House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Finance

FINA • NUMBER 083 • 1st SESSION • 38th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, October 4, 2005

Chair

Mr. Massimo Pacetti

Standing Committee on Finance

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● (0940)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody. Thank you for taking time out of your day.

We're here for the pre-budget consultations 2005,

[*Translation*]

pursuant to Standing Order 83.1.

[*English*]

We have here three groups. For the first time the groups appear, we're going to allow you a 7- to 10-minute intervention for your opening brief. Then we'll allow the members to ask questions. So if you could keep your opening briefs to about a 10-minute slot, I would appreciate it.

I have three groups here. The first group will be the Assembly of First Nations.

Mr. Jock.

Mr. Richard Jock (Executive Director, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you.

I'd like to begin by passing on the respects of the national chief, who unfortunately has been called for other business, but I do want to assure you that he and the organization consider the pre-budget process very seriously. This is a very important undertaking within the Assembly of First Nations.

I want to also assure you that we work to make our submissions as helpful and as substantive as possible. We do this not by simply laying out a laundry list of items and expenditures; we attempt to approach this from the viewpoint of strategic and sequence planning. In general, our approaches are about short-, medium-, and long-term investments that are intended to reap tremendous dividends for our people and indeed for all of Canada.

We have a limited time today, and we will not go through our submission; that has been tabled with you previously. Instead, we will spend some time focusing on the why: why action is needed now and why such investments are needed now.

The AFN has made seven consecutive pre-budget submissions. Though there have been improvements in the political landscape, frankly, there have been very little substantive changes made in those budgetary requests.

First nations citizens in Canada continue to lag behind other Canadians in all important quality of life indicators. For example, the United Nations has released its 2005 human development index, ranking the quality of life in different countries. While Canada now ranks fifth in the world—and that's something to be proud of—we do feel compelled to examine the current disparity for first nations, who, if we apply that measure, rank 48th in terms of quality of life. Our interest is in eliminating that disparity.

The UN human rights commission this year stated that “Poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, morbidity, suicide, criminal detention—”

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Jock, I've just had a request. Are you reading from the brief you submitted to the committee or is it a separate brief?

Mr. Richard Jock: It's separate. They're speaking points. We've tabled the report itself and now we're just speaking to highlights and some of the rationale behind it.

The Chair: Thank you.

It's just that somebody asked if it was the same.

Mr. Richard Jock: As mentioned briefly, Canada ranks fifth in the human development index, which would put first nations at 48th if that measurement were applied. Again, I just wanted to repeat that we are looking at ways of eliminating that disparity. I was just quoting the human rights commission report this year, which states that “Poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, morbidity, suicide, criminal detention, children on welfare, women victims of abuse, child prostitution, are all much higher among aboriginal people than in any other sector of Canadian society”.

We state these as really the basis for a call to action. This committee obviously has a political opportunity to do its part in terms of the finance interests. In saying so, AFN is not really looking for generalities or general approaches; we're looking to make plans. We're not interested in the current situation of poverty; we want to see how we can move to prosperity. Therefore, we really look forward to committing ourselves to an agenda of progress and productivity, which is the subject of this committee's work this year.

We've seen much progress on the political front in terms of having a voice at the table. The Assembly of First Nations is putting forth concrete and comprehensive plans at those tables. We are also working with first nations to build unprecedented consensus on this path to progress.

However, we have some barriers in that the government in its expenditures will state that DIAND core program spending is going up by approximately 2% a year. But with inflation and a growing population, the net result is that these resources are actually shrinking in terms of purchasing power. Our governments are forced to try to do more and more with less and less effective fiscal resources. Two per cent a year obviously doesn't even keep pace with inflation, which is pegged at 2.6% at least. I think, in view of recent fuel costs, that would even put that at quite a substantial disadvantage. Add to this the fact that our population is young and growing; then this is further deficiency in terms of those resources.

Essentially, these overall practices from a fiscal point of view have been in place since 1996. The outcome is a growing disparity between first nations people and other people in Canada. There's a persistent gap in the quality of life between our people and the general population of Canada, and this gap is not closing. It's important that we now catch up.

Suicide is an epidemic within our communities, and our infant mortality rate is one and a half times higher than the national average. Our people live in houses with insulation that's killing them; this has been presented to another subcommittee. More than a hundred communities take a risk every time they turn on the tap, and a hundred more communities are living under boil water advisories. Tuberculosis, a third world disease, is eight to ten times more prevalent on reserves than in the general population.

● (0945)

● (0950)

Mr. Bob Watts (Chief of Staff, National Chief's Office, Assembly of First Nations): The national chief is concerned that opportunity and time are running out. He wants to emphasize that where first nations go, so does Canada. Our future is Canada's future.

Productivity and innovation are the orders of the day. China and India are on the rise. Parts of South America are also emerging as economic contenders. Canadians want a strong country and a competitive country, but we're hearing alarm bells.

The Canada West Foundation reports that within the next decade the number of Canadians leaving the labour force will exceed those entering the workforce. Canada will face a critical labour shortage that could stall our economic engine just as new economies are gaining strength. The foundation says “The Aboriginal population represents the largest untapped labour force in Canada, and thus it makes good economic sense to engage the Aboriginal population”. Why is this? Because half of our population is under the age of 25. Canada's population is aging, but our population is coming of age.

Increasingly, first nations productivity and economic participation are crucial to Canada's economic success. That is why the national chief and our executive have issued a challenge to Canada's first ministers to work with first nations on a legacy project to close the gap in quality of life between our people and the rest of Canada within 10 years. This means immediate resources to ensure our people are living, learning, and working in healthy conditions and healthy communities. It's not enough to build more schools if our students can't sleep at night because there are five of them in one room.

It would be a mistake to think that first nations problems are out of sight and out of mind. We can all remember the SARS crisis that was international in scope, and Canada was not immune to the impacts. In the waning days of the crisis, Health Canada was drawing up emergency plans in case the virus spread to first nations communities. An internal Health Canada document suggested that the overcrowded conditions in our communities could allow a virus like SARS to spread in a rapid and lethal manner. They were concerned about the virus, and I quote again, “racing through native reserves”.

Right now a lot of experts are concerned about a global pandemic. If we allow the terrible conditions our people are forced to face, we run the risk of creating our own man-made disaster. That's not alarmist; that's alarming. It's a call for action.

Last year's pre-budget submission identified the areas for immediate investment as housing, health, and other priorities. These will stop the bleeding and set a foundation of stability and sustainability that we can build on. We are still waiting for action in these essential areas.

We are now focused on an agenda for the future: investments that will pay huge dividends down the road, capable governing institutions, economic opportunities, environmental stewardship, and improving health and social conditions. These investments will ensure Canada has a labour force that is healthy, agile, and educated.

As the percentage of first nations people in the workforce increases, the impact of the skill level of that group becomes more and more important. We can continue to ship our technical jobs to India and China, creating a huge gap and ever-increasing economic dependency, but we have tremendous untapped potential right here. Either Canada reaches out to our people to fill those roles or Canada falls further behind and off the economic map.

To put it in simple business terms, we're seeking start-up money to get the business of first nations under way—seed money to grow a competitive and modern economy. Increased funding for programs and services directed at first nations is a good first step, but only one step. Ultimately, our goal should be first nations programs, services, and governments that are directed and accountable to first nations people.

Our pre-budget submissions over the last several years have been intended to make things better for first nations, but it is not just about us any more. It is about all Canadians. We're all in this together.

The national chief and our national executive urge you to implement our recommendations. We cannot afford to lose another generation of first nations citizens.

Meegwetch, thank you, *Nia:wen*.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Watts.

The next group I have here is Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami of Canada, Mr. Kusugak.

Mr. Jose Kusugak (President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami of Canada): Thank you, sir.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is an organization that I represent. It's kind of a pan-Arctic organization. It deals with the Inuvialuit of the western Arctic, Nunavut region, northern Quebec, and Labrador.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has advocated in recent years for the government to take an Inuit-specific approach in dealing with Inuit issues. Too often Inuit are lumped in with the first nations after the creation of aboriginal programming, resulting in inadequate and culturally inappropriate results, and arguably government waste. Very often in health and housing issues we stand together, but culturally and traditionally we are very different people with a different language, a different history, and so on. That's why we've been trying to persuade the government to look at Inuit in the Inuit-specific areas.

This means that Inuit have to fight to access aboriginal programming announcements that are responding to first nations issues and priorities. It's often unclear whether the government intended to announce first nations initiatives or aboriginal initiatives—meaning first nations, Inuit, and Métis. This seems to be the next logical step in the recognition of Inuit-specific policy development, meaning Inuit-specific budget development and announcements.

It is important for the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which represents all the Inuit regions in Canada, that this pre-budget consultation consider where we are, how much it costs to do business, and how much it costs to live in the Arctic.

To give you a bit of a preamble and a recent example using the price of gas this summer, it was very interesting for Inuit to watch the rest of Canada up in arms about how high the price of gas was. For things like this Canada seems unified. But when it comes to the high prices in the Arctic, only Inuit face the huge challenge of getting this heard, then recognized, then considered, and then addressed, not only by ordinary Canadians but by people of influence like you here.

To use some concrete examples, a sheet of half-inch 4x8 plywood, which costs $22.47 at Home Depot down the street here in Ottawa, costs $140 by the time it reaches a typical Arctic community—in this case Inukjuak on the Hudson's Bay coast. That's six times the Ottawa price.

Per capita or equal funding formulas designed for southern Canada will perpetually leave Inuit in the Arctic impoverished, holding the short end of the stick, so to speak.

Visit any store and look at the price of milk. A two-litre container of 1% milk, which costs $3.99 at the Hartman's store here on Bank Street, costs $6.99 in the Naujat Co-op store in Repulse Bay, which is the community I was born in, right on the Arctic Circle.

I also have some examples here of real prices from a co-op store in Pond Inlet. One litre of McCain's orange juice costs $21.69. For two litres of Kool-Aid, which is not necessarily real juice, the real price is $52.49. For two litres of pseudo grape juice, the price is $41.69. Those are some real prices.

● (0955)

You should have a copy of some of that for your enjoyment and put it on your wall; it's very expensive art.

Also, the Prime Minister has considered the evolution of the three territories to eventually become provinces. In the same breath, can the government say that the new provinces will be united by the Trans-Canada Highway and the national railway system, vital transportation links available to the majority of Canadians? The existence of these essential links amounts to a transportation subsidy for Canadians who live in southern Canada.

In the Arctic, the high costs of transportation are not subsidized in any similar way, despite the fact that Inuit pay all taxes—the GST, PST, and income taxes—and live in municipalities and carry Canadian passports. The main methods of transporting people and goods in the Arctic are air and marine transport, when there is no ice. Canada should consider transportation taxation subsidies and/or exemptions, such as abolishing the GST, as a start, for the Arctic regions; that would help to reduce the high cost of living and spur economic development.

The government has acknowledged the yawning gaps that separate so many aboriginal people from other Canadians and has specified housing as one of the critical factors. Indeed, as Richard also mentioned for the Indian people, there is a critical shortage of social housing in the 53 Inuit communities, a fiduciary obligation the Government of Canada refused to negotiate in the land claims issues.

During the housing sectoral session on November 24, 2004, when asked to describe what success would look like on the housing issue, participants wasted no time in saying it would be when the chronic social and health issues caused by overcrowding in Inuit houses and lack of houses are reduced to the same level as exists for other Canadians. I think there's a long way to go in that.

The Crown must recognize this fundamental fact of life in the Arctic first and foremost in setting a goal of closing the gap between Inuit and the rest of Canada.

Last, equitable funding formulas that take into account the true costs of living in the Arctic must be devised. Inuit are first Canadians and Canadians first. Treat us like equal partners for the benefit of all Canadians.

Thank you.

● (1000)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kusugak.

We don't have a copy of the brief or your speaking notes. I'm wondering if you can provide us with a copy of that. Could you just pass it along to the clerk?

Mr. Jose Kusugak: Apparently it was e-mailed last night.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

We'll go to the next presenter, the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Mr. Dinsdale.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale (Executive Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): Thank you very much.

I'd like to begin by thanking the finance committee for the opportunity to provide this briefing today and by apologizing that our president, Vera Pawis Tabobondung, was unable to be with you, although she certainly wishes she could have been. My name is Peter Dinsdale, and I'm executive director of the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Friendship centres are an urban, on-the-ground service delivery provider for all of Canada's aboriginal people. The first friendship centres started in the early 1950s as a response to all aboriginal groups moving into urban areas. It wasn't until 1972 that the national body was developed. In 1996 the administrative transfer for our core funding program, the aboriginal friendship centre program, was transferred over to us. We now ourselves administer that core funding program to all 117 friendship centres.

So there are 117 friendship centres across Canada, from coast to coast to coast. In your briefing books we've provided a copy of our friendship centre map in the middle, just to give you a sense of where all the communities are. Let me say that Canada's aboriginal population is increasingly an urban population. Over half of all Canada's aboriginal people live in urban areas.

Keep in mind as well that over half of all aboriginal people are under the age of 25, and half of our people don't graduate from high school. We have a growing underclass within first nation, Métis, and native communities living in urban areas. We're undereducated, we're underemployed, and we're living in poverty. Friendship centres are designed to help address that reality in communities across this country.

In response to your theme, I'm pleased to share how the investments made in friendship centres increase productivity. I don't count productivity by an increase in GDP or any other measure other than having the ability to serve the most impoverished people in this country on the ground in communities all across Canada.

Last year alone, through our 117 friendship centres we served over 757,000 people through our programs and services. Again, these are the most impoverished people in your communities. The services we have available in each community differ, because a lot of times we have partnerships with provinces and local municipalities to be more responsive to regional programming. However, in general they cover such broad areas as education, employment and training, health care, cultural programs, and youth programs and the like. Each community agency really tries to respond to what's happening there. The issues in downtown Winnipeg are not the same issues as in Rankin Inlet. The friendship centres are designed to respond to those local needs.

Friendship centres are also status-blind. Quite often we get criticized for being pan-aboriginal, which is a bit of a red herring. When people come through our doors for services, we don't ask for a status card. We don't ask what Métis card you belong to. We don't ask what homeland you're from. We provide services. I assure you that the friendship centre in Rankin Inlet is not a first nation-based friendship centre, nor is the friendship centre in Winnipeg an Inuit friendship centre. Again, they're responding to the populations and communities they serve.

Today, through the national body of the NAFC, we deliver over $30 million in programming through three primary programs with the federal government. One is the urban multi-purpose aboriginal youth centre initiative—UMAC, for short—where we focus on providing community youth programming across the country. We get approximately $11 million to do that.

We also have a summer employment program, Young Canada Works, which is delivered in a partnership between Canadian Heritage and HRSDC. We provide about $1.5 million in programming, and this year 300 aboriginal students across the country received summer employment in friendship centres.

But what I want to talk to you about today is our aboriginal friendship centre program. That's the core funding program from all these 117 friendship centres. It provides each friendship centre with enough money to keep the doors open and keep the lights on—despite the high price of electricity and natural gas these days, and insurance. This program is up for renewal this year. It gets renewed in five-year mandates. We underwent our summative evaluations—a copy is provided in your kits as well—but now it's time to talk about renewing the program.

In the early 1990s, through the various expenditure reviews that occurred, the aboriginal friendship centre program was cut by 25%. That cut, the 25% reduction in the early 1990s, has never been restored. Through the years of inflation and the high cost of everything, we estimate that amounts to 40% in today's real-term dollars.

● (1005)

There hasn't been an increase, and this hasn't been looked at, since these cuts occurred in the 1990s. What these have done is diminish our ability to respond to issues in communities. We as a body and entity aren't invited to some of the bigger processes at play. Our fight is for survival; our fight is to keep the lights on in the building; our fight is to keep the gas going so that the homeless in your communities have some place to go and the most disenfranchised have some place to get services. It's time that we restored these cuts.

We're recommending that the budget include a $10-million enhancement to the aboriginal friendship centre program. Of that $10 million, we propose to spend $7.8 million in local communities. These funds would go directly to local friendship centres to serve those people in your communities.

It's a little technical, but we have some friendship centres that don't receive guaranteed funding every year. We call them non-core-funded friendship centres—they get one-time funding each year. We're recommending that it's time to fund those friendship centres to the full level.

We're also recommending that we provide an additional $53,000 in each community in order to bring them up to some level where they can comfortably leave the lights on and go out and pursue other programs to serve people in urban communities.

We're recommending that a regional pot of $950,000 be set aside to provide training to local friendship centres. We police ourselves very strongly in terms of accountability; if a local friendship centre is having difficulty, we put them on what we call a special agreement and give the funding in quarterly increments at a time. We have increased reporting requirements, and we need funds to help provide training for local boards of directors and local community people to better serve their community. We currently don't have enough money to do that. So if a friendship centre in northern B.C. has some capacity issues, we don't have money as a national body to fly people into that community to train them. If we're honest about accountability and transparency, we have to do something about that.

As well, at the national office we're recommending a $950,000 allocation to look at communications efforts, to provide some more training, and to focus on core delivery.

This isn't a Cadillac budget, but very much a Chevy budget, just bringing us back to where we would have been had the cuts not occurred and had we kept up with the cost of inflation.

Let me tell you why this talks directly to accountability. For every dollar the government gives us in AFCP, we leverage nine additional dollars from other programs and services. So if the Province of Ontario has a program, the friendship centres are well placed in urban communities to provide those services. If municipalities want to offer a homelessness program or an outreach program, friendship centres partner with them to provide those services. Your AFCP funding helps to ensure those community agencies are there to respond to those needs.

The friendship centre funding also provides a base for other programs. As those programs are described in your briefs, I'm not going to go into them in detail, because our focus is really on the aboriginal friendship centre program. An example like the early learning and child care initiative that the federal government is currently doing is very well positioned to be delivered in friendship centres. If you're talking about serving kids in communities across this country, friendship centres are in 117 communities and would be fabulous partners to make sure that the youngest in our communities have access to a good quality start. Quite frankly, those partnerships and those discussions aren't occurring at the level they should be. If they were, we'd be talking about a $30 million request to have children and youth programming available to urban aboriginal kids across the country, because they don't currently have access to those programs, I have to be clear.

We have other areas that we're concerned about. We think the urban aboriginal strategy is grossly underfunded; it's an embarrassment, quite frankly. We think the aboriginal human resource development strategy has no meaningful urban component to serve people where they live in urban communities. Housing and homelessness and other priorities exist, but for us today, we want to talk about the core funding initiative that allows us to respond to those.

In summary, together we've built an excellent vehicle of partnerships between the federal government and friendship centres in 117 communities across the country—and growing. We're well positioned to be an important part of the new aboriginal agenda, but we need to be properly resourced to respond to those various opportunities and challenges that exist.

Thank you.

● (1010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dinsdale.

I just have a quick question. I want to make sure I understand this. Is the aboriginal friendship centre program issued through the Canadian Heritage ministry?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Yes, Canadian Heritage, that's right.

The Chair: It continues to be?

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Yes.

The Chair: Mr. Harris.

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, gentlemen, for your presentations this morning. I think you've each given a separate and unique insight to us on your particular areas of concern.

I just want to preface my questions with a little bit of background about me. I was born in Prince Rupert and was raised there until I was 15, when I moved to Prince George. I have spent my entire life in the central interior, in the Cariboo area of Prince George. So I think I'm pretty well aware of the challenges that aboriginals and their communities as a whole have faced over the many years that I've been walking around in that area. Currently, my riding of Cariboo—Prince George has a very large aboriginal population in many communities. As you can imagine, I am always, and currently am, working on a number of different concerns that have been brought to me.

One thing that I get so frustrated with is that whenever something seems to be working, when some program or some mechanism is working or seems to be doing some good, some bureaucrat somewhere changes it and implements some different policies that tend to screw things up, quite frankly.

I'm working on something now in native housing in the Chilcoutin area. There was a good formula for house inspections to determine whether there needed to be some healthy repairs to the residences. All of a sudden that formula was changed, and now there are about three extra steps thrown in before you can get the job done. The inspectors there and the leaders in the communities are just getting so frustrated with it. I don't know who's causing it; I imagine it's the bureaucrats in the department.

Anyway, to get to my question, this is something that comes up on an ongoing basis. It appears to me that over the last 30 years there have been several billions of dollars—maybe over $100 billion—thrown into aboriginal programs designed to improve the physical and social health of the communities, the housing conditions, the employment conditions, and so many other areas that are challenging to aboriginal people.

When I visit the communities and deal with aboriginal people in the cities, it appears to me that despite the billions of dollars, the quality of life seems to be posing more challenges than it did 30 years ago. I don't know the answer. It seems like we keep pouring money into it, but it seems to be getting worse, particularly the social problems.

I know that social problems in the white community are as great a concern, and there's no short answer to these, I guess.

Can you just give me a thumbnail sketch or an assessment of the opinion I just gave you?

Mr. Richard Jock: I think what you've spoken about is also the basis for our discussions, in terms of not only new resources but a new relationship in doing things differently.

Within that, I think the Auditor General has as well been very clear on what she considers the reporting burden to be. There is more of an emphasis on the management and administration of these dollars, rather than focusing on the actual delivery piece of that.

In general, I would agree with your assessment and state that the Assembly of First Nations, among its interests in new resources, is also looking at new ways of delivering those. They are really focused on the local delivery level and not on these intermediary institutions.

For us, part of the answer is not only more resources, but it is indeed on streamlining and making the institutions that deliver those more effective. Very clearly, it's also that first nations institutions, whether they be at a regional or a local level, are the ones that are best positioned to actually deliver those services.

I would say that in some instances, where there are allocations that look fairly large, the reality sometimes comes down to one or two houses per community. For example, in last year's allocation of $290 million, the way it came out the other end of the funnel for Atlantic provinces was one house per community. Transformative change needs to be looked at in a broader and more visionary process than house-by-house allocations.

● (1015)

Mr. Richard Harris: I tend to agree with you.

It appears to me that in the way the department and bureaucrats look at it, if a good idea comes from a first nations person, community, or leadership, it has to automatically be questioned because it wasn't first thought of by the department. Even if it's a good idea, many times it's just cast aside, as if it can't possibly work because we don't know anything. That's the attitude I'm getting from the bureaucrats.

Even when I question them on specific things, they either refuse to tell me how it's working or in many cases they're very arrogant. They say they're handling it and it's not really any of our business. We're told not to worry, they'll look after it.

Yet I go back to the reserves to talk to the people out there and they get even more frustrated with the lack of attention to things that are obviously wrong. In so many cases, I know the leadership in these different communities can't believe the prevailing attitude is that they simply don't know the answers to things. They're told not to worry, the bureaucrats will look after it sooner or later.

I only wanted to make that comment. I'm going to continue working around my riding as best I can. It gets pretty frustrating sometimes.

I only want to ask this—

The Chair: Mr. Harris, you're over the time limit. I want to allow Mr. Kusugak to reply to your last comment, and then I've got to move on.

Mr. Jose Kusugak: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to echo your comment on when it works, it's derailed. The Prime Minister announced that there would be an Inuit-specific secretariat a couple of years ago, and we're trying to start that department. I've been in Ottawa for six years, and when I was talking to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and there were a couple of hundred of them in a room, I asked specifically, how many of you work specifically on Inuit issues in the Arctic? Not one hand went up. There is nobody in Canada, at the federal level, who works specifically on Inuit issues at all. So I wanted to assure the chairman that with the billions of dollars that are put towards aboriginal programs and so on, there is no way of tracking how much of that is going specifically towards Inuit issues, Inuit programs, and so on. So we're trying to figure that out right now.

When we met with the federal cabinet last November, the Hon. Joe Fontana, Minister of Labour and Housing, suggested that we make the plans and provide them. So we actually developed a workable plan with the type of housing, how many houses per year, and so on, to try to catch up. We thought we had that kind of agreement. Now the minister is saying there will be a housing bureaucracy developed, which will stop the whole process now for I don't know how many years. We know the kinds of houses we need, the number of houses, and when to deliver—we only have a window of the summer to be able to deliver plywood and other stuff to the Arctic because there is no other way of sending cargo—and it seems to have halted. This is one of the things I am trying to get you to understand, that is, the cost of transportation in the Arctic.

● (1020)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kusugak.

Mr. Dinsdale.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Thank you for including our voice.

This has been our experience actually in the whole transformative change in the aboriginal agenda, that service providers don't have a process in the dialogue at all. We develop employment training programs, housing programs, and health programs. You don't talk to people who are serving people in communities. So if you want to find out how to reach people in those communities, I think you should talk to the people who serve them. And that's been our concern all along in this promised transformative change and policy process.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Loubier, Mr. Hubbard, and then Mr. Martin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Welcome, sir. I have two questions for you. First of all, several years ago, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, more commonly known as the Erasmus-Dussault Commission, was set up. The Commission's report was received with much enthusiasm by First Nation and Inuit communities. There was talk of a 20-year period of strategic planning in order to make restitution to aboriginal communities and subsequently to ensure development. However, First Nation and Inuit communities would be in charge of this development.

Do you feel that in the ensuing years, the government has failed to put in place the mechanisms to ensure that this planning in fact does take place over the next 20 years, that self-government becomes a reality for a growing number of aboriginal peoples and that more successful projects are carried out, like the ones achieved by aboriginal peoples for whom self-government is a reality? In other words, is the government acting on a case-by-case basis, rather that according to an overall plan designed to meet the objectives set out in the Royal Commission report?

[*English*]

Mr. Bob Watts: Thank you for the question.

My observation, and we've talked about the royal commission, and I'm sure it's referenced in our submission.... As you say, sir, the royal commission called for a 20-year plan. My sense is that people were shocked at the notion that folks had planned on more than an annual basis, and RCAP laid out a budget for the plan too. I think folks were shocked at the idea that people should budget over a number of years. We've been trapped. It talks about all aboriginal people, but first nations people in particular have been trapped in an annual planning cycle, both in terms of money and in terms of policy planning.

Our sense is that up until last year there hadn't been much work done at all in terms of looking at the implementation of RCAP. There were a few things done that have started to bear fruit with respect to the legacy of residential schools, but in terms of looking at our communities and developing holistic plans, capital plans, and economic plans that really look at how to develop a future, there's been no joint effort and no money provided to encourage that to happen. Therefore, it hasn't happened. We've been stuck in a one year at a time planning cycle. It's been one of the core recommendations in all of our pre-budget submissions over the last number of years; that is, to encourage government and ourselves to get out of that trap. We can't plan for the future just one fiscal year at a time. We have to engage on a larger planning scale.

The national chief has tried to encourage the Government of Canada and all governments within Canada to engage with us on a ten-year plan to reduce the gap in the human development index. It would be great to have your support as a committee on that plan.

● (1025)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Two years ago, your Chief, Phil Fontaine and your Quebec and Labrador representative Ghislain Picard came to Ottawa to talk about the housing situation of aboriginal peoples. We also heard from Inuit officials on the same subject. The situation is truly catastrophic.

My colleague Pat Martin and I had on opportunity, when we both served on the Aboriginal Affairs committee, to visit communities in Quebec where mould in houses was a very serious problem.

In your opinion, after Chief Fontaine and Mr. Picard sounded the alarm, did the federal government react and free up significant sums of money to address these health concerns?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Jock: One of the things we've included in our submission is a little bit of a scorecard about exactly those kinds of requests and a little bit of where we are. In there in particular it talks about the need and the allocation. My recollection of the housing request is that it was $5.1 billion, which would completely eliminate the housing disparity. The allocation last year was $295 million over five years. It's our hope that the upcoming first ministers meeting will yield substantial investments. It's also our hope that there a significant part of the "Layton budget addendum" will also be attributed to first nations housing. We're hopeful on those, but we're really anxious to see that these become reality.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kusugak.

Mr. Jose Kusugak: Thank you, sir.

I want to paint the reality behind the housing allocations for aboriginal people. The Nunavut allotment from those millions was, like, $200,000. I talked about the transportation and that earlier; that doesn't build one good house, really. It builds one reasonable house for the whole region. The Northwest Territories government, for Inuit housing, actually had to refuse theirs, because they couldn't build one house with their allocation.

This is the reality of how it's divvied up. When it's just given to aboriginal people as a mass, the allotment for the Inuit is so insignificant that they can't really build with their allotment the necessary houses.

You'd asked some questions about the royal commission. When the Prime Minister said that there will be an Inuit secretariat, last November we finally signed a partnership agreement to deal specifically with Inuit issues, policies, and so on in the Arctic. Meanwhile, in the fisheries department, for example, the minister developed their own Arctic Ocean strategy without involving Inuit, when the partnership accord said they shall involve Inuit.

As we know, there are many issues in the Arctic—education, housing, health—and when Inuit are not involved, really nothing gets done. It's such a waste of taxpayers' money, money that's been hard earned by Canadians like you and like us. When nothing happens like that, it's a total waste of all our great work in this country.

So I just wanted to try to stress that there are real differences between southern aboriginal peoples and the Arctic aboriginal peoples in these kinds of allotments.

● (1030)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kusugak.

Mr. Loubier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Loubier: Mr. Kusugak, you mentioned the cost of basic foodstuffs. You noted that the cost of two litres of milk was almost twice that charged down south.

Do you have any statistics on the average family income of Inuit families in the 53 villages you spoke of earlier? It would be interesting to draw comparisons, using the cost of the average grocery basket, to see how such prices impact families.

[*English*]

Mr. Jose Kusugak: Fortunately...and this is just because of the way things have been. On my way here, I saw at least two homeless people. Or I assume they were homeless; they were sitting there with cups in front of them for us to be able to put a little bit of money in so that they could eat and so on. In the wintertime here in Ottawa, I see people sleeping on the streets in front of heat vents and so on. In the Arctic, you can't do that. There are homeless people, but somebody has to take them in.

So out of the goodness of their hearts they take them in, which creates a very unhealthy situation if they are mentally disturbed or have communicable diseases and so on. In that same way, to deal with the really high costs, they have to share even their meagre wages. There are not that many jobs. The government is one of the biggest employers in the Arctic, whether it's the Nunavut government, the provincial government, and so on. That's why the Inuit wanted to go the land claims route, to be able to start exploration in the Arctic, the non-renewable stuff and so on.

The Chair: But the question was more geared to whether there's a statistic in terms of the average income from the 53 communities that—

Mr. Jose Kusugak: I would imagine that would be anywhere from $40,000, or maybe...but that would be an average amount. For many years, if you were from the south and you went to the Arctic, there was a subsidy for you to be able to deal with the prices, but it didn't apply to the aboriginal people. Maybe it does now, as some kind of equitable budget. There is no way of gauging it.

The Chair: Thank you. We have to get going here.

I don't mean to cut you off, but I'm running short here.

Mr. Hubbard, Mr. Martin, Mr. Pallister, and then Mr. Bell.

Mr. Charles Hubbard (Miramichi, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was going to start with the north, but I'll switch to the friendship centres first and get back to Mr. Kusugak later.

In terms of the friendship centres we talk about funding, and we talk about advocacy and your programs. Mr. Chair, we look at the fact that today about more than half of our first nations people live off reserve.

In terms of your advocacy programs, do you see progress being made in terms of what you're able to lever from other departments and other government agencies, both provincial and federal? Is this being adequately addressed in terms of the various groups, in terms of what you call your friendship centres, which are mainly urban-based organizations?

● (1035)

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: I think the good news is we have nowhere to go but up. I think the unfortunate reality is that whether it's human resources and skills development, the unemployment and training programs, or housing, when they do homelessness and housing programs, or your health blueprint, we aren't included at all.

There is a small move afoot I think from the AFN to address some of those issues in some other groups. But the reality is, very little voice has been given to these issues. If you look at the Canada aboriginal peoples round table process, urban wasn't addressed. It was supposed to be a lens that was supposed to cut across all the themes. The reality is that urban got dropped in every single theme.

We were invited to four of the seven follow-up sectoral sessions, where, as Canada's largest urban aboriginal service provider, we were provided an opportunity to consult on how the Métis nation should develop their housing stock, on how the Métis nation should define accountability, and on how the Métis nation should develop lifelong learning programs.

A historic opportunity was lost to say, who serves aboriginal people? What level of government is responsible for funding their housing programs, employment and training programs, or the role of the political groups versus the service delivery groups in people in urban communities? A tremendous opportunity was lost.

So no, sir, there's been no movement whatsoever to deal with those issues.

Mr. Charles Hubbard: Within your funding, do you have enough person years to have people aggressively looking at some of these other programs that could help your people? You talk about administrative costs and having good people to assist, to investigate, and to help negotiations. This is one of your problems back at the friendship centres.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Yes, sir, I think we need a dance partner. Quite frankly, we don't have the money to do the job we should be doing, but we need a receptive host as well.

Mr. Charles Hubbard: Moving off now to the north again, Mr. Kusugak, in terms of the transportation, is there any suggestion...? I think most people understand that you have the summer period when you can move things in by boat and you have the winter period when you can get over the tundra with certain types of equipment. Flying in is the big expensive part.

In terms of all of this, is there any suggestion...? You mention that down here I drive on a government road, while up there you don't have those roads. But somebody is paying for that government road and I'm benefiting from it. How could you suggest that people of the north might get special consideration or special help in terms of those transportation factors, which are so important in the costs of all these commodities?

Mr. Jose Kusugak: One of the things that really drives up the prices is that there's actually a taxation on cargo.

That sheet of plywood I was talking about, by the time it gets from here to Inukjuak at $22, the GST alone is $21. So it's about the same cost of the original piece of plywood. That has a lot to do with the taxation of cargo in the Arctic.

There's also a food-mail program that the government was trying out, and it seemed to work really well, but that program hasn't come to full fruition yet.

I think there are international examples of rural, hard-to-get-to places that are exempt from federal taxes and so on. There are certain ways that the federal government in Canada, I think—I'm sure—can use examples from other countries to apply those kinds of things to the Arctic.

When the high gas price down south happened, Canada's complete unity was against that high cost of gas. This is a daily occurrence for all goods in the Arctic, and that's why we come to you, to realize that a little.

Mr. Charles Hubbard: With the first nations communities we talk about the infrastructure and we talk about having adequate water supply, and of dealing with all those necessities. I know there has been considerable money put into that program, but I guess there never is quite enough, because we have a number of first nations that still have contaminated water. And we talk about housing. There is money going in, but never quite enough to meet all the needs.

My question has to do with how the department allocates that money. We have some first nations that do extremely well economically, that are really outstanding in terms of their organization responsibility and the economic basis on which they are created, but others have great difficulties in terms of all those factors, which are missing.

Do you feel the department adequately addresses the needs of the communities on the basis of their actual need? I guess when someone talks about one house per community, it doesn't.... Do those who have the greatest difficulty get five houses, whereas others get one or two? Is it being adequately divided in terms of the needs of the 600 first nations communities?

● (1040)

Mr. Richard Jock: I'll take a brief stab at that, and I'll invite my colleague to add to it.

Part of what happens is where communities experience problems. Some of these communities that are most in need then actually go under what's called third-party management. This actually makes those communities ineligible for some of those allocations, especially where there's any kind of matching resources or any kind of resources needed from the community, such as ministerial guarantees or community guarantees to build those houses. There is not a process by which the capacity issues get dealt with in a way that's really constructive, planned, and long term. Essentially the communities that have the worst circumstances get worse, or at least they have no prospect of being able to improve.

Mr. Charles Hubbard: I'd like to point out to members of the committee that in terms of first nations housing, it's always a matter of paying the complete cost of a home in the year in which it is constructed. So this is a limitation for most first nations peoples. They can't adequately address their housing over a 20- or 25-year period.

Could you expand on that? I could be a little wrong, but I think I'm right in terms of most groups.

Mr. Watts talked about the idea of planning. Planning and the development of housing for all of us is a long-term program.

Mr. Jock, could you indicate to our committee the problems your people have in this area?

Mr. Richard Jock: You've put your finger on part of it. One is planning, and it's also knowing what the allocations will be for the next year. As an example, the $290 million that we referred to that was allocated in last year's budget has not been approved yet. I understand there is a possibility this will not be approved even before the end of this fiscal year. So it really puts the communities behind the eight ball. Some of our communities are in the same context as Inuit communities in terms of winter roads and so on, so those communities obviously won't be able to build houses if they're allocated money after now. Similarly, having actual allocations made in September or October puts communities at great risk. It increases the cost per unit due to winter construction.

Essentially I would agree with your comment that without a planned set of allocations and some stability in that, it really does work against the best interests of first nations.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jock.

Thank you, Mr. Hubbard.

Mr. Martin, Mr. Pallister, and Mr. Bell.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of the witnesses.

I'm only a guest on this committee. I'm substituting for my colleague. But I noticed that the theme of the pre-budget consultations is productivity. As a socialist, I've always been frustrated that productivity seems to be measured in corporate profits, etc.; increases in productivity for Canada haven't really been focused on elevating the standard of living conditions for the general population—never mind the aboriginal population, where that poverty gap exists.

You made a point that you've essentially put this out as a challenge for the first ministers meeting—in the next decade, are we willing as a nation to address that gap, to address the appalling social conditions—which I believe to be Canada's greatest shame. Will they make this an urgent national priority? The argument could be made that if we're interested in the nation's productivity, how does it benefit us to have this permanent underclass that's not fully participating, not firing on all cylinders?

I say that just to preface the question I have. This spring the NDP played a role in negotiating what we called the better balanced budget by redirecting what would have been spent on corporate profits toward what we consider social urgencies, and we did specifically cite some of that spending for aboriginal spending, in a loose context.

Let's look at the housing budget specifically. We negotiated $1.6 billion overall, and we said specifically—and it was agreed upon by Joe Fontana—that one-third of that should be dedicated to aboriginal housing in its broadest sense. Our fear then was, what if it's just going to substitute for other spending that would have otherwise taken place? Are we being snookered here? So I went to the Minister of Indian Affairs and asked him if they were going to play tricks with this. No, no, no, he swore. He committed that it would be in addition to any other spending the department was going to do.

You've made reference to not knowing if this $290 million is even cleared yet. Is it a concern of yours that at the first ministers meeting the money they announce might be the money that Jack Layton negotiated in the spring, instead of new money? Is that a concern of yours?

● (1045)

Mr. Bob Watts: That is a concern. We've heard several of the same promises that you've heard, Mr. Martin, in terms of it not being substituted for what otherwise would have been spent or for new announcements. So we're expecting that the government will live up to its word, that what we've been calling the Layton deal will be in addition to both new money announcements through the first ministers meeting and the budget allocation from the last budget, which should be out there now.

Mr. Pat Martin: I think for the record we should make it abundantly clear that this House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance expects any spending announced by the first ministers to be in addition to what was already agreed to in the Layton deal, if you want to call it that, the NDP-Liberal budget. We will not accept or tolerate anything else. We'll consider it a breach of contract, if you will, if they try to use the NDP money to meet their commitments that they promised in November. That should be clear.

Mr. Kusugak, did you want to add to that?

Mr. Jose Kusugak: I wanted to say that there has been no social housing built at all in Inuit communities since 1993. That's one thing.

The other thing is I hear the Prime Minister saying that we have to become equal with other Canadians in the next little while, whereas in the estimates book of Indian Affairs and Northern Development it actually says that the aboriginal people will be on an equal footing with other Canadians in two generations. That's quoting it from this year's book.

Mr. Pat Martin: Two generations.

Mr. Jose Kusugak: Two generations is 50 years—

Mr. Pat Martin: It's 66 years, I think.

Mr. Jose Kusugak: It's around there, yes—and that's just not acceptable. Sometimes I think the Prime Minister is speaking and the cabinet's ideas are totally different, where the right hand doesn't know what's going on with the left hand.

Mr. Pat Martin: That's a very worrisome matter you've pointed out. I'm disappointed. I'm going to look for that reference. We will challenge that reference, because after eight years of huge surpluses, largely paid for by cutbacks in social spending, if this isn't the right time for social and economic justice for aboriginal people, then when is? When is a convenient time, if you have an eight- or ten- or twelve-billion-dollar surplus and are still ignoring third world conditions in your very backyard? When is the right time, then? That's the question I would ask.

Reference was made to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. When its report was first published, someone asked Ron Irwin, when do you intend to implement the recommendations of the royal commission? His answer was, they've already been implemented; we've already done it. That was in 1996.

Can you point to one recommendation of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that's actually been complied with? I don't know what Ron Irwin was smoking in 1996. Is this gathering dust?

● (1050)

Mr. Bob Watts: In terms of any recommendation being complied with—and complied with I think means it's been responded to, there's been a conclusion to it—I can't think of any. The one that may have the most substantial process in place right now may be residential schools. In terms of the myriad of other recommendations, whether on housing, partnership, education, or health, we're not seeing that.

We're still waiting, for example, for the health escalator to kick in that was talked about last year. Our fear is it's going to be announced as something new at the next first ministers meeting, when it was already agreed to.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Brian Pallister (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, gentlemen, for being here.

I tend to be a believer in self-government, but I know there are deep divisions around the topic, and there's a lot of confusion about the definitions. You also know very well that within your own communities.... We have more diversity among the first nations communities, for example, in Canada than we have among Canadians, in the sense that we have 600-plus different first nations communities out there. The range of views shouldn't be a surprise to anyone.

But one of the obstacles, as I see it, to advancing toward more self-determination and more local control over management, in particular of reserve communities, has been the absence of support and of unanimity of support in those communities themselves, particularly among first nations women. Many women I have had the opportunity to meet, and continue to have the opportunity to meet, who live in first nations communities are very concerned about moving forward on the self-governance agenda because of the absence of certain rights and protections in those communities for them. I share their concerns.

The Senate, as you're aware, just completed last year an examination called *A Hard Bed To Lie In*. I think you have probably had a chance to review it. Some very heartfelt testimony was presented to the Senate committee by a number of people whose opinion matters to all of us. Their expressions of concern were widespread, but centred in part at least on the absence of the rule of law on reserves.

One of the things they highlighted in that report was the issue of matrimonial property rights, and the absence of them. It puzzles me, frankly, that our federal government, and governments before, to be fair, haven't proceeded with consultative discussions with community leaders on this issue more readily. It strikes me as an obstacle to moving on this file that will remain, if it's unaddressed. I can't see Canadians generally, and I can't see first nations women in particular, being strong proponents of self-government as long as the possibility exists that they can become victims in their own communities through an absence of rights and protections for them.

As someone who's a supporter of many of the things you've spoken about today, I ask for your perspectives on this issue. It's one I think will stand continuously as an obstacle to advancement and betterment for aboriginal communities, as long as it continues to be there. Do you share my frustration with the lack of leadership on this issue from our federal government?

Also, to be frank, I've had the chance to meet with now more than 100 community first nations leaders across the country. I see an absence of leadership too—and I understand it in part, because people have a lot to do at the local level, and there are a lot of files to juggle—on the side of the first nations leadership on this file. I want to be frank and honest with you and say that.

Can you share your perspectives on this with me? Can you tell me of progress that's being made? Or can you give some sense of whether there is any reason for optimism that we're actually going to make progress on this file and address the rights of women in first nations communities?

● (1055)

Mr. Bob Watts: First of all, maybe in a bit broader context, when we're talking about self-government, we're talking about it being the key to the successful economic, social, and cultural future for first nations. It's not just about power, but it's about payoffs for individuals and payoffs for Canada in general.

I think you're all familiar with studies—for example, what Harvard University did, what the World Bank did—on the cost of doing nothing, which should be compelling for all of us in terms of moving this issue ahead.

In terms of something as specific as matrimonial property, I think you're right. I think people will be fearful of things like self-government as long as there's a sense that their rights may not be protected. Right now the rights of individuals on the reserve are governed by the Indian Act. It's the Indian Act that set up the matrimonial property problem.

In talking to some of the elders in our community, we heard it was always understood that women owned the land, and then the Indian Act changed that. And people sort of said, “Well, you know, we'll just go along with it, because it probably really doesn't mean anything”. But it meant something. So it's the Indian Act that interfered with that concept in our community.

When the First Nations Land Management Act was passed a couple of years ago, there were specific provisions in that to deal with matrimonial property and the rights of women and men in first nations communities when it came to the breakup of marriage. So there's some good leadership that was displayed by first nations leadership, both men and women, and working with the Native Women's Association of Canada. And we've been doing the same in terms of working with the Native Women's Association of Canada and our own first nations women's council.

This issue is alive. It's not moving terribly fast, but it's alive.

I guess in summary I would say that as communities take steps or leaps and bounds towards self-government, all those issues that talk about how individual rights and how people are protecting the community have to be addressed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Richard Jock: If I could just add a couple of points, certainly Bob has covered—

The Chair: Mr. Jock, just quickly because I'm going to run over.

Mr. Richard Jock: There are two things. Part of the overall approach is creating new institutions and looking at the governance institute and other ways of supporting development, which are key to achieving the kind of balance you're talking about.

The second thing is that we are negotiating the development of an overall citizenship approach with government to reverse some of the situations that we've seen here to create much more of a sense of belonging to those first nations themselves. The AFN itself is undertaking a renewal process, part of which is to show leadership and involvement of women in ways that are direct in the AFN as an organization.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pallister.

Mr. Bell, and then we're going to wrap up.

Mr. Don Bell (North Vancouver, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentations.

I have a question to the three of you, the three groups. It relates to the issue of having first nations men and women take advantage of what we know is the coming workplace shortage of skilled workers. I noticed, Mr. Dinsdale, that you addressed this partly with your friendship centre issue.

I know in the presentation that you presented, the Assembly of First Nations, you have references, and I was referring to that. You make a reference in there. You talk about 51% of registered Indians not graduating from high school. It's 51%, I presume, of the total population at this point. And 30% of the overall registered Indian population is under the age of 15 right now. So that's different from the rate with the Canadian population...oh, the growth rate for the first nations population was five times that for non-aboriginals.

The 50% lacking high school graduation would also account for a lot of the older population in the first nations. What percentage of, let's say, those under 30...and I'm not asking for specifics, but if you understand my thrust, what is the percentage for the younger aboriginals who are coming up, female and male youth? Is that improving? Is high school graduation improving substantially, dramatically, compared to what it was for the older population? What are the obstacles, or what could we be doing specifically to help aboriginals position themselves to meet some of the job shortages we're going to have?

That's for both the friendship centres and the assembly.

And then to Mr. Kusugak, I guess for the Inuit the problem is geographic separation from where a lot of these opportunities are and what it would mean for members of your community to take advantage of them and be able to fill them. That means moving south, which I guess, then, means deserting your communities, where it's less of a problem for other first nations communities that are more integrated across Canada to the work fabric, I guess.

Can we start with Mr. Kusugak and move across?

● (1100)

Mr. Jose Kusugak: Thank you, Mr. Bell.

Education is giving young people choice. Yes, we would like them to be in the Arctic and helping us, if they could, but educating them means to let them be free to go wherever they want to go. We believe in that principle enough to actually start a school from Nunavut here in Ottawa called the Nunavut Sivuniksavut program, to learn how to enroll in universities. They actually take the parliamentary system. They go to Rideau Hall. These are from all the Nunavut communities, in this case. We're getting northern Quebec and other regions showing interest in developing southern schools for a lot of our people.

When the Prime Minister was addressing the world diplomats, he also mentioned that Canada is hiring an awful lot of Asians from overseas. He said that's not necessarily wrong, but we have our own people here in Canada, and if they're educated properly they can take a lot of those jobs. Taking that principle, we have a teacher education program for Inuit. My wife took that course, and I have a son and a daughter-in-law also taking it. It might sound funny, but in the first year they graduated I saw an actual improvement in the Christmas concert that was happening there, because Inuit teachers tend to have higher expectations of the students. I think it is not necessarily planned that way, but there is a certain low expectation of aboriginal people in the schools when they're taught by other Canadians. Mind you, there are excellent teachers from the south who go to the north, but the more Inuit we can teach to teach our people...it does improve education quite a bit.

Mr. Don Bell: Mr. Watts or Mr. Jock.

Mr. Richard Jock: I have just some brief comments.

The survey that was mentioned here is quite a detailed one, and we could actually provide you with some gradients, if you're interested, but in general, 40% is still the rate that we're seeing as the average for completion of high school.

Mr. Don Bell: It's still low, then.

Mr. Richard Jock: It's still a huge gap when you consider that it's over 70% for the general Canadian population.

The other point in here is that having much more locally tailored programs would enable first nations groups in particular to take advantage of the unique opportunities in each province of the country. For example, in Alberta, there would be obvious opportunities for which their local training interests would be best managed within those provincial opportunities. Also, looking at more opportunities for Internet and distance training so that communities that are small or in isolated locations can take advantage of those training opportunities would be a way to bridge some of that gap.

I don't know if Bob has some comments to add.

● (1105)

Mr. Bob Watts: To put it in a bit broader perspective, in terms of the relationship of training to opportunity, our sense is that there is not going to be a pipeline built in Canada, a hydro dam, a few trees cut, or mines developed that don't involve aboriginal people, and in most cases, first nations people. So it really talks about the need for government, corporate Canada, and first nations people to be working together, (a) to create the opportunity, and (b) to identify what the requirements are to fulfil those opportunities in terms of jobs, in terms of training, and in terms of education.

Those opportunities are there. It's going to require all of us working together; otherwise, none of those things is going to happen. Any time you get 100 miles north of the Canada-U.S. border, none of those things is going to happen without the involvement of first nations people. That's just an economic and political reality.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Watts.

Thank you, Mr. Bell.

Mr. Don Bell: What about Mr. Dinsdale?

The Chair: Quickly, please.

Mr. Peter Dinsdale: Thank you.

We say if you're going to address the workplace shortage, you need to do two things.

One is having a meaningful aboriginal human resource development strategy that focuses the policies and process in urban areas where aboriginal people live. Currently, for me, living as a first nations citizen here in Ottawa, if I want to retrain as a carpenter, I have to apply back to my reserve to get access to funds to get employment training programs here in town. It's the same way across the country. The policies that are developed under employment training programs are focused on a first nations reality and not on an urban reality. That has to change if we're going to meaningfully address workplace shortages in urban centres.

Secondly, we need education programs that are focused on reintegrating into the public education system aboriginal people who have already dropped out. We have excellent examples of that in alternative schools across friendship centres in Ontario, which do just that. They take kids who have dropped out of school and provide them with a blanket of services—cultural, healing, health services—to help them get back into the public education system. We need more of that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dinsdale.

Thank you, Mr. Bell.

I want to thank the witnesses for taking time out of their day and presenting briefs.

The meeting is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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