago on Canada's budget. They voted to spend a certain amount of money on a certain number of programs. This bridge, and the cost of this bridge, could impact the fiscal framework to the tune of maybe hundreds of millions of dollars.

We want to know where the 50% is going—if it's going to the Ambassador Bridge and to the friends of the U.S. President for a fund, given that it is not going to Canadian workers and Canadian families and to repaying the cost of the bridge. We want to hear from ministers involved in this negotiation. I think there's been a lack of transparency around that and around where Canada is. We'd like to hear from the minister of Canada-U.S. trade negotiations, Minister LeBlanc. We'd like to have the finance minister at this committee to talk about that fiscal impact. We think Canadians deserve those answers. We want to hear from the Minister of Infrastructure, Minister Robertson, on the bridge, and certainly from officials from the Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority, to make things clear to Canadians and give them answers.

More than anything, what my colleague has brought forward in this motion is that we want to know why the Prime Minister's answers don't match the reality of the deal. The only way we can know that is by having the deal presented in this committee. We want to know why he said the thing that he said. He probably knew the details of the bill. The Prime Minister has billed himself as the guy to negotiate with the President, the guy who's in the room, the guy who understands economics.

● (1345)

Caroline Desrochers (Trois-Rivières, Lib.): I have a point of order.

Melissa Lantsman: What we don't know—

The Chair: I'm sorry. I have to interrupt you. We have a point of order.

Caroline Desrochers: I'd just like to remind the member that all of the documents she's talking about are actually public. They were made public.

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

We'll continue. Thank you.

Melissa Lantsman: I'll certainly continue with the motion. I'm sure my colleague will have the opportunity to speak.

We want to know why the Prime Minister told a number of different stories to Canadians and why the story of what he told doesn't match the agreement in place. I think Canadians want to know that. I think there have been questions swirling around that for now weeks at a time.

That's exactly what this committee is here to do. It's exactly what this meeting is here to do. I hope all members of Parliament and all members, including those on the government side, want to know those answers too.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Lewis, please, and then to Madame Gaudreau.

● (1350)

Chris Lewis (Essex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's an honour to be here today at the OGGO committee for this very important topic. The Gordie Howe bridge is about a kilometre and a half, maybe two kilometres, from my riding, which borders that of the great member for Windsor West. It was important to come to Ottawa today to discuss this motion.

I want to start off by congratulating and saying thank you to the 6,500 skilled trade workers who put blood, sweat and tears into one of the most amazing bridges I've ever been on. I would just say thank you to them and congratulations. This is their celebration. It's all of Canada's, but it's certainly theirs.

I got to visit that site three or four times over the last six or seven years. What they've done is really second to none. I was also there last Friday for the opening of the bridge. I would just say thank you to all of those who made it happen.

About eight or 10 days ago, I did an interview with a local radio station called AM 800. One of the questions they asked me was this: “Do you believe, MP Lewis, that we'll ever see the full deal or that Canadians will ever know the full deal?” This was before it was released by Bloomberg in the United States. I said that I was not so sure it would be tabled before July 27, at least not by the government. They said, “Okay.” I said that I was cautiously optimistic but knew for sure that our workers, our businesses and the nurses and doctors who use our bridges to go over to the United States to work to put food on their table and their family's table, and who pay an exorbitant amount in tolls, wanted to know exactly where the tolls were going. They want transparency, and they deserve accountability. Quite frankly, it should have been tabled and they should have been told the absolute truth from the get-go.

I won't be overly long, but I want to say one thing to my wife and daughter back home. We have four horses at home, and they ride horses basically every weekend competitively. They both wear cowboy hats. I just want to let them know that just because someone wears a cowboy hat, it's not an excuse to not tell the exact honest truth. It's not an excuse to forget something, so I don't blame them.

When I went across the border yesterday, I took the Gordie Howe bridge. I took the tunnel over to Michigan. I had a meeting and I took the bridge back. I was in awe. It was amazing. When I got through customs, there was a great CBSA officer there. I paid my eight-dollar toll with my debit card.

On the way home, as I was going down the 401, I got to thinking: Where does that eight dollars go? We understand that we're splitting it. It was going to be profit, but now it's revenue from the tolls. We know that 50% is going to the States, to Michigan specifically. We don't know what it's being used for. We don't know what the 50% of the remainder of the money is going to.

One question I would ask is this: Is any of that 50% going to the Ambassador Bridge? Surely it will be in this agreement. Surely the three ministers and the bridge officials—

Vince Gasparro (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, sir.

Vince Gasparro: Mr. Chair, this is all public. The information has been made public—

The Chair: I'll interrupt you, sir. That's not a point of order. You will have your chance to speak.

I'll ask colleagues to stick to procedural points of order or those on translation issues, so we can hear everyone's—

Vince Gasparro: Well, there's clearly a translation issue.

The Chair: Okay. Thanks.

Continue, Mr. Lewis.

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Certainly, if we had Minister LeBlanc, Minister Robertson or Minister Champagne here, they would be able to answer the questions of this committee. These are not unreasonable questions. They're actually very reasonable questions that my office is being inundated with, and rightly so. How can I do my job effectively as the member of Parliament for Essex and answer my constituents' questions if I don't have the answers?

There are a lot of questions. I cannot fathom or even perceive how any member sitting around this table wouldn't have constituents with these same questions and wouldn't want to call on the ministers to be totally transparent and accountable. Just give us answers to our questions so that we can be fully transparent and accountable to our own people.

I just want to reiterate that this is not about the fact that I'm upset about the Gordie Howe bridge opening, because it's going to help the Windsor-Essex region and all of Canada greatly. It's about being true to our constituents and ensuring that we are doing the right thing by answering their questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1355)

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. Lewis.

We'll go to Madame Gaudreau and then to Mr. Gill.

For those who are new to the committee, I'll always announce who's up and who's next, but it's up to you as members to get yourselves on the speaking list. I won't remind you past that.

Madame Gaudreau, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I was on a fact-finding mission last week with the Standing Committee on National Defence to assess our equipment, our operational readiness and the impact of cost increases. Of course, we talked about NORAD.

So when this came up in the media, of course people in my region pointed out that this wasn't happening in Quebec, but who paid the $6.4 billion? All Canadians, including Quebeckers, paid for it.

So I wanted to know if we could see the terms of the agreement. While it's true that media outlets were not exactly contradicting each other, they didn't have the same information. What's unfortunate is that of course the Parliamentary Budget Officer doesn't necessarily need a request from a department or committee to shed light on the matter. That's one thing. However, how is it that, after all the time it has taken to get to this point today, we're being told, through points of order, that now the information is available? That's all well and good, but I still have lots of questions.

Are the clauses purely descriptive? How is the $6.4 billion going to be repaid? Is that set out in the agreement? I don't know; I haven't seen it yet. It was just released. For example, is there a priority regime for payments? Do we have any guarantee of a return on our investment? Will all the tolls go into an American fund? Will everything have to be renegotiated, because...? Well, we've heard it all before.

We just got a bit of information. If a meeting hadn't been called under section 106(4) with a motion on the table, I have a feeling that we wouldn't have discussed this at all, and we wouldn't have been able to get to the bottom of this.

I totally agree that some things could have been changed for this meeting. What is absolutely crucial, however—since this is what democracy is all about—is that parliamentarians, at least, be informed of the details of the agreement, out of concern and respect for taxpayers. They want the facts. Many Quebeckers are on holiday, but I can tell you that they'll be back at work soon and I'm already hearing from some folks. They're telling me that I need to be sure, as an MP, that the negotiations are fair. I tell them that they have no more information than I do. I get it as the Prime Minister shares it.

We've been getting most of our information so far from the media, but parliamentarians should be in the know. At this point, I don't have any details about the agreement, but I do have lots of questions. Once again, decisions are being made, but we only find out about them after they've been announced, thanks to the opposition. People often say that all we do is oppose everything, but that's what democracy is all about. It is about striking a balance, because the Government of Canada is not a private company.

I'm an entrepreneur. I can do whatever I want with my own money, but when I use public funds, for example, when I use the budget I'm given as an MP, of course it's a completely different matter. That's why there are safeguards in place. That's why we have a Parliamentary Budget Officer. Personally, I think it's crucial that we get to the bottom of this. We can discuss how to go about it, but seriously, if this is coming to light today with a majority government in place, it's because the opposition brought this information to light. Are there really things we're not supposed to know?

• (1400)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

It's Mr. Gill, and then it will be Mr. Danko.

Harb Gill (Windsor West, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to try to keep it pretty simple today, because maybe I'm missing something. If I am, I look forward to an explanation.

The Prime Minister recently said that Canada is “in a stronger position” today than it was a year and a half ago. How are we stronger? I'm looking at the record, and I'm having a little trouble getting there. Let's go through it slowly.

The United States put pressure on Canada over the digital services tax, and Canada dropped the tax. The same thing happened with Canada's retaliatory tariffs. All the elbows-up rhetoric—poof—was gone...not the rhetoric, just the tariffs. The same thing happened with the so-called Netflix tax. There was pressure from the Americans, and we made concessions on that too. I'm not sure about you, Chair, but as a former cop, I see a pattern here.

Then we get to the Gordie Howe bridge, in my riding of Windsor West. This one shouldn't be complicated. Canada paid for the bridge, Canada financed the bridge and Canada built the bridge. It cost $6.4 billion. It's our bridge, our money and our risk.

When the bridge was finished and we were ready to open it, President Trump allegedly got some inducements, as reported by some newspapers in the U.S., from the owner of the Ambassador Bridge, and he said, “Nope, you're not opening the bridge anymore.” He wanted compensation, so Canada went back to the negotiating table.

Apparently, these were the technical issues the Prime Minister talked about when the bridge didn't open in June. Then after the negotiations or technical discussions, we came out with 15 years of payments equal to 50% of defined net revenues going into a U.S.-controlled fund, along with new provisions around the tolls. That's yet another concession. I'm sure we all see the pattern of concessions.

This is the part where I need some help. What did we get? The Americans applied pressure, and we made concessions. What did they give us?

Please don't tell me that we got the bridge open. I'm happy the bridge is open. People in Windsor are happy that the bridge is open, because we already paid $6.4 billion for the bridge. That's like buying a car from a neighbour who owns a dealership, paying cash for it, bringing it home, paying the neighbour every year because he finally agreed to give you the keys, and them coming inside and yelling at your wife, saying, “Hey, I got a great deal.” Nope, you did not. You paid twice.

Tell us this: What did Trump originally want? We know he talked about half ownership. Canada didn't give him that. That is great. We will give credit where it's due. What else did he want? How much revenue did he want, and for how long? What kind of control over the bridge was he looking for? What did Canada say no to or counter with? What did the Americans give up? How did we end up with 50% for 15 years?

These aren't trick questions. This is basic negotiating. What did they want? What did we want? What did they give up? What did we give up? Then we can compare the two. That's it.

Let's follow the money. Canada spent $6.4 billion. How much are the 15 years of payments expected to cost? There has to be a number. You don't negotiate a 15-year financial agreement without doing the math—at least I hope you don't. What's the number? Will this delay Canada's recovery of its investment? It probably will, and if so, for how many years? Will it be five, 10, 15 years or more?

Canada borrowed the money. Canada is carrying the financing debt and the servicing cost for that debt, but when these new payments were calculated, Canada's financing costs weren't deducted the way the Prime Minister claimed they were going to be. Canadians will carry the debt, and somebody else will get the revenue before the debt is accounted for.

Again, who negotiated that? If I lend you the money to build a store, and then you tell me somebody else will get a cut before you repay what you're supposed to owe me, I might have a question or two for you.

Then we get to the 2012 agreement. The new agreement says that the old agreement will stay in place, but President Trump said the old agreement is basically null and void going forward—on the day we had the ribbon-cutting ceremony, no less. Who is right? Is it the Prime Minister or Mr. Trump? More importantly, what did Canada do? Did we call them? Did we write to them? Did we contact Michigan? Did we say, “Hold on. We have an agreement, and we both signed it”? Are we going to go again and renegotiate this now?

These are simple questions. We need answers for them. We need written assurances. If we have written assurances, table them so that the committee and parliamentarians can see them. If not, then why not?

● (1405)

Here's where I'm losing the plot. We made new concessions to get the bridge open. Almost immediately, we're debating whether the original agreement protecting Canada's investment is still secure. What exactly did we settle? This is where the bridge becomes a bigger part of the story. The digital tax was followed by pressure, and Canada backed off. The retaliatory tariffs were followed by pressure, and we backed off again. The Netflix tax got pressure, and we backed off. The bridge was followed by pressure, and Canada backed off again. Now we are facing more tariff threats.

I want to understand the strategy here. Maybe there is one. Explain it, because right now it looks like this: Washington applies pressure, Ottawa caves; Ottawa announces that as being progress; Washington comes back with another demand; Ottawa makes another concession; and then the Prime Minister tells Canadians we are stronger somehow. Stronger how? Are there fewer tariffs? No. Is there more certainty? Not really. Is there better access to the U.S. market? Nope. Is there more security for the auto sector? Nope. Is there more investment? Sadly, no. Is there a more secure CUSMA? You must be kidding.

Just give me one of those things, so I can bring it back home and tell my people, “This is what your Canadian government got for you.” If Canada is stronger, I'd love to see that, based on these strategies and arguments that are being given.

What is the new strategy of the government if things don't change? Is there a plan B? President Trump hasn't exactly been subtle. You don't need binoculars to see him coming. He tells you what he wants. He applies pressure. He threatens tariffs. He waits. Why do we keep acting surprised when he does exactly what he told us he was going to do? It's like me during my policing career when I would pull somebody over for doing 140 in an 80 zone. When I'd hear, “Officer, I didn't realize I was speeding”, I'd say, “Sir, the odometer is right there. You should have looked at it for a change.”

At some point, you have to look at this and say that Canada has leverage. We have energy. We have critical minerals. We have steel, aluminum, autos and manufacturing. American factories depend on Canadian supply chains. American workers depend on this relationship too. Let's use it.

Right now, the government's negotiating posture reminds me of a cheap lawn chair. It looks sturdy sitting there. Then when somebody puts a little pressure on it, it falls immediately. There goes another leg. Somehow, the press release the following day says that the chair is stronger than ever. Nope, it's lying in the grass.

Maybe that's a bit unfair. Maybe our negotiators fought like hell behind closed doors. Maybe the Americans demanded 10 things and Canada stopped nine of them. If that's what happened, tell us. I'll congratulate them personally and say good job. That's exactly what this committee should find out.

If the members opposite shut the study down today, then I have another very simple question: Why? Yes, you have the votes; you can shut us down, but you can't shut down the facts. You can't make the tariffs disappear. You can't make concessions disappear. You can't make the uncertainty disappear. You certainly can't make President Trump disappear.

Closing our eyes doesn't solve the problem. It's like a pigeon sitting in a tree who sees a cat, closes his eyes and pretends the cat has disappeared because he can't see it anymore. The pigeon may feel better, but the cat doesn't really care. It's going to have that pigeon for lunch. That's really my concern: Are we going to be lunch?

I don't want Canada fighting with the people of the United States. They are our neighbours. They are our friends. They are our family. They are our biggest customer. I want the government to succeed with them.

Let's face it. The Americans show up looking for American interests. We should go out there looking for our interests—for our workers and our families, not somebody else's. Our job is to look after our folks, not after the first threat and not after the second concession, but every single time.

● (1410)

Let's make this very simple. Since the Prime Minister took office, what has Canada given up, what has America given up and what has Canada got? If we're really stronger today, just show us. That's all. There's nothing to it. Walk us through it, and we'll be happy with that explanation. That's what I'm looking for.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll go to Mr. Danko and then to Ms. Desrochers.

Mr. Danko.

John-Paul Danko: Thank you, Chair.

I appreciate this opportunity to talk about some really good news for Canada, which is, of course, the opening of the Gordie Howe International Bridge. It brings extremely significant economic uplift and new trade opportunities for Canada and the United States.

Of course, this bridge is not about toll revenue. It's never been about toll revenue. It's always been about building the trade partnership between Canada and the U.S. and enabling cross-border trade. I think the Windsor-Detroit crossing carries a third of all the trade between Canada and the U.S., so this is a tremendous good-news story for Canada and for the United States.

As we're back in Ottawa, it's interesting to hear opposition members pontificate about their opinions of what it took to get this bridge open. The word “pontificate” is interesting, because it refers to the pontiff, the Pope, who is named after the Roman root word, the Latin word, for bridge. Obviously, Rome is known for its roads, but naming the Pope after the Latin word for bridge also speaks to the importance of bridges to the economic success of the Roman Empire.

The members opposite talked about some of the questions they have about the agreements. To state this again on the record, both the original contract, which was signed in 2012, and the new agreement in principle are publicly available. The terms of those contracts are actually fairly simple and straightforward. They're spelled out publicly and published on the website for the Gordie Howe International Bridge.

I think the member opposite actually did a fairly good job of explaining the terms of those agreements, but very briefly, the original contract had a profit-sharing provision once the debt and the bridge were paid off. In approximately 50 years, 50% of toll profits will go to the U.S. and 50% will go to Canada. The new agreement in principle simply adds a revenue-sharing agreement with the U.S. for the first 15 years, whereby 50% of the net toll revenue, excluding operating expenses, will go to the American fund. The terms of those contracts are publicly available and are fairly straightforward.

I was watching the construction of this bridge, which began in 2018, as a civil structural engineer. In particular, being that I'm a bridge design engineer, it was a really interesting project to watch the construction of.

This is truly a global megaproject. The size, the significance and the importance to the Canadian and American economies put it on a global scale. To have it built in our own backyard and to see the construction were really special. From a professional standpoint, it was gratifying to see the technical expertise and all of the work that went into building a global landmark.

In total, I think almost 16,000 individuals, a very strong union workforce, built this bridge. I believe it took over 20 million hours of construction to build and used 75% Canadian steel. The construction phase alone had a significant economic impact for Canada. I also note that construction started in 2018 and carried on through COVID. It was a really important economic driver and work opportunity for Canadians during the COVID crisis, because work carried on to make sure this project was built and completed.

I have a few quotes to share from statements that have been made by Premier Doug Ford, by the Governor of Michigan and by the Laborers’ International Union of North America's vice-president, Joe Mancinelli.

I'll start with Premier Ford, because he's been extremely supportive of and connected with the construction of this bridge and what it means to Ontario and Canada. Premier Ford, on the opening of the structure on Monday, July 27, said that, in his opinion, “The Prime Minister did an excellent job getting this deal done.” He said this agreement will allow approximately 300 billion dollars' worth of goods to move across the border, creating more opportunities and more jobs. Michigan is Ontario's number one trading partner, and it's critical for auto manufacturers and all manufacturers and the manufacturing sector. “He did an incredible job”, he said, referring to the Prime Minister.

● (1415)

If I move on to the Governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, on opening day, just last week, she said:

> I'm proud to celebrate the opening of the Gordie Howe International Bridge.... Built by skilled workers on both sides of the Detroit River, this bridge is an engineering marvel. It's also a symbol of the partnership that has defined Michigan and Canada for generations and [all the things that] we can accomplish...together.

Finally, I'll share a statement that Joe Mancinelli, the international vice-president of the Laborers' International Union of North America, or LiUNA, posted about the construction of the Gordie Howe International Bridge and the significant role that his members had in building this landmark structure. He said he is “So proud of the skill and perseverance of LiUNA members and workers across skilled trades played in this transformative build including our contractor partners and engineers! Truly impressive! Brothers and Sisters, ‘We built that!’”

Again, as a structural engineer, I visited the bridge with our Ontario caucus before it was open last summer. It is an amazing structure, and I hope all Canadians have an opportunity to travel across this corridor. I am genuinely excited as a member from Hamilton, Canada's industrial centre, to see the positive impact that this will have on trade across the country, particularly in manufacturing centres in Ontario, with Hamilton being Canada's steel town.

As an engineer, I know that when you get to look at a structure that you had a part in building or have pride in a job well done.... I'm just so happy for all the members of LiUNA and the workforce who had an opportunity to work on this structure. I hope they all get a chance to travel over it, see what they've done and, as Joe Mancinelli said, feel the awe of saying, “We built that.” As Canadians, we can all share the sense of pride that we built that.

That's the end of my remarks. If you can add me to the speaking list for a second time, I would appreciate that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now have Ms. Desrochers, and then we will have Ms. Rochefort.

The floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Caroline Desrochers: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank my colleagues for convening this important meeting. It is indeed important to discuss everything the opposition wants to talk about, so this is welcome.

I'd like to start by correcting a few points.

First of all, I know this was raised during the points of order, but the agreement has been released. The original 2012 agreement was made public quite a while ago. Also, the agreement in principle was released a week ago, on July 22. So, it has been released, and everyone can access it, including members of this committee as well as the opposition parties' research offices.

Second, it's ironic to hear some of my colleagues say that the Prime Minister is trying to mislead Canadians when, from the beginning of this meeting, they've been talking about gross toll revenues, when they know full well that we are talking about net revenues. We know they've read it. We know they're doing very good work and have done their homework. Now we're talking about toll revenues after operating costs have been deducted. The Prime Minister was very clear about that. Here we're talking about operating costs, which include things like maintenance, insurance, toll booths and snow clearing. That's the second point I wanted to correct. I want everyone to know exactly what we're talking about. We're not talking about the gross revenues that the bridge authority will bring in. We're actually talking about the net revenues after all the operating costs have been deducted.

The third point I want to correct is my colleagues' offensive insinuations that the Prime Minister tried to deliberately mislead Canadians. The Prime Minister has been very clear. He has clarified his remarks. He made it very clear that, throughout all the discussions, the agreement signed by the prime minister in 2012 has not changed.

I would ask my colleague opposite to let me continue. He's interrupting me, but I showed him respect and listened while he was speaking. It'd be nice if he could show me the same respect and listen to me. Thank you very much.

Half of all revenues will go to regional development for a period of 15 years. We've already discussed net revenues, so I won't go over that again. However, the agreement signed in 2012 remains intact and unchanged. That's important, because at the end of the 15 years, the agreement remains in place. It continues. That doesn't change. The bridge will still be owned by Michigan and the Government of Canada. The agreement in principle means that funds will go into an economic development fund to support trade between Canada and the Detroit region. I think it's important that everyone understand these points.

The bridge is open. It opened two days ago. My colleagues talked about the fiscal impact. About 7,500 vehicles crossed the bridge in the first 12 hours. That's a lot.

The fund will support investment in initiatives to encourage and increase traffic along this corridor. As I think my colleague mentioned, everyone is well aware of the vitality of this corridor and its importance to members on both sides who are from that area. Seventy billion dollars' worth of trade between Ontario and the United States each year... Much of that will cross this bridge. Three hundred billion dollars' worth of trade currently crosses the Ambassador Bridge every year.

● (1420)

That bridge needed to be modernized. Now users have modern facilities that will allow trucks passing through the region to be processed much faster. It also means much safer facilities, which will make it possible to detect the transportation of illegal goods. I think that's also important to note.

[*English*]

There's all of this. My colleague, very rightly so, talked about the marvel of this piece of engineering, about all of the work and the workers who contributed to this, and about how that contributed to our economy during the years of construction.

I think what's interesting here is that we're hearing from the other side about continued criticism of the government's actions. However, I have not heard what they would have done differently, given this context.

How long would you have been willing to keep this bridge unopened—one year, two years, six months?

● (1425)

The Chair: Excuse me. We have a point of order.

Dan Albas: It's on relevance. She has not spoken to the motion. I've been patiently waiting for her to address the motion itself. Instead, she seems to be shadowboxing someone else.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Albas.

We always allow wide latitude for that, but perhaps we can get to the motion itself.

[*Translation*]

Caroline Desrochers: Thank you for that latitude, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The bottom line is that this was the best course of action for taxpayers in the current context. The agreement in principle, as the members can see.... Going back to the motion, I know the motion is calling to see all the clauses. It's been public since July 22. Again, I invite my colleagues to go online and read it. It also explicitly preserves the 2012 crossing agreement between Canada and the State of Michigan, which are the two joint owners of the bridge, as we expect the net revenue to be modest or even negative at the beginning.

This is a good-news story. Even with a good-news story, my colleagues are incapable of cheering for Canada. That is pitiful. That is very sad. Instead, we're going on a wild goose chase to try to create a story that paints us as not having Canadians' backs. More importantly—I'll get to my bottom line, and then I'll let my colleague take the floor—the full cost of the bridge will be recouped. The sooner we open the bridge, the sooner we can start recouping those dollar amounts.

The opening of the bridge provides certainty for the thousands of SMEs that are relying on an additional trade corridor and that want, in these very uncertain economic times, certainty. I'm sure you have businesses in your ridings. We do. We hear it all the time. We can deal with what we know. We can deal with the tariffs. It's hard, and we can deal with them, but we need certainty, and this provides that certainty.

What would they have done differently? What are they putting on the table? How long would they be willing to not provide that certainty to the Canadian SMEs that rely on this?

With that, thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Rochefort, please.

[*Translation*]

Pauline Rochefort (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to this issue today. I must share with you that I was on holiday.

When I first learned of the 2026 agreement in principle, I will admit that I was confused. I can therefore appreciate why there has been a misunderstanding, but for me, the confusion disappeared completely once I recognized that there were two separate agreements that work together.

The first agreement, the 2012 Canada-Michigan Crossing Agreement, remains fully in force. That's an important point that's been made that deserves to be repeated. That agreement established, back in 2012, the ownership, the governance and the financial framework for the Gordie Howe International Bridge. Under that agreement, Canada collects the total revenues and applies them to the operation of the bridge and the repayment of Canada's approximately $6.4-billion investment. Once Canada's investment has been fully recovered, the agreement specifies that net operating revenues will be shared equally between Canada and the State of Michigan. In other words, the concept of sharing future net revenues is not new. It has been part of the project's financial framework from the very beginning.

The second agreement, of course, is the 2026 agreement in principle. Rather than replacing the 2012 agreement, it builds upon it. In fact, it explicitly states that nothing in the agreement in principle amends, modifies or supersedes the 2012 Canada-Michigan Crossing Agreement. Instead, it commits both governments to developing the arrangements necessary to implement new commitments, including the establishment of the United States-Canada economic development fund.

I think it's our job as parliamentarians to look at all of the various documents. Read together, these two documents tell us two things. First, the 2012 agreement remains the legal foundation of the project. Second, the implementation arrangements of the 2026 agreement in principle must be consistent with that existing framework.

With that context, I would like to touch briefly on two or three points. The first is why the bridge was necessary. I think it's necessary to touch on that and why that decision has proven to be the right one.

The point I would really like to make today in my remarks is why the agreement in principle strengthens, not weakens, the original vision for this project. Quickly, we've touched on some of the points about why the bridge was necessary. Basically, it was about preparing us for the future. Governments in Canada, and also Michigan and Detroit, recognized that one of Canada's most important trade gateways could no longer depend on a single international crossing. The question was straightforward: What happens if there are disruptions, whether because of an accident, severe weather or infrastructure failure? The list goes on. These threats remain today. Actually, they are all more reasons why we did the right thing by opening the bridge as quickly as we could.

Windsor—some of my colleagues live in that community and the surrounding communities—needed a different route that did not bring increased trucking and vehicle activity through its city streets. It needed one with direct freeway connections, modern customs facilities, greater capacity and public ownership designed to serve Canada's long-term interests.

Looking back, it was 15 years ago that the agreement was drafted. That was a long time ago, but that decision has proven to be remarkably forward-looking. When governments approved this project, few could have anticipated the changes that have taken place over the last few years. COVID-19 exposed the fragility of global supply chains. Geopolitical instability has reinforced the importance of economic security. Today, countries around the world are investing in resilient supply chains, advanced manufacturing and so on, as we are doing here in Canada.

That is precisely where the Gordie Howe International Bridge fits. It protects Canadian jobs. It strengthens the Canadian manufacturing sector. It supports our exporters. It improves the resilience of our supply chains. It enhances—

● (1430)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Rochefort. I have to interrupt you. There's a point of order.

Mr. Albas.

Dan Albas: Again, Mr. Chair, it's on relevance. I am trying to hear what members are saying and to give them some latitude, but we're not hearing about the motion. All they're doing is advertising the government's talking points on the bridge. It would be nice if we actually heard what they thought about things like democracy, transparency and the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

The Chair: That's a valid point, Mr. Albas.

Can we get to the motion?

Pauline Rochefort: I'm coming to my main point, actually.

The Chair: Thank you.

Pauline Rochefort: Basically, overall, Canada built this bridge because it advances Canada's national interests. The fact that it also strengthens one of the world's closest economic partnerships is an added benefit, not the primary purpose. Staying closed was not and is not an option.

This brings me to the agreement in principle. From the very beginning, the Gordie Howe International Bridge was intended to be more than a construction corridor. Governments understood that while the bridge would create economic benefits across North America, the communities of Windsor, Detroit and their surrounding communities would experience the greatest impacts and therefore deserved to share directly in its success.

As my colleague John-Paul Danko mentioned, last summer I had the opportunity to visit the bridge and also the surrounding communities to see the impact of the bridge's footprint in that community, with the connection to the 401. The bridge has such a significant impact on that community. I was pleased to learn then that the concern for local communities had given rise to a community benefits plan and a local community group ensuring that local residents, indigenous communities, businesses and community organizations had a voice in shaping the project's legacy.

In my view, what Canada has agreed to in the agreement in principle builds directly on the original commitment. It recognizes that things are no longer as they were in 2012. We can now see and feel the impact of the bridge on the affected communities. It addresses what could not have been seen in 2012.

Melissa Lantsman: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

● (1435)

The Chair: I'm sorry. I have to interrupt you, Ms. Rochefort. There's a point of order.

Melissa Lantsman: I'm just wondering if there's anything in the member's notes relevant to the motion.

Pauline Rochefort: Yes. I'm coming to that.

The Chair: I really have to get you to turn to the motion itself. We have a lot of other people who wish to speak to the motion, so I need to direct you to the motion. Thanks.

Pauline Rochefort: Basically, these are my final remarks. The United States-Canada economic development fund is not a departure from the original vision. It is its natural evolution. It takes the philosophy behind the community benefits plan and provides it with a long-term economic framework. In doing so, it helps ensure that the success of this bridge is measured by not only the goods that cross it but also the opportunities it creates for the communities that host it.

The original agreement built a world-class bridge. The agreement in principle builds world-class communities around it. Canadians expect us to stand up for Canadian interests. That also means those who live in the communities near the bridge. They also expect us to work constructively with our partners when doing so advances those interests.

Those objectives are not mutually exclusive. The Gordie Howe International Bridge proves that. The agreement in principle builds upon that success. It strengthens an already successful nation-building project by ensuring that the communities at its heart share in its long-term prosperity. For me, that's a very important concept.

For all those reasons, I support the agreement in principle and do not support the motion that's being presented today.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thanks.

We've had a few people added to the speaking list. After Mr. Gasparro, we have Ms. Lalonde, Ms. McPherson, Ms. Lantsman, Mr. Danko, Madame Gaudreau and Ms. Desrochers.

Mr. Gasparro, the floor is yours, sir.

Vince Gasparro: Thank you, Chair.

I am against this motion for many reasons, which I'll get into. The primary reason is that the motion fails to discuss the significant economic benefit to Windsor, the province of Ontario and the country more broadly.

The fact of the matter is that Canada and the United States have the largest trading relationship in the world. Approximately $1.3 trillion in goods and services cross our border every year. The Windsor-Detroit gateway is the busiest commercial land border crossing between Canada and the United States, carrying approximately 30% of all Canada-U.S. trade. The corridor is one of North America's most critical trade routes, and it is essential to continental supply chains.

The Gordie Howe International Bridge will improve the movement of people, goods and services by providing additional border capacity, a new crossing alternative, modern border processing capabilities and, for the first time, a direct highway-to-highway connection. Canadians who live in Windsor know full well that those who travel across the Ambassador Bridge have to travel through residential areas, impacting hundreds of residents every single day. The bridge will improve the reliability of cross-border supply chains, particularly for the automotive and advanced manufacturing sectors, where goods and components may cross the border multiple times during production. Reliable border crossings, as we all know, are critical for just-in-time manufacturing, where delays can disrupt production, increase costs and put Canadian jobs at risk.

What's interesting is that Conservative Premier Doug Ford supports our government's decisive action to open this bridge. Clearly, he knows what the Conservative opposition does not: The total trade between Ontario and Michigan was valued at $81 billion back in 2022 and is critical for Ontario's economy—

Melissa Lantsman: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Gasparro. I have to interrupt you for a point of order.

Melissa Lantsman: I'm wondering if that member's prepared notes have anything to do with the motion, because we've heard a lot of this but nothing yet on the motion.

● (1440)

The Chair: As before, we allow wide latitude, but if you can, get to the motion, please.

Vince Gasparro: Sure. If the honourable member had been paying attention and not playing on her phone, she would have heard that I led off with why I'm not supporting—

The Chair: I'm going to interrupt you there.

Colleagues, all around, I'll just ask that we keep it to the motion and keep everyone away from such comments.

It's back to you, Mr. Gasparro, please.

Vince Gasparro: Getting back to why I do not support this motion, the motion does not address the broader economic benefits to our country. The bridge itself is estimated to contribute approximately $1.3 billion to Windsor's contribution to our country's gross domestic product. Approximately 75% of the project's steel was sourced from Canada, and 25%—

Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): I have a point of order.

The Chair: I apologize for interrupting you, Mr. Gasparro.

Ms. McPherson, go ahead on your point of order.

Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have to agree with some of my colleagues that none of these interventions seem to be addressing the motion. We all agree that the Gordie Howe bridge must be open. We all agree on its importance. We all know the facts about the workers and how much steel came from Canada. However, we are discussing the motion, and this appears to me to be an attempt to filibuster and not actually discuss the motion.

I would like the member to return to the motion we are debating today, please.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

This is going to be one of those times when Ms. McPherson and I agree 100%.

Can we get to the motion, please?

Vince Gasparro: I am speaking to the motion, Chair, and to why I do not support it.

The motion fails to address the broader economic impacts to our country. As I was saying, 75% of the project steel was sourced from Canada, with 25% coming from the United States. More than 455 co-op students got experience from the building of this bridge—right from Ontario universities. Members of the ironworkers union, LiUNA and others benefited from the opening of this bridge.

I am confused. The Conservative opposition is trying to celebrate the opening of the bridge yet is critiquing the opening of the bridge at the same time.

To conclude, I do not support this motion. It does not address the broader economic benefits that this bridge has.

I look forward to being added back onto the speakers list.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gasparro.

Ms. Lalonde, welcome to OGGO. I don't think you've been with us before.

[*Translation*]

Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, this is my first time here. I encourage all my colleagues to use their little earpieces, because I will be speaking French.

I am very proud to represent the most beautiful riding in Canada, Orléans. I hope everyone is enjoying being back here in Ottawa. I hope all my colleagues here today are having a good summer, especially you, Mr. Chair.

I, too, would like to echo what my opposition colleagues have said about the exemplary work done and the contributions made by workers over many years to give us this bridge. I'm not an engineer by training, but the engineering that went into this bridge is extraordinary. My colleague talked about that. I also had the pleasure of visiting it last year, and I was proud to know that some of my colleagues, Mr. Gill and Mr. Lewis, were just there for the opening of the bridge.

It was really important to me to thank the workers. I know my colleague, speaking in English, referred to the statements made by the Ontario Trucking Association, by Eric Lombardi and by the Premier of Ontario on the bridge's opening.

What I'm not hearing from the opposition is how long they would have kept the bridge closed. I think that's also very important. I'm going to read the motion, because my colleagues seem rather sensitive to the idea that we might be deviating from the subject of this motion.

It talks about transparency, but this is transparent. The agreement was made public on July 22, I believe. It was made public to everyone. Taxpayers, Canadians and the people of Orléans can read this great agreement.

Another very important point, when we're talking about honesty and openness.... Once again, the bridge is open. That's a key point. I think we can all agree that this is important for the economy between Michigan and Ontario. As a proud Franco-Ontarian, trade is definitely extremely important to me. I'm also a former businesswoman. However, what's even more important in all this is that the agreement signed in 2012 by—I'll say it, because the Conservatives like to hear this name—Stephen Harper, the former prime minister of Canada, remains in effect. The 2012 agreement is still in place. Nothing has changed. A parallel agreement has been reached.

I know some of my colleagues have suggested or mentioned that the Prime Minister is in his element. I listened to a press conference on July 26, I believe, during which he spoke transparently and humbly, saying that he should have perhaps been more clear in his initial remarks. However, that's exactly what he did and what he communicated to all Canadians about the 2026 agreement that will be in effect for the next few years and that will also create a strategic economic investment fund for the regions in Michigan and Ontario. So we're talking about a fund that will help the local economy.

I'm looking through my notes. I don't want to focus too much on the numbers, because that's often not the most important aspect, but there are some members from Windsor here. Because I do like numbers, I think it's worth noting that it is estimated that the bridge will contribute about $1.3 billion to Windsor's gross domestic product. That's just for Windsor, all attributed to the bridge's opening. About 7,500 cars and trucks have already crossed in the first 12 hours.

So we are here to discuss a very important motion. I think everyone here recognizes the importance of our role in parliamentary committees. As you mentioned, Mr. Chair, this is my first time on this committee. I don't have any prepared notes, but I have a lot of information.

● (1445)

Another point that hasn't been mentioned so far about this bridge, which is now open, might interest the Conservatives. I visited the bridge last year. Another one of the reasons for building it, apart from supply chains and transport, is border security. I think that's something we all need to remember. The inspection facilities, which are now state-of-the-art and equipped with the latest technology, will enhance the ability to detect illegal goods, contraband and unauthorized persons, while supporting the efficient and secure flow of legitimate trade and travellers.

I didn't hear any mention of how long the Conservatives would have kept the bridge closed. We've taken a practical and pragmatic approach. We signed a bilateral agreement between Canada and the United States that will create an economic fund for the region, which benefits our small businesses and people in those areas. Indeed, the fact that the bridge is open will benefit small businesses, as well as the auto and manufacturing sectors. Everyone will benefit.

So the bridge is open. That doesn't alter the fact that, for some, this bilateral agreement was made public after it was signed. I was a businesswoman, and I never negotiated in public. I would negotiate, and then the agreement would be made public. Unless the Conservatives have a different idea of how negotiations should happen, we negotiate at the table, and once the negotiations have concluded, the agreement is made public.

Projections are also being made in terms of what this will bring in. I was a businesswoman. When I was opening my retirement homes, my budget projections often assumed it would take three or four years before I could expect a return. So, yes, it's very important to be transparent, and that's why the agreement has been made public.

Once again, what I want to know is how long the Conservatives would have kept this bridge closed, to the detriment of an economy that is of great importance not only to Windsor and Ontario, but also to the rest of Canada.

I don't want to go on too long, but I wanted to make this point, because the security aspect is super important to me, and so is trade and the fact that this motion talks about these important matters. We're talking about transparency. Transparency means making an agreement public after it has been signed, and that's what we did. The bridge is open, and I know some of my colleagues were there. I would have liked to have been there, too, to witness the historic opening of this extraordinary bridge.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak, Mr. Chair, and I'll now let other colleagues speak not only to the motion, but also to the fact that the bridge is open.

● (1450)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll go virtually to Ms. McPherson and then back to Ms. Lantsman.

Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will take a few moments to speak to the motion that has been brought forward by my colleague Mr. Albas. I want to start by saying that, of course, all of us understand the importance of the Gordie Howe bridge. All of us in this room know how important it is that this bridge opened. Absolutely, we do.

I want to congratulate all of the workers who built this bridge over the last number of years. What an incredible accomplishment it is. What an incredible testament it is to the workers in this country. I have to give a shout-out to my colleague Brian Masse, who was the member of Parliament who pushed so hard for so long to make sure that this bridge got built.

What we're talking about in this motion is getting the clarity we require. We as Canadians, parliamentarians and opposition members received information from the Prime Minister that misled the media and misled Canadians. It was deeply unclear. People didn't have a good understanding of what the negotiations looked like and what the agreement was.

Yes, we all absolutely want to see this bridge open. Every single person, and I honestly believe every parliamentarian, recognizes the value of this bridge, but Canadians deserve answers. They deserve to know why the Prime Minister misled the media and misled Canadians—

John-Paul Danko: I have a point of order, Chair. The member is assigning motive to the Prime Minister. That is unparliamentary.

The Chair: That's not a point of order, Mr. Danko.

All of us should be careful with that.

Go ahead, Ms. McPherson.

Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

It's actually a fact that the Prime Minister gave the wrong information and said it was because he had a cowboy hat on. As an Albertan, I spend an awful lot of time every year at the Stampede, and I hope that the hat on my head does not influence my ability to share information accurately.

Canadians look at what we are seeing right now, and they are seeing another appeasement by the Prime Minister. I will agree with my colleague from Windsor West, who brought up a number of appeasements that the Prime Minister has already done. It would be one thing if we were giving up the digital services tax or if we were giving up the retaliatory tariffs. Even today, news is coming out that we are now allowing the web giants to get off scot-free instead of paying their fair share—

Marie-France Lalonde: I have a point of order.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I have to interrupt you, Ms. McPherson.

Marie-France Lalonde: I do not like to interrupt. I thank all members who allowed me to speak, but I spoke to the motion. I don't think Ms. McPherson is speaking to the motion.

● (1455)

The Chair: We've so far allowed a very wide latitude in the debate.

As I did with everyone else, I will ask you to get to the motion, Ms. McPherson.

Heather McPherson: Absolutely, Mr. Chair.

I certainly hope I'm not getting under anyone's skin when I bring up the idea that this looks like an appeasement. We have an obligation as opposition members to get to the bottom of how this negotiation happened. What is in the deal? If we have, on one hand, the Prime Minister telling us something that was clearly not true, and now on the other hand, he is telling us something else, how do we know which of those things we can move forward on? I think this is a very reasonable motion through which to ask for clarity.

What I would ask my Liberal colleagues is this: If you are so proud of this deal, and if you are so proud of the work that the Prime Minister and our ministers have done in negotiating this deal, then why would you not want an opportunity for the ministers to share that information with Canadians through this committee and through this motion? It seems to me that is a reasonable thing.

If you believe this is such a good-news story, as I've heard you say, I would think you would like the idea of bringing forward ministers so they can share your good-news story. It seems to me that when we have Liberal members of Parliament—members of this committee—not even trying to amend the motion but simply disagreeing with the motion in its entirety, that means you don't want to be held accountable for this agreement.

That's a problem, because Canadians want to know the details. They deserve to know the details. The confusion that was sowed by the Prime Minister already needs to be clarified. In fact, I'm curious why my colleague Mr. Albas didn't include the Prime Minister among the witnesses for this testimony. It would be nice to hear from him at a time when he doesn't have a cowboy hat on.

This is a pattern with the government. This is a pattern we have seen with the lack of transparency and clarity and the misinformation or disinformation coming from different ministers and the Prime Minister. The idea that an issue as big as this and as important as this to our economy.... We need the ability to ask ministers questions about it, to get to the bottom of it and to get some clarity on how this deal was struck, what Canadians are benefiting from and what Canadians are paying.

This is the motion, so for my part, New Democrats support this motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

We'll now go to Ms. Lantsman, and after Ms. Lantsman, we'll go back to Mr. Danko.

Melissa Lantsman: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to speak to the motion. I'm going to suggest that the reason you hear filibustering about the bridge—we all agree, of course, that the opening is a good thing—is that they don't want to actually talk about the motion. Let's get right back into the motion, because it's a good motion about governance and about what Canadians deserve to know. In it, we ask a few questions, and I'll go through them.

What's included in the agreement refers to “all incurred operating costs of the bridge”. The problem is that the agreement never defines this. Whether it's public or not, it is deliberately left vague. That's what we're asking about. Reporters pushed officials on this. The closest thing to a definition we got was the Prime Minister's Office describing things like toll booths, maintenance or snow removal, but we don't actually know. That's exactly why we've brought this committee meeting forward.

Most notably, the text of the agreement doesn't define operating costs. It doesn't mention Canada's debt, which is the crux of all the outstanding questions that Canadians want answers to. He's implied that debt repayment comes off the top before any split, but the text doesn't say that either. That's why the question about governance is the first question we have in the motion.

I know that members opposite have referred to this being a public document. I hope they've read it so they can follow along.

Let's go to a question about clause 2, on what “objects” means for the Canada-U.S. economic development fund. There is nothing specific in it. It is a placeholder. The clause just says that Canada and the U.S. will “reasonably agree” on the fund's objects later. It's only that they must benefit the United States and Canada-U.S. trade. That's as clear as mud, which is exactly why we want to use Parliament and this committee to get to the bottom of this with officials.

We'll go to the third piece, clause 3. As per clause 3(a), what “comparable regional crossings” will be used to determine whether toll rates are above the average of such crossings? The agreement doesn't name them. That's the problem. That's what we want to hear from officials—from ministers and from those who were responsible for negotiating this agreement. It's just a phrase in the agreement, “average comparable regional crossings”, and a benchmark without listing the crossings count.

The obvious competitors for crossings in my colleague's neighbourhood of Windsor-Detroit are the Ambassador Bridge and the Detroit Windsor Tunnel. Since the Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority has set the toll rates for cars and commercial vehicles, and since those are below the privately owned competitor, which is the Ambassador Bridge—we now know they're friends of President Trump—they're charging eight dollars for personal vehicles versus $14 on the Ambassador Bridge. However, “comparable” isn't fully defined. That's a built-in point for future disagreement. That's exactly what we want officials to answer. None of this has been answered by any of the government members on this committee.

We'll go to another question on governance. How will dispute resolution proceed if there is a disagreement about these toll charges? There isn't really any dispute resolution in this process. It's a consent and clock mechanism that's worked in.

When Canada proposes a toll increase of over 10%, that pushes it above the regional average, or a decrease pushes it below it. If the U.S. gets a 30-day window to consent or object and Washington says nothing, then the consent is automatically given. However, the text of the agreement, which we want officials to speak to, doesn't actually talk about what happens if the U.S. objects. There's no arbitrator. There's no path to dispute resolution. Despite that agreement all being public, none of this is on the record.

These are all questions that have been asked of departments and the government. There are no answers to these questions, so we're using our parliamentary committee to get to the bottom of this.

Finally, as per clause 5, notwithstanding the details that remain to be finalized, what specifics have been agreed to regarding the repayments, the timing, the calculation methods, the auditing, the reporting, the enforcement and the dispute settlement? Those are all questions that Canadians have about this deal.

● (1500)

This is the most revealing clause, actually. Clause 5 says, “Officials will develop and finalize the legal, financial and administrative arrangements necessary to implement this Agreement”. We want to hear from those officials about what that implementation—“as expeditiously as possible”—looks like.

That's the entire clause. Payments, timing, calculations and methods are not specified in the agreement yet, despite the agreement being public, as you have said so many times in your talking points. Only the fifty-fifty, 15-year headline split is set. The mechanisms are all TBD, so that's what Canadians have questions about. What are these mechanisms? Auditing and reporting are not addressed at all in the agreement. Enforcement is not addressed at all in the agreement. Dispute settlement is not addressed beyond the toll consent clause that I just spoke about, clause 3. All of these questions still remain.

This reads like a term sheet, and the Prime Minister would understand the difference. It's not a finished contract. What Canadians deserve to know, with a $6.4-billion investment of their tax money that hasn't been accounted for in the fiscal framework at all, is what all of this means. When does it happen?

When the Prime Minister is asked about it and repeatedly misleads the Canadian public.... That's why this committee is important. That's why it's important to hear from officials. Perhaps they are not officials on the other side who were part of the negotiating team. In fact, I'm certain they are not. Perhaps they are not officials on the other side who understand the intricacies of this agreement. Perhaps Canadians will have a whole lot more questions after their interjections in this committee than when they started.

We all know the bridge is good for the economy. I will give you that. I'm going to amend the motion to give the Liberals everything they wanted and everything they've asked for here in this committee. I want to amend the motion so that it adds, after “Bridge Authority”, point e. If you want to talk about the economy and fully understand it, I'm going to amend it to read, “e. Additional witnesses that will help the committee fully understand the economic impact of the deal, including from impacted businesses and workers”.

I think that should take care of all the talking points you've put forward on the table, and we can answer the last five questions that I've asked, which haven't been answered by anybody on this committee representing the government. They are questions that I think Canadians want to know the answers to, and they are questions that are still outstanding after continued misleading statements by the Prime Minister.

● (1505)

The Chair: Thanks. Do you have that amendment in writing? You can send it to the clerk or read it back slowly for the analysts, unless they caught it.

Let's hear the amendment first, and then we can suspend for a couple of seconds. We're adding point e.

Melissa Lantsman: I'm moving that the motion be amended, after the words “Bridge Authority”, with the following: “e. Additional witnesses that will help the committee fully understand the economic impact of the deal, including from impacted businesses and workers”. I think with that, you can probably support the motion.

The Chair: We're going to be on the amendment. I'll start a speaking list on the amendment. I have Ms. Gaudreau first for the amendment, and then it's Mr. Danko, Mr. Albas, Ms. Desrochers and Mr. Lewis.

Do we still need to suspend? It's one simple line.

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: Can we make it one minute?

We're suspended quickly, for one minute.

● (1505)

(Pause)

● (1520)

The Chair: Thank you for your patience. We are back in session.

We are on the amendment. The speaking order is Madame Gaudreau and then Mr. Danko.

Madame Gaudreau, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At the beginning of my remarks, which was an hour and a half ago already, I was really talking about the principle. I still agree with that principle.

I obviously learned that the agreement in principle was public, although I had read it on July 22. So I've had an hour, and I must admit that I didn't listen to all the speeches, but I can tell you that I've been working very hard to unpack the agreement.

It is perfectly normal to want to get to the bottom of this. I also have some questions that I'm sure my colleagues won't be able to answer.

For example, article 1 provides for payments equal to 50% of net revenues—that's correct, we know that—for the first 15 fiscal years with no conditions on debt repayment. Yes, that contradicted what had previously been indicated. That's one point. What information do we have today? It's not enough. Yes, article 1, if you read it, is specific. It really focuses on the first 15 years, but it doesn't define net revenues without reference to capital. In addition, it puts those payments outside the 2012 framework, even though we're being told that the 2012 agreement remains intact. I'll continue for a bit. I don't understand. That's not what I see. So, on reading it, it's clear that these payments will go on for 15 years. That's fine. We understand that.

There is another interpretation that is legally possible, but it has to be confirmed by implementation arrangements. When it comes to risk management and the management of public funds, audit information is needed. For example, what is the exact date of the first payment to the U.S. fund? When is it due? We don't know. Does the repayment of Canadian contributions constitute a deduction when calculating net revenues? We don't know. Why does article 1 not mention the condition publicly announced by the Prime Minister regarding the full repayment of the debt? Will the payments be made by the Windsor-Detroit Bridge Authority or directly by the federal treasury? I have so many questions. For example, if the U.S. refuses to adjust tariffs, will that have to be justified and reasonable?

I see four major problems with the agreement. I did a cursory analysis in the last hour. There is a possible discrepancy between the Prime Minister's statements and the published text. We want to know more. That is perfectly legitimate. The priority given to Canadian taxpayers' repayments, as planned in 2022, could have a negative economic impact. The United States has been granted the power to approve certain toll decisions. I think it is very much in our interest to find out more about that. My final point is that we want to know what legal and financial instruments need to be defined to measure enforceability and real costs. My colleague spoke about this earlier.

In view of all that, we really need to meet to discuss the matter. Now, as far as this motion is concerned, there was an amendment, which is what we're talking about now. However, I would go even further. If we can reach an agreement to shed light on the situation for our constituents, I think we can achieve this by the middle of summer. I spent many hours working here in Parliament throughout July 2020. I have no problem sitting through the summer, but I'm very aware that we can plan and we can give the government time to do its homework and be accountable. In addition, the Parliamentary Budget Officer will be able to provide us with information, and the ministers concerned will also be able to attend. This is a proposal. I think it could be a win-win for everyone.

● (1525)

Otherwise, we'll be packing up and heading home three minutes from now. The opposition members won't get any answers, and the government will go into hiding, precisely because it doesn't have all the answers. Negotiations often happen very quickly.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Gaudreau. We have resources until about 4 p.m., so we won't disappear quite so fast.

I have Mr. Danko, and then we'll go over to Mr. Albas.

Mr. Danko, go ahead on the amendment, please.

John-Paul Danko: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I note that you made the trip from Edmonton for this meeting in Ottawa. It's very appreciated that you did that.

I appreciate the discussion this afternoon. I'll note that the sitting members of the government operations and estimates committee from the opposition are present, and there are alternatives filling in today. We had the former member for Carleton grace us with his presence. I guess there's nothing important going on in Battle River—Crowfoot during the summer when we're spending time in our constituencies. It's interesting that he was here for this meeting.

A lot of this is politics, and I understand that, but if we're talking about the amendment on the table—

The Chair: I apologize for interrupting.

Colleagues, Mr. Danko has the floor.

John-Paul Danko: If we're talking about the amendment on the table and the impacts of the opening of the Gordie Howe International Bridge on businesses and workers, I'm going to go back to the comments from Premier Doug Ford in Ontario, who understands this issue very clearly and obviously had a much clearer understanding than the Leader of the Opposition. He said that this agreement will allow approximately 300 billion dollars' worth of goods to move across the border, creating opportunities and jobs, and that the Prime Minister "did an excellent job getting this deal done".

If we talk specifically about what that means for Canada, for Ontario, for the United States and for Michigan, it means faster and more reliable trade, more predictable delivery schedules, reduced shipping delays, reduced fuel costs, a lower risk of supply chain disruptions for just-in-time deliveries and greater resilience if there is a problem with another crossing.

That was one of the imperatives that led to the construction of the Gordie Howe bridge in the first place. Following 9/11, there was a realization that Canada's most important border crossing with our most important trade partner was at risk of redundancy if there was a problem at the Ambassador Bridge.

It also means stronger manufacturing and supply chains, as I said, to keep factories supplied with parts. There are highly integrated manufacturing sectors on both sides of the border, and it will reduce production interruptions and support manufacturers throughout Ontario and Michigan.

On increasing opportunities for Canadian workers, I talked in my initial comments about the impact that the value of the construction of this project had, but moving forward there will be improvements in trucking and logistics, expanded warehousing and distribution, and state-of-the-art customs facilities for streamlining the goods being transferred on both sides of the border and for making sure that inspections are up to date and that contraband, guns and drugs are seized at the border.

We have a number of members from the Windsor area here today, and I thank them for joining us at committee this afternoon. Specifically for businesses in Windsor and the surrounding areas benefiting from the increased economic opportunity, there will be more customers for hotels, restaurants and retailers, increased demand for transportation and logistics, and an overall greater investment in industrial and commercial development in those specific geographic areas on both sides of the border.

We already talked about lower transportation costs. When this bridge was originally proposed, the Province of Ontario made over $1 billion in highway improvements to ensure that there were seamless connections to the province of Ontario and the Canadian highway network. The same was done on the U.S. side, so you have a seamless connection between I-75 going south and the 400-series highways in Ontario, which is of critical importance for the quality of life in Windsor and Detroit, as it takes transport truck traffic off city streets and puts it onto the 400-series highways and the interstate highways, where it should be.

Finally, there is the increase in investment confidence that this certainty brings to businesses and workers on both sides of the border. That is probably the number one thing we are dealing with right now as a country and as Canadians—the ongoing uncertainty with the United States. We should all be very proud that getting this bridge open and finalizing this deal has created certainty in this critical trade corridor so that businesses on both sides of the border can now have certainty when it comes to cross-border trade.

I'll leave my comments there. I'm sure my colleagues will have some additional things to say on the amendment.

Thank you.

● (1530)

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Albas and then to Ms. Desrochers.

Dan Albas: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm certainly happy to hear that there is one federal Liberal who still talks positively about Doug Ford and what he feels about transportation. I'm sure he'll go to bed feeling better about that.

This is simply it. The motion and the amendment were obviously tabled so that the government could have some comfort. The motion and the amendment were written to give members of the Liberal Party a bit of comfort. It may be cold comfort, but it still is comfort that they could have something where they could talk about.... They are obviously opposed to any scrutiny whatsoever when it comes to this deal. To me, that says right away that there's something wrong here. They've known it from the beginning. The fact that they wouldn't mention or speak to the motion and rarely spoke to the amendment shows that they are opposed.

I would encourage all members to vote for it, but let's just get to a vote. Let's let democracy happen here. Let's let our constituents know whether we are with them in transparency and doing our jobs or whether you'll just be cynical about it and vote against it because you want to cover for the government.

The Chair: Ms. Desrochers, the floor is yours.

Thanks, Mr. Albas.

[*Translation*]

Caroline Desrochers: Mr. Chair, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak again.

Out of respect for the members who have travelled to be here, but who should be in their ridings right now and speaking with their constituents, I would just like to make one point. Some members have suggested that we are filibustering, but that's not at all what we're doing. I thank my colleagues for proposing the amendment in question, because that's what we've been talking about from the beginning.

However, I would just like to point out, as did my colleague, that the leader of the official opposition was here for about 20 minutes, which took up some of the committee's time. Unfortunately, that time could have been used to discuss this motion.

In light of that, I move that the meeting be adjourned.

● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair: There is a motion to adjourn. We'll take a vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4)

The Chair: That has carried. We are adjourned.