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Chair

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

We have before us Ms. Jacquie Maund, coordinator of Campaign 2000. We will go for up to an hour. Jacquie got a little concerned that I was going to give her so much time, but she'll be speaking for ten minutes.

The procedure is that the committee members will question the witness, and then she'll get some time to wrap up.

Ms. Maund has notes in English only; therefore I'm not distributing them. But if anybody wants to get them from Ms. Maund, they're welcome to.

Material in both languages is being distributed to everyone. We have a publication from Ms. Maund, "Stacking the Deck", in both English and French. We'll keep it as reference material.

With that, Ms. Maund, please start. Thank you.

Ms. Jacquie Maund (Coordinator, Campaign 2000): Good afternoon, everyone. I'm happy to be in Ottawa to speak to you this afternoon. My name is Jacquie Maund, and I'm the coordinator of Ontario Campaign 2000.

Campaign 2000 is a national non-partisan coalition of over 120 organizations across the country that is committed to ending child and family poverty in Canada. Our name comes from the 1989 unanimous House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by 2000. Each year, on the anniversary of that resolution, we produce a report card of the latest statistics on child and family poverty in Canada. Our numbers come from Statistics Canada. The most recent data, from 2004, are the numbers I'll refer to this afternoon. I brought a copy of that report for you.

We use the pre-tax, low-income cutoff from Statistics Canada as the definition of poverty: the pre-tax LICO. Our findings show that poverty rates are consistently higher among female-lone-parent-led families, so we appreciate the opportunity to present to this committee at the hearings on women and economic security.

I would like to start by summarizing some of the findings in this report card on child poverty in Canada. It shows that approximately 1.2 million children are living below the poverty line; that's equivalent to about one in every six children. Over the past 25 years the poverty rate of children in Canada has never dropped below that rate of 1989, which was 15%. We've never actually

achieved a lower rate of child and family poverty since this resolution was made.

Our findings show that economic growth is not solving our child and family poverty problem in Canada. Despite very strong growth over the past few years, Canada's child poverty rate has remained stalled at about 17% or 18%. We see a growing proportion of working poor families. One-third of low-income children in Canada have at least one parent in the workforce working full time, full year, and yet that family is not able to earn sufficient income to lift them above the poverty line. That number is up from 27% twelve years ago, so there's an increase in terms of the number of working poor families.

We also know that public programs make a difference in reducing child and family poverty. If we did not have programs like the Canada child tax benefit and others, our poverty rates in 2004 would have been 24%, not 17%. Government programs do make a difference.

I'd like to talk a bit more about female-lone-parent families, who are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Poverty rates are disproportionately high among female-led families. Approximately 52% of all low-income children in Canada live in families headed by lone mothers. Yet according to the 2001 census, only 15% of all Canadian children are in female-lone-parent-headed families. They are disproportionately high among that segment of our population.

When we talk about poverty, we also want to highlight how poor people are and how far below the poverty level the average family is. What our statistics show is that the average two-parent low-income family would need an additional \$10,400 per year just to bring them up to the poverty level. If we look at female-lone-parent families, they're slightly better off. The average female-lone-parent-led family would need an additional \$9,400 to bring them up to the poverty level. Our numbers indicate that those figures have not changed much since the early nineties. So again, despite strong economic growth, we have not seen much of a reduction in the depth of poverty that these families are living in.

If we look at families receiving social assistance, of the total number of children in those families, 71% are in families headed by lone mothers. That's equivalent to about 339,000 children across the country who are living in female-lone-parent families that are receiving social assistance. The vast majority, over 90%, of those lone-parent families are typically led by women.

• (1540)

I'll move now to some of the reasons behind our high child poverty rate and speak about those, trying to focus a little on the particular issue of female lone parents.

Campaign 2000 talks about two main reasons behind the persistence of a high child and family poverty rate in Canada. Those are first, the weakened social safety net in our country, and second, changes in the labour market over the past couple of decades.

When parents are unable to be in the workforce and are not eligible for employment insurance, social assistance—welfare—becomes the program of last resort. The work of the National Council of Welfare shows that welfare incomes are far below the poverty line. For example, the welfare rates for families with children reach only 55% to 60% of the poverty line.

Despite increased government spending on child benefits, specifically in 1998 with the introduction of the Canada child tax benefit, most families with children have seen little improvement if any in their income situation when they're relying on social assistance. Part of the reason is that social assistance rates have not kept up with inflation and are inadequate, and also that many provinces continue to claw back part of the national child benefit supplement.

Welfare rules stipulate the amount of income recipients are allowed to keep. For example, for female lone parents, typically, if they're able to get child support payments from their spouse, that money is deducted from their social assistance cheques. They're not allowed to keep it.

Employment insurance no longer provides a safety net for the majority of workers who are temporarily unemployed. As of 2004, only about 44% of people who were unemployed were actually receiving employment insurance, compared with 75% ten years ago. Those are some aspects of the weakened social safety net.

Looking at the labour market, we find that despite strong job creation and low unemployment, more and more families are working, but they're not able to get jobs with sufficient pay, benefits, and hours to lift their families above the poverty line. Low wages are part of the reason behind that.

One in every four jobs in Canada pays less than \$10 an hour. If we look only at full-time jobs, one in every six full-time jobs is low-wage work paying less than \$10 an hour. Women are more likely to be found in low-wage jobs than men; 22% of women are in low-paid jobs, compared with 12% of men. Women earn approximately 71% of what men earn for full-time, full-year work.

Increased education does not make up much more of the difference. It comes up to about 74%, I think, if you look only at people with similar education levels.

So low-wage work is part of the reason behind disproportionately high poverty rates.

Then, if we look at the nature of work, non-standard, precarious employment now makes up 37% of all jobs in Canada, compared with 25% in the mid-1970s. When we talk about precarious work

we're talking, for example, about part-time work, temporary work, contract work, and self-employed jobs.

The vast majority of part-time workers, 70%, are women. People who are in contract, temporary, and self-employed jobs are not covered by employment standards legislation, so workers in those jobs are at higher risk of unpaid wages, of wages below the legal minimum, and of unpaid work for statutory holidays and overtime. If we look at who is most typically in those kinds of precarious jobs, it is women, new immigrants, and visible minorities.

Looking at child care, we know from our work that access to affordable, good-quality early learning and child care is a key pathway out of poverty to both enable parents to receive training and get jobs and also to ensure that children's well-being is stimulated in their early years and that they're well prepared for school.

Canada has one of the highest rates of labour force participation by women in the OECD. There are about three million children who have a mother in the paid labour force, yet there are fewer than 800,000 regulated child care spaces in Canada. Those figures are for 2003.

• (1545)

I have a reference to a study—I have left you copies—that looks specifically at lone mothers, where we found that access to subsidized, regulated child care was critical to their ability to obtain and to maintain employment.

I'd like to conclude with five recommendations aimed at the federal level.

One, we should ensure effective child income benefits. The Canada child tax benefit is scheduled to reach its maximum of \$3,243 this July. Campaign 2000 calls for a Canada child tax benefit of \$5,100 per child per year. There needs to be an assurance of no clawbacks at the provincial level.

Two, we call on the federal government to create a system of early learning and child care programs in consultation with the provinces; to come to new bilateral and multilateral agreements that represent the interests of Canadians; and to direct funding to building a national system that's regulated, high-quality, accessible, and affordable.

Three, we want to see encouragement of good jobs at living wages. We call for the federal government to establish a minimum wage of \$10 an hour, indexed to inflation. This, in combination with an improved Canada child tax benefit of \$5,100, would bring, for example, a single mother with one child approximately up to the poverty line. We also call for the federal government to strengthen the Canada Labour Code—as recommended last October by Harry Arthurs, the federal commissioner—and to restore eligibility for employment insurance to address the significant declining coverage.

Four, expand affordable housing. Canada is one of the few countries in the world without a comprehensive affordable housing strategy with permanent funding.

And five, support affordable and accessible post-secondary education and training. We know that the lack of financial assistance for training programs and the lack of access to subsidized training make it very difficult for lone parents, overwhelmingly women, to move off social assistance and get out of the cycle of poverty.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to the first round of questions.

Ms. Minna, seven minutes.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

First of all, thank you.

I've worked with and met with your organization for many years. To be honest, it's hard for me to ask a question, because I agree with what you say. I agree with the solutions. I was very involved when the child benefit was initially established. It was meant to grow over time. I was very involved, with my colleagues, on the agreement that was struck with the provinces in terms of the early education and child care program across this country. And of course we were very busy building towards a housing strategy and so on, which is really no longer there.

I agree with you on the \$5,100, no question. I believe our leader, Mr. Dion, has already made it public that this is something he would do. But he didn't say \$5,100, he said \$5,000. He's already made a commitment to reinstate or to establish national early learning and child care. I know he's made a commitment to reinstate the Government of Canada's federal \$10 minimum wage. While it doesn't necessarily affect the provinces directly, because we don't have jurisdiction, it does set the bar at where I think we need it to be. That needs to be there.

Your other points are all well taken. I want to ask you a couple of other questions that may flow out of some of this. As I said, I don't quibble with any of this.

As to restoring the EI, extending it to self-employed, I think this is important. You could tell me some more about that. I don't know if you've read the pink book we had; maybe I'll send you a copy.

If we were to raise the personal exemption to \$10,000 or \$15,000—let's say \$10,000 initially—whereby the taxes aren't

actually paid since it's a personal exemption, how far would that go to assisting? That's in addition to the things you've mentioned. For me there are a number of things at the core of it—the child benefit, early learning and child care, and a national housing program, at the very minimum. Those three are fundamentally important. Of course, the fourth is the wage increase.

In terms of the last two budgets, could you tell us about the measures in them, about where they help and where they don't? How do they fit into this picture, into the recommendations you've made to us today? And if things need to be changed, where do they need to be changed?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Just to comment on your comment in terms of raising the tax exemption level, I would say the recommendations we've made would certainly be a higher priority for us than raising the exemption level, because many low-income people don't pay taxes because they don't earn enough money to pay taxes. A tax break, a tax cut, doesn't really benefit them.

Hon. Maria Minna: I agree with you. I just wanted to get a handle on that. Okay.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: That would be my comment on that.

Hon. Maria Minna: What about the tax credit of the last—

Ms. Jacquie Maund: The working income tax benefit?

Hon. Maria Minna: No, the tax credit, which is \$2,000, but it's \$310. A certain number of families missed out altogether. There's a gap. If you're making \$21,000 as a single mom, you don't fit under the work income supplement because it maxes at \$12,000. You don't receive the \$310 either because you're below that. This is the group I think you're talking about. I'm going by the Caledon Institute research, which shows it leaves a family or a woman, especially a single mom making between \$22,000 and \$12,000, with absolutely nothing coming in.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I think you've answered the question. Caledon has done the more detailed analysis on that gap, so I would just defer to their work and reiterate that the recommendations we make would be our highest priority, certainly.

• (1555)

Hon. Maria Minna: What would you do with the \$1,200 that was given in the previous budget? It's called universal child care, but it really isn't. You and I know it's an income support. My suggestion is to add it to the base of the child benefit. I don't know. What would you do with that?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: It could be. Ideally, we would like the moneys that are being spent on that program to be directed to build a universal, accessible, affordable, national child care system. We're talking about child care. Let's build the spaces, because you don't get a space with a piece of money; you're still on the waiting list.

That would be our focus there. Ideally, we would like to see that happen, plus the Canada child tax benefit be increased to \$5,100. The universal child care allowance, of course, is only for children under six, and it's not income dependent. Building up the Canada child tax benefit we think is a fairer way to do it. It's an income-tested benefit and it goes to all parents with children under 18.

Hon. Maria Minna: To what extent is your organization concerned about whether the agreement with the provinces on a national child care program be entirely for not-for-profit or allow flexibility?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: From our perspective, it's very important that it be for not-for-profit child care—regulated, high-quality, not-for-profit child care, and that there would certainly be strings attached to that federal money that flows to the provinces.

Hon. Maria Minna: My only other question—I'm probably running out of time very quickly.... I obviously support, and we have supported, a national child care program. I call it an early education and early development program. One of the things I've suggested.... Ontario was calling it the best start program, and they were beginning to establish it in the schools as part of a continuum of early development, as well as a child care program, as well as a drop-in for stay-at-home moms, for early years. Do you see that as being a feasible way of approaching this?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Definitely. When we talk about a universally accessible child care program, so parents have the choice, if they're in the workforce, if they're receiving training, they have the comfort of knowing there's a space there for their child. If they're a stay-at-home parent, but they want their child to benefit from the stimulation of early learning programs, they have the possibility of enrolling their child part-time or whatever.

It's building a system that is of high quality, that is available to all, and that will benefit children. We know that from the studies in the OECD.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Madame Deschamps.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, please allow me to welcome you to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. You spoke to us about child poverty. If there are poor children, then it is logical to assume that there are poor parents as well. Generally speaking, women are more likely to be living in precarious financial circumstances.

Many women are single parents. In 2001, the poverty rate among single mothers under the age of 65 was 42%, compared to 19% for single fathers and 9.5% for married couples with children. It is extremely difficult for single mothers to save money. The problem is even worse among aboriginal single mothers and those who were not born here.

Is the current government doing enough to devise measures or create policies that would enhance their financial security? In providing a taxable universal child care allowance, is the government doing enough to improve the precarious financial situation of a large number of households, including single-parent families?

• (1600)

[English]

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Do I think the universal child care allowance is satisfactory to help parents? No. And I think the example in Quebec shows us that a universally accessible child care system at a very reasonable price has been very successful, both in terms of supporting women moving into the workforce, and generating increased tax revenue that is now being used to help pay for the program. Some specific research on this has come out recently that analyzes the Quebec program in that way.

Our work shows that building a system of child care that's accessible and affordable for all is a much more effective way of supporting parents, particularly low-income mothers, in their search for training and employment. That's in the report I referred to.

[Translation]

I have a copy in French. It means something like "stacking the deck".

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: A universal child care network in Quebec provides children with a system that takes their development into account. There are various programs provided to children in Quebec's child care system: they have a stimulating environment, they learn to socialize, and if they have problems or some type of deficiency because of their home life, these can be more easily detected, etc. I am proud that my children were able to benefit from this system, and I am happy to know that other children are deriving the same benefits today.

As for employment insurance, the current program is rather restrictive. Generally speaking workers have a hard time qualifying for EI because the criteria have been tightened up. The program seems to be even more discriminatory towards women, since they often depend on seasonal work and their employment situation is unstable. Often, they don't have the required number of hours to qualify for EI. According to the statistics, only 33% of women manage to qualify under the current system.

For years now, we have been asking for improvements to the plan to reflect the type of job that is becoming the norm among a greater number of workers. Moreover, a bill is currently before the House, and it will be given third reading this week, but will probably not receive royal assent; in the bill there is a clause relating to self-employed workers. Self-employment is growing, since 16% of the labour force is made up of people who work for themselves.

That is another measure that could improve the financial security of workers, particularly women.

[English]

Ms. Jacquie Maund: What is this bill proposing in terms of self-employment?

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Bill C-269 includes a provision that would allow those who are self-employed to voluntarily contribute to the EI plan with the creation of a system for that purpose.

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds. It would be nice if you didn't ask another question.

• (1605)

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Have you anything to add, Ms. Maund?

[English]

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I think the legislation on labour has not kept up with the changes in the labour market. It's way behind at the provincial level and at the national level. So when the federal commissioner, Harry Arthurs, released his report last October, many of us were very disappointed that it received no press coverage and was not really taken up. So I think there's a lot of material there to still work with to follow through on his recommendations.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Ms. Smith, for seven minutes.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you.

I would just say that I'll share my time with Mr. Stanton, and in the second round we'll share our time just to get our questions in.

Thank you so much for coming today. It was very nice of you to do that, to take your time.

In 1989 there was a promise that child poverty would be eliminated by 2000. I realize this is a very deep problem and it's something that needs to be addressed.

Quite honestly, we have heard from absolutely hundreds and hundreds of parents who are in a very poor situation with young children, and they're very grateful for the \$100 a month that has been allotted to them. And they don't pay tax on that because they're below that level of paying tax. So it has been extremely beneficial to them, particularly when there are very small children. They're also able to use it for anything they choose to use it for. It would be my wish, personally, that we could increase that, because we've had such a great response from very poor families on it.

Seeing that this was a declaration made in November 1989, what do you think, over all this time, were the greatest hindrances? Because when you bring up the stats today, the same old same old did not work, did it? I've looked back at conversations from way back then; I've looked back at committee reports. The same kind of thing was being said.

What has happened now with the new government is that we've tried to attack it in such a way that low-income families have had immediate benefits. It's a start, and we need to do more.

Very practically speaking, what do you think? Why wasn't it successful, since 1989? I mean, why are the stats the way they are today? It's deplorable. Do you have some comments on that?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Sure, I have two comments.

Number one, I think when the promise was made in 1989—and maybe there's someone here who was there then, I don't know—it was said, and there was no plan put in place. So it was a political

statement. There were no targets set. There were no timetables. There was no action plan. There were no commitments behind it.

Subsequently, the Canada child tax benefit was developed in 1998, and we know that actually did have some targets and timetables and money and has really begun to make a difference.

But if you look at what other countries have done, you'll see, for example, the United Kingdom in 1999 made a commitment to address child poverty and set out a very specific 20-year plan, set out a monitoring committee, set up a U.K. low-pay commission. They did a number of things and have been monitoring progress on those targets and are making progress.

We're calling on the Canadian government, and many of us also at a provincial level, to set out a poverty-reduction strategy that includes targets, timetables, and specific investments so that we can track progress over time. That will make a difference.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Mr. Stanton now has a question.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you for joining us this afternoon in our study of the economic security of women.

In the conclusion of your report today, in the recommendations, you outlined five different areas that you'd like to see addressed. Certainly, at a philosophical level, anyway, I don't disagree with any of it.

The one question I would have is whether your organization costed any of this out in terms of what the weight of this would be in the public sector. I just quickly took some references from some of the numbers I do know, and this is a substantial social cost.

• (1610)

Ms. Jacquie Maund: It's a substantial public investment for a substantial public benefit.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Okay.

So from that point of view... I'm taking the view of people I hear from in my riding on a regular basis with concerns about the high levels of taxation. Ultimately this has to be paid for.

Did your organization come at that question in terms of where the taxes should be increased? Where would one move this \$15 billion, \$20 billion a year—whatever the number is—to do what you've recommended here? On whose shoulders would that be placed?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: No doubt there's a cost to this. There's a cost to any government program, obviously, whether we're talking about meeting Kyoto targets or whatever.

Canada has been in a very strong fiscal situation. We've run a surplus for a number of years now. There are various proposals for how that surplus should be used. Should we use it to invest in the future of this country in ensuring the well-being and the future education and health of our children? That would be one way.

Some people are very concerned about continuing tax cuts that, in essence, will reduce that surplus, will reduce our ability to make the investments in the kinds of social programs that are needed to build our social infrastructure.

It's a political decision. Do we continue to give tax cuts and to erode our fiscal ability to make the kinds of investments that, we would argue, we need, as a country, or do we just look at the short term and say people want tax cuts, so we'll give them to them, even though this means that, inevitably, our public services are going to suffer?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I have just a follow-up question on that.

This is now specifically on the child care benefit side of things. You're suggesting something in the range of \$5,100 a year, and specifically for a national day care strategy that would support a—maybe I'm paraphrasing—structure of expanded day care facilities for more access. You mentioned the 800,000-odd spaces that are there now.

What would you say, then, for the people who, for example, are not in proximity or are in a situation in which they cannot access those facilities and/or are working a non-standard work schedule? The traditional not-for-profit institutional day care typically runs from 6:30 in the morning till 6 o'clock at night. Those people on shift work represent a whole sector of the population that can't access that. Where does that leave them?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I just want to clarify. The \$5,100 is the Canada child tax benefit. About 90% of Canadians who have children currently receive the Canada child tax benefit. It's going to reach \$3,200 this summer. We're saying increase it to \$5,100, which would be the approximate additional cost to help raise a child.

One option would be, instead of the \$100 universal child care allowance that is available for everyone who has a child under six, to flow that money to increase the Canada child tax benefit, which is both income-tested and is a non-taxable benefit. So I'm sure for those parents who are currently receiving the \$100 cheque, we would argue that a fairer way would be to increase the Canada child tax benefit. That's one thing.

Secondly, in terms of child care, we're talking about building a national, accessible, affordable child care system. When we say flexible, ideally we're talking about flexibility in terms of hours, because, as you so rightly saw, particularly parents working on shift work do not necessarily have access to it.

We want to talk about increasing the system so that's it available to more people and so that it's a good-quality system, so that parents have the option to use that system. Right now, if you're on a waiting list—many of us have been on a waiting list for many years—it's extremely frustrating. There is no system there that one can rely on.

The Vice-Chair (Mrs. Joy Smith): Ms. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Maund, for the incredible information. It's very useful, and I think it's very important to have this kind of information in the public domain.

I wanted to ask a number of questions. Firstly, your group has been around for about 18 years, and obviously you've been working very hard in that time. I wondered what kind of opportunity you have had to work with governments. We've had a number of them since 1989. Have you had any success in talking to governments; have they been listening; and has there been progress?

• (1615)

Ms. Jacquie Maund: We're a non-partisan organization, so we meet with politicians of all parties and senior bureaucrats, and we have done so a number of times over the years. Our material is publicly available, and we encourage political parties to use it in their platforms and to adopt our policy recommendations.

I haven't worked with them for 18 years, but I know from meetings that have happened in the past that our work has had input. It has been reflected sometimes in throne speeches, in the design of some programs, in terms of the feedback that we provide around programs like the Canada child tax benefit, and on the clawback issue. So I think we have had some input, certainly also around the development of the national child care program and those agreements that were in place. At the end of this fiscal year, there were some discussions there.

While the child poverty rate has not declined, our work does show that government programs do make a difference. In fact, if we did not have the programs that we do, the rate would be around 24%. I can only say that we'll continue our work—both our policy work and our advocacy work—building on the research that we do, in terms of what has worked in other countries in northern Europe that have significantly lower child poverty rates.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Now that you mention it, I was doing some reading, and in the mid-1990s Ireland made a determined effort to tackle its child poverty, poverty in general. At that point in time they had a rate of about 15%; ten years later it's at 6.8%. If you start to look at what's happening in Canada, we're at 19%; and my God, we have failed if it's increasing and not coming down.

In the reading, I discovered that they put together a ten-year plan, including a budget, dedicated money that looked at income, education, health, housing, affordable housing, and targeted women, children, seniors, and disabled people, including urban and rural dwellers. They made sure there was an inclusion there.

The responsibility for this was placed firmly on the Prime Minister, who oversaw a cabinet committee whose job it was to work for social inclusion, and they developed what they called the 20% plan. The 20% plan basically said that 20% of all new housing would be set aside for affordable housing, 20% of placements in colleges would go to needy young people, 20% of all new jobs would be directed toward the poor, and that their plan would reduce the number of persons on welfare by 20%. The bottom line was that they did have this impact.

Is this something for Canada? Is this something—it obviously works—that we should be importing here?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Definitely, and I'd refer again to the concept of a poverty reduction strategy that has targets, timetables, and investments. Ireland has done it, the United Kingdom has done it; both of those cases are well documented.

Here in Canada, Quebec has a bill that is law now, a poverty reduction law, since 2004. Newfoundland, one of the poorest provinces in the country, after a year's worth of consultation, in June 2006 announced their poverty reduction strategy. The province of Nova Scotia now has an all-party commission looking at it.

Definitely, it's time for the national government to step up to the plate, work with the provinces and develop a national poverty reduction strategy. Our children deserve it.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: There's been a great deal of talk about the cost. Everybody is worried about the cost of doing it. I wondered if you could comment on the cost of not doing this.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Canada is at its economic peak right now. There's an amazing report called *Growing Concerns: Canadian Attitudes Toward Income Inequality*, published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. We have the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years. We have the highest corporate profits in 30 years. We are in a strong fiscal position, one of the strongest in the OECD countries. If we cannot afford to invest in reducing child and family poverty in this country now, when will we ever be able to?

The cost of not doing it, the cost of children growing up in poverty—there are numerous studies that show the impact on health, in terms of increased obesity, increased diabetes, increased asthma, numerous studies. They're at risk for lower performance in school, and then as adults, at higher risk for more periods of unemployment and low pay. So if you're talking about the longer-term cost in terms of health, education, criminal justice, social services, it's there.

In Campaign 2000, we can't see what we're waiting for. Obviously, the research is there both in terms of the cost of not doing anything, in terms of what needs to be done and what we can afford to do. Research has costed out what needs to be done. We would say, let's do it. If it took us since 1989 to get this far, what are we waiting for now?

•(1620)

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Okay, I'll try to be very quick.

We've had a number of folks in here talking about things that need to happen. You made some reference to unemployment insurance or employment insurance, which doesn't reach women in their greatest

need. Part of the problem is that for many women, they just don't have the number of hours in, particularly if this is the second baby and they haven't managed to get enough work time in between the arrival of the first and the arrival of the second.

One of the recommendations was that there be a reach-back, whereby women could go back to a period of three to five years prior to the birth.

The Chair: Question.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Is that a good idea?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I can't comment in detail on this proposal, but I think any modifications or updating of employment insurance to increase the eligibility and to ensure that women who are not eligible for reasons of having been out of the workforce temporarily for child-bearing or child-rearing obviously would benefit women and would benefit their families in the longer term, in terms of their ability to build up pensionable earnings, as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to the second round, and it's five minutes.

Mr. Pearson.

Mr. Glen Pearson (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I was here in 1989 on the evening they passed the child poverty package that was introduced by Mr. Broadbent. I wasn't here as a member of Parliament; I was here as a director of a food bank. I still am the director of the food bank in London.

There's great frustration that from the very beginning we as food banks across the country have tried to work, along with Campaign 2000, once it got going, to tackle this problem of child poverty. It continues to be a real issue for us.

At my food bank, for instance, we help 2,600 families a month directly and another 2,600 families through other agencies that we feed. They are grateful for having \$100 a month, as the package gets out there, but it's not what they're looking for. They need something more substantial.

I'm not bringing that up to be partisan in any way. What I'm trying to say is that we keep coming up with short-term measures as the way to incentivize things, and that doesn't work.

I thought Mr. Stanton asked a good question when he asked, "did you cost it out", and "how much will it be". I thought Ms. Mathysen's was better: "What would the cost be if we didn't do it?"

I know, because I used to live there, that Ireland went through a phase where they did cost it out. I think it would be helpful for us as a committee, if you have any way of compiling those things, for you to get those things to us. We have to sell to people that this is what women are facing in poverty, especially single mothers, and it's very necessary that we do it.

I want to know whether you think it's possible. You say there are numerous studies out there, or pieces that have been done about costing. Is it possible to pull all that together in one package, or has it been done—for the cost of not doing it?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I don't think it's in one package. The National Council of Welfare did a report on the cost of poverty a few years ago. There are bits and pieces. There's a piece that the London Children's Aid Society did on costs associated with increased children in child welfare. So there are bits and pieces. I haven't seen something that puts it all together.

Mr. Glen Pearson: I think sending anything in our direction that has that would help us. I think it would be a help, because it helped Ireland to sell it.

The other point I have is about targets. I thought that was really significant. They are not what we had at the beginning. We've been talking about child poverty for 20 years, and nothing has come of it.

Would you give us a target to suggest, as to how to start?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Sure. It would be a 25% reduction in the child poverty rate in five years, 50% in ten years.

Mr. Glen Pearson: Thank you.

My final question is in the area of jurisdiction. As food banks, we have provincial associations. We have also a federal association, the Canadian Association of Food Banks. We find, when we're trying to deal with the child poverty file, that it's so difficult in jurisdictional terms. You have the federal government doing its thing and then you have provincial governments that come in and out, depending on who the administration is.

In your view, in light of what Ontario has done in its recent budget, do you see signs of hope at the provincial level, or does it worry you a bit that each province is coming up with its own solution, one not necessarily harmonized with the federal plan?

• (1625)

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I think there's an opportunity to harmonize. I think the provinces maybe are moving faster than the federal government at this point, but I think there's an opportunity to harmonize.

What we've talked about here are steps that we think can be taken at the federal level. We have provincial partners. I'm the Ontario coordinator, so I also have recommendations for what the provincial government in Ontario could do.

Campaign 2000 is currently working on what the components of a national poverty reduction strategy might be. We're beginning to flesh out how the federal and provincial governments might work together to undertake something like this.

Mr. Glen Pearson: That would be helpful.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: You have one more minute, if you want to spend it.

Mr. Glen Pearson: No. I know others want....

The Chair: Okay. Ms. Minna was about to, but I guess I passed the chance.

I'll come back to you another time.

Ms. Davidson and Ms. Grewal, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and I am sharing my time, so I'll be quick, with about three questions.

Certainly this is a huge issue, and I think you can see that everybody around the table agrees that it is. I think we also know there has been a lot of talk about it over the past however many years—twenty-some years—and we still see disturbing comments such as on the handout you gave us, “How's Canada doing in meeting the resolution? No Progress.” Those are things we shouldn't have to be looking at.

As governments over the past numbers of years, we should have been able to put something in so that this statement would be incorrect. Now is the time when we need to get something done, so let's hope the will is there to do it.

I have just a couple of questions. You base your statement and your statistics on the poverty line. What is the poverty line?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: Well, what we use is the Statistics Canada low-income cut-off. We use the pre-tax low-income cut-off.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: And what is that?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: It varies by the size of the family and the size of the community. I'll give you an example. I'll use 2004, because the data I used were from 2004, so it's two years behind.

Say you are looking at one mother with one child in a large city with a population of 500,000. If her before-tax earnings were \$25,319, she would be considered living below the low-income cut-off, which is the de facto poverty line that's been in use for about fifty years.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Is everybody using the same thing? I've asked this question before, and people have told me that there is no poverty line now; it's a moving target, depending on.... Nobody can give.... You're the first person who's ever given me an answer with a figure.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: There are different measures of poverty. There's the low-income cut-off, which StatsCan defines pre-tax and post-tax. There's also what Europe uses and how the OECD does their reports that track different countries in terms of how they're doing. They use the low-income measure, which is 50% of median income. So they use LIM.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: I was interested in Canada, what we were using.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: There's LICO in Canada or there's what's called the “market basket measure”, which HRSDC, I think, started developing a few years ago. We're a few years behind. It hasn't been developed consistently. So certainly for our purposes, if we're looking historically, we always use the LICO because we can get that data every single year.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Do most organizations use that? Are most of the data based on that?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I would say so, but I can't speak on behalf of all organizations. I would just say that if you're tracking the number over time, LICO is always available every year from Statistics Canada, so that's the one we use.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Okay.

Very quickly, in terms of the existing provincial plans, is there a similarity in them at all? You had said they probably could be harmonized, but is there a similarity in them now, or are they very different?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: We're looking at Quebec and Newfoundland. Quebec is a little different from other provinces, to begin with. They have their own child benefit. They're way ahead in terms of setting up a child care plan. So they've had a good start. Newfoundland...there are similarities. They look at housing. They look at child care. They look at income support. There are similarities there, yes.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Nina.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much for coming here to speak with us today.

Denmark, Finland, and Norway are among the most wealthy nations, but they have the lowest rate of child poverty, and I assume the lowest rate of female poverty as well. So what is their secret? I want to know if you have some comments on that. Is it simply higher government spending, or is there another explanation for their success?

• (1630)

Ms. Jacquie Maund: The countries that have the lowest child poverty rates, below 5%, are Scandinavian countries. I can't describe their programs in detail. I can certainly refer you to a UNICEF report called *Child Poverty in Rich Countries 2005*.

Basically my understanding is that they have a number of supports for families in terms of income support and generous parental maternity leave support. So it's certainly programs that support families. They also have a much stronger system of affordable housing that families can access. Those are the basic things. They also have better labour markets in terms of better-paying jobs. So they have the good-quality jobs plus the social investments and programs that support families.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: I see.

And in Canada, how much...?

The Chair: That's it.

Madame Demers, *pour cinq minutes*.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for joining us, Ms. Maund.

I am rather annoyed. I don't know where, as a society and as human beings, we got off on the wrong track. We now have a third generation of people living on social assistance. It is more lucrative for people to stay home than it is for them to go to work. The only employment available is either part-time or unstable. Everyone who works contributes to EI, but when layoffs occur, people aren't eligible for benefits.

So a woman with children is better off saying home and living on social assistance than finding fulfilment by working. It makes no sense. I imagine you have given some thought to ways that we could work together to reduce child poverty, of course, but we must also help the parent.

In your report, you state that little progress has been made to eliminate child poverty. Nevertheless, a number of positives or strengths are listed, including a strong financial position to make needed investments—a projected federal surplus of over \$13.2 billion for 2005-06. The surplus was actually greater than that. Also, other provinces have already committed to provincial poverty reduction strategies. As for the weaknesses, you state that there is insufficient political will and leadership to establish a plan with targets and timetables, federal-provincial inter-jurisdictional issues can complicate implementation, and competing/shifting political priorities compromise progress.

Your group has been around for 18 years now. I am sure that you have given some thought to implementing a strategy and timetables that are almost achievable, because, as legislators, we don't seem to be clever enough to do it ourselves. It is a hot topic one year, and completely forgotten the next. This is something that must be addressed on a ongoing basis, rather than sporadically.

Can you provide us with a plan that we could then bring forward? In view of what Irene and Mr. Pearson have said, and what they have done elsewhere, I think we could benefit from your expertise in order to help our children find a way out of this misery that should not be occurring in 2007.

[English]

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I'm sounding repetitive, but I guess I would just refer again to the success that other countries, Ireland and the United Kingdom, are having by setting out a plan, as you say, and not just a one-year proposal, but a long-term plan that is monitored, that is tracked.

In the United Kingdom they did not have a minimum wage, but they decided to set one as part of their child poverty reduction plan. They set up what's called the U.K. Low Pay Commission and they established a minimum wage, and it was the key part of their strategy to reduce poverty. Because they were tracking poverty and it wasn't going down as fast as they wanted, they realized they had to raise their minimum wage in order to achieve their poverty reduction targets. It's that kind of rigour that I think is required in order to achieve success.

In Newfoundland, I'm told that there is a minister who's responsible for implementing their poverty reduction strategy and then there are ministers in the other key ministries. They meet on a regular basis, this across-cabinet committee. So all of their programs are aligned in terms of continuing to monitor to achieve their strategy so that it's not just one part of the government that's responsible, it's a concerted package.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Do you think the government should legislate to prevent companies from laying off employees in order to improve their bottom line? In the past, when a company felt that it wasn't making enough money, it would lay off some of its employees. Today, people are being laid off when the company doesn't generate enough dividends for its shareholders. That type of thing should not be allowed. Do you think that the government should legislate to prevent that type of thing from happening?

[English]

Ms. Jacquie Maund: It has not been a policy that we've advocated. We're looking more at the big picture in terms of what is happening to the changing workforce and what protections can be put in place for precarious workers, which is a big discussion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Demers, she's not an economist. Let's be kind to her.

It's okay. You were seeking an opinion.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Mathysen for five minutes, and then I'll give Ms. Minna one minute.

She had some suggestions for you, Ms. Davidson. She had information for you.

Ms. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you very much.

Do we need proactive pay equity legislation in this country?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I can give my personal opinion, but—

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Yes, that would be wonderful.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I would say yes, but Campaign 2000 has not taken a specific position on that issue. As a representative of Campaign 2000, I can only really speak to issues that we've written on and stated.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Okay, but obviously you've done some thinking. Would it address some of the issues we've talked about in terms of women's poverty?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: The findings are that women earn—if you look at comparable jobs in terms of education—74% of what men are earning. So pay equity might be one way to address that.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: You made reference to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. It's interesting that in their article they talked about the 2004 earnings of the richest 10% of Canadians being now 82 times those of the poorest 10%, and that is nearly three

times as much as it was in 1976. So we have these horrific statistics and we look at them.

Have you given much thought to the prosperity gap as a result of systemic discrimination, the root causes of this? Where does it come from? Why are women in particular so behind the eight ball?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I can't specifically address that, just because our work focuses more on child and family poverty, but you'll see in the report card that we do have some information on inequality in terms of how the poorest 10% of families are doing versus the richest 10%, and that is also captured in the *Growing Gap, Growing Concerns* report.

Just going back to this issue of the cost, there are numerous sociological studies that look at that. If you have growing inequality in a society during a time of great economic boom, which is what we have, and if you have numbers.... These are true numbers from the last census: 47% of all new-immigrant children, children in families who have arrived in the past five years, live in poverty, and you'll see in the report card aboriginal poverty numbers. So with poverty numbers are disproportionately high among certain sectors of our society, there is a great risk at some point for social instability. A very vivid example of that, not to sound too extreme, is the race riots that were seen in Paris a couple of years ago, where new immigrants were obviously being very socially excluded and marginalized, and it erupts.

So again, if we're talking about costs and we're talking about investment, these are investments that need to be made in order to make a difference.

• (1640)

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: We've been talking a great deal about the connection between economic disparity and some of the violence that we see in our communities. Has Campaign 2000 looked at all at the connection between women's poverty and the violence that many of them face, the violence they're subjected to or are vulnerable to?

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I can only speak anecdotally in terms of a number of the women we work with who are on social assistance, who are in that situation because they've left abusive relationships. They left because it was safer for their children to get out of that relationship than to continue. Actually, they're in a situation where they're living in poverty because they left an abusive relationship and that's what they decided was better for their family.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: The lack of affordable housing, child care, and the support systems that are so desperately needed condemned them to stay either in poverty or in a situation of abuse.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: That's right.

The Chair: Do you have one more quick one?

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Yes, very quickly, I wondered if you've had a chance to look at Bill C-303, the Early Learning and Child Care Act, which Olivia Chow and Denise Savoie put forward. One of the things about it is that it makes a child care system empowered by legislation. It is secured in legislation. I wonder if you could comment on that.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: We feel that legislation establishing a national child care system is an important part of what we are proposing. The programs flow from the legislation, and the legislation establishes the principles.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Stanton for one minute.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to follow up on the conversations. I respect the positions that have been put forward, but I think the characterization that we're heading for this massive social disconnect if this is not addressed.... We have to keep in mind that in fact right from one of the first meetings we held on this topic we heard from department officials that in fact the incidence of poverty in Canada continues to decline. There have been tremendous strides made in the last 20 to 25 years.

Among women in particular, the incidence of poverty was 16.5% in 1997, and by 2004 it was down to 11.7%. The suite of programs that the Canadian government provides and has provided and continues to build on continues to keep that incidence of poverty going down. I don't mean to belittle it, but I think to suggest that somehow we're headed to some crisis might perhaps be overstating it.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I would point to the graph on the first page of our presentation where we actually present the poverty rates using the before-tax low-income poverty number, which is the one we use. What the department people have probably told you is the after-tax poverty number. If you look at that, it's 12.8%. But in both cases, the rate has been stalled since about 2001.

Our concern is about why the poverty rate has stalled—and I would say at an unacceptably high level—in a time of strong economic growth. It has never gone down below the rate of 1989, despite our continued economic growth. Clearly, economic growth is not solving the problem.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you.

I just wanted to clarify one thing about the LICOs. The immigration department uses the same one. A couple of years ago there was a review, and they use a basket of what a family would need. It was a new system that was introduced. It's actually used across the government by immigration to decide who can sponsor and so on. It's a fairly standard authority.

The other thing I wanted to add is that David Dodge, the head of the Bank of Canada, as you know—he's leaving now—at two separate meetings and in a speech at the Standing Committee on Finance said very clearly that if he had any money at all left to invest, whatever he had left he would invest in early education and child care, because it is an economic program, and that's where you get the best returns on the margins in the long term. This is from the Bank of Canada. I thought that was a pretty strong statement.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you.

Does anybody want to make one last comment? If you don't, I'd rather close it off.

Thank you, Ms. Maund.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: I would like to make a brief comment.

[English]

The Chair: Do you want to make a comment?

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will try to quickly summarize what we have heard today. If we want to make any headway in fighting poverty, it is up to the government to show that it is serious about it. This has to be a government priority. If it isn't one of the government's priorities, then, logically, no progress will be made and nothing will be done. From what I've heard here today, a government that invests in programs to reduce poverty will save money on health care. We all know how poverty affects families: children suffer from poor nutrition, there are alcohol, drug addiction and mental health problems, and that's only for starters. In the end, the entire system would benefit. That is what I wanted to say.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Maund.

You've given us a very thoughtful presentation. You came up with what you understand to be the work that Campaign 2000 has done.

You have painted a dismal little picture that child and family poverty has not moved from the same 15% level for 25 years. It gives us food for thought as we move forward on what to do.

I can understand that in 1989 we were in the economic doldrums. In 1998 we brought in the national Canada child tax benefit.

With economic growth, we have to invest in our children and in our citizens. You've given us somewhere to move forward on. Along with economic sustainability, we need to have a social justice mindset as well.

I'd like to thank you for being here.

As we move forward, if you have any more information as to the best practices in other countries, we would like to have it. When we have HRSDC or the finance department before us, we will ask them how they gauge it.

Members of the committee, we have to be mindful as well that we are a different country and we are a different government. We do things differently, but we all want to solve the same problem. Let's see how we can move forward.

With that, I'd like to give you a minute or so to wrap it up.

Thank you very much from the committee.

Ms. Jacquie Maund: I don't think I need to wrap it up. I said all I needed to say in the presentation.

I thank you for your questions and your interest.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is suspended.

•(1645) _____ (Pause) _____

•(1650)

The Chair: We will resume the meeting.

I have two things that are committee business.

We have asked HRSDC and finance to come on Tuesday, May 15. As we have listened to a lot of witnesses, they would like to have written questions so that they come prepared. Because they are departments, they will be able to bring us concrete answers.

Ms. Minna, it's what they would like.

If you have questions prepared and you wish to give them to the clerk, let's get those questions in by May 9. If you do not wish to do that and you want to ask them questions directly, that's fine too. This is an option that's been given to you. If you wish to present your questions, please do so.

The second thing is one that will get a lot of people upset, but that's life. The minister is not available to appear until May 30. We have bent over backwards. We have e-mails asking her to come. She said she didn't like Tuesday or Thursday, so we gave her Wednesday. If she appears on May 30, the estimates have to go on May 31.

Committee, what would you like me to do?

Yes, Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: I want to say it is highly unusual for a minister to come so late in the process, when we know that if we don't report, the estimates are deemed to be accepted and we won't have a chance to ask questions.

We are having officials come in prior to that.

The Chair: We have HRSDC and the Department of Finance. Do you mean the Canadian Heritage officials? We have no officials coming prior to that.

Hon. Maria Minna: I meant from Status of Women Canada.

The Chair: From the Status of Women, no, we haven't asked for that. We asked for the minister.

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm sorry, but I'm not finished.

The reason I'm asking this question is that if the minister comes so late, we should do some preparatory work prior to that with the officials from Status of Women.

Quite frankly, I have to say I'm very disappointed. It is not the way for the minister to treat this committee. She should show more respect to this committee. I know she is busy. All the ministers are busy. That's life in Ottawa.

I'm sorry, but to come the day before the estimates have to be in is not responsible.

The Chair: But you're also providing us with a solution by saying we should have the officials.

Hon. Maria Minna: Having no other choice, I imagine that's what we have to do.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: I want to voice my concern about the late appearance of the minister as well. It's very clear this creates a real problem.

It would seem to me she has an obligation to be here so that we can indeed discuss these things. I know you have no power in terms of compelling her, but it would seem to me she's not behaving in a very cooperative or perhaps even responsible way by leaving it so late.

The Chair: Ms. Smith, then Mr. Stanton, and then Madame Demers.

Mrs. Joy Smith: To be very clear, the minister cares very much about this committee and is doing her very best. We've talked on several occasions and she really wants to appear before this committee. She has time available on May 30, and that is the earliest time, as she has other committees and other things she's already booked into.

I've been on the status of women committee for a couple of terms now, and I know with the former government there were many times ministers could not appear exactly when we wanted them. I think one solution would be to draft a letter to the minister, if there are some concerns that need to be addressed. That might be something to do.

But she's getting here as quickly as she can.

The Chair: Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I just have question of clarification. You said she could come on May 30.

The Chair: She could.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Is that one of our regular Tuesday or Thursday meetings?

The Chair: No, it's a Wednesday. We had to insist because we cannot have her on the 31st.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: And the estimates need to be on...?

The Chair: The 31st.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: So we're still within the bounds—albeit a day late.

Can it be done, in fact? Is there the ability to have this meeting, vote the estimates, and then get this in the next day?

The Chair: It will be extremely difficult, and that's why it's disheartening that the minister... She said Tuesdays and Thursdays were not possible, so we gave her Wednesdays—every Wednesday or any Wednesday she wanted.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: And that's the only one?

The Chair: She has chosen the 30th, and I have to take the committee's guidance as to what to do.

• (1655)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: The way I'd see it, Madam Chair, there's not a whole lot of choice here. We're within the bounds. Agreed it will be at the eleventh hour, if you will, but it's within the bounds. If all the dates have been covered, we're dealing with a month or four weeks here, and one of those weeks is a break week. In all honesty, you say you need the committee's guidance, but I think we just have to respond in the affirmative and get on with it.

The Chair: Madame Demers.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Madam Chair, I am tired of continually blaming the previous government, because that is all we ever hear. I am fed up with that type of excuse. We read about the budget cuts in the newspapers. The minister has the time to meet with Conservative members to discuss the sponsorship program that they are considering, she has time to consult with other people, but she has no time to meet with her committee. She is the Minister responsible for the Status of Women. She doesn't have the time to meet with the members of her committee to let them know what is about to happen and to discuss these matters with them. Madam Chair, it makes no sense, I just don't get it. I can't believe that this woman can't find one hour, on a Wednesday, before May 30th, to come and meet with us. I really can't believe that, Madam Chair. Although we usually meet on Tuesday and Thursday, we are ready to meet on Wednesday to accommodate her, and she can't find the time before May 30th? Someone has to speak on our behalf. Someone should check with the people who do the scheduling in her office. This type of thing is not normal.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, I've heard from everyone.

Is there anyone else?

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Yes. Madam Chair, I'm not sure what Madame Demers was talking about in referring to meeting with the Conservative members. She's never met with me.

I'm just concerned about the Wednesday. Am I the only who has other committee meetings on Wednesday? Do we have to miss our other committee meetings? It's not fair to bring a substitute in here, if we're dealing with the main estimates. It should be this committee that's dealing with the issue.

Are the Tuesday and Thursday right out of the picture?

The Chair: Yes. She can't make it. Totally out of the picture for her.

In terms of main estimates, everybody has had the main estimates for some time now, so if you have to find a replacement, please ask the replacement to be knowledgeable about the main estimates.

Members of the committee, you know that as committee members we do not have the power to summon the minister. We can go to the House and put a notice of motion saying we asked the minister to come, and she didn't come—and we can put political pressure. But we have this date.

What I would suggest we say to the minister is yes, we would like her to come, because the officials really cannot answer all the questions. We might have questions for the minister that only the minister can answer. So if you want, we will try to do it two-pronged. We could ask the officials to come, and the questions they cannot answer we get the minister to answer. We keep the minister for May 30.

I think there was a suggestion that if we're going through the estimates and we find very pressing things that need a response from her, perhaps we can write and see if she can get the response from her ministry ASAP. Is that agreeable?

I know people are a little upset, but what choice do we have? We have no choice.

So I will proceed with asking the clerk if she can get the officials to come, and we will ask the minister to appear before us on May 30, which is a Wednesday. So if you have a replacement, please apprise them of it.

Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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