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Chair

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.)): Committee members, could you please take your seats. The ministers are here and they are busy ministers. We'd like to respect their time.

Welcome to meeting number 36 of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

Thank you, Ministers, for coming. We have before us Minister Baird and Minister Merrifield, with their officials. I'm going to try to pronounce the officials' names correctly because I don't like my name being mispronounced. We have Madam Komarynsky, Madam Baltacioglu, and Mr. Forster from Transport and Infrastructure, and from Finance we have Doug Nevison.

Ministers, this committee has been studying the issue of infrastructure spending and its impact on the economy. We have had officials before us and we've had stakeholders. They claim they can't tell us how much money has flowed out, and they have told us that you are the custodians of the figures. I'm hoping that in the question and answer session you'll be able to put these uncertainties to rest.

I understand that both of you have opening remarks.

We had requested that the officials stay for the second hour, because we understand that you ministers are busy. I'm hoping that the officials will stay for the second hour, in case the committee has additional questions.

Minister Baird.

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities): These are not easy times. When the global economic downturn began to threaten Canadians' livelihoods, we sought advice to determine how they wanted the federal government to act. We were told that infrastructure spending had to be part of Canada's response to the global economic downturn, and that was indeed one of the central features of our response.

We accelerated our existing infrastructure funding. That's been one of our great successes. We steamrolled and fast-tracked approvals and made more money available sooner. We committed almost \$12 billion in new funding for ready-to-go infrastructures projects.

[Translation]

We are making unprecedented investments in infrastructure. Municipal administrations, together with our government and the

provincial governments, have responded to the call in just a few months time.

[English]

As part of Canada's economic action plan, we have now committed almost \$7.5 billion to more than 5,000 infrastructure projects. When combined with contributions from our funding partners, the total commitment to projects is over \$22 billion. From the new infrastructure stimulus fund alone, fully 75% of all projects that were slated to begin in 2009 were under way as of September 1.

According to John Beck, chairman and CEO of construction giant Aecon Group, "I've been in this business for 45 years. I've never seen as strong a pipeline of work as we see today." Bill Ferreira, of the Canadian Construction Association, stated, "We are starting to see a lot of competition for infrastructure projects." He also said, "Many of our members say they are very busy and it will be one of the busiest seasons on record."

By working with our partners in the provinces, territories, and municipalities, we are leveraging matching funds from each level of government. This means that, compared with what would have been possible if we had sent the money only to municipalities, we will be able to go three times as far, with three times the results, and three times the number of jobs created.

[Translation]

We are working with Premiers Danny Williams, Dalton McGuinty and Gordon Campbell, as well as with municipal leaders from all political stripes in order to select projects that will create jobs and provide hope and opportunity for Canadian families.

• (1535)

[English]

The simple fact is the federal government is funding municipal projects identified as priorities and managed by those same municipalities. Our role is to green light the projects in concert with our provincial partners, something that we've been doing at a record pace. Our government respects municipalities and has confidence in their abilities.

Those who are concerned about what infrastructure projects are moving forward and where they are located should talk to the provinces and municipalities who approved each and every agreement with us. To quote the current Mississauga city councillor and former Liberal MP, Carolyn Parish, the decisions were made by the city. She is right. It is the provinces and municipalities who help determine their infrastructure needs, not unilaterally the federal government.

Last week our government unveiled an unprecedented infrastructure investment for the Johnson Street Bridge in the city of Victoria. Victoria Mayor, Dean Fortin, said, "Today's announcement is the largest investment Victoria has ever seen, and we are grateful for [that] partnership." I know the vice-chair knows that Mayor Fortin is not known for being a hotbed of Conservative Party support, but we have enjoyed an excellent relationship with him.

Last month, together with Toronto Mayor David Miller, we announced nearly \$200 million of federal funding for more than 500 projects throughout the city.

The highest per capita spending anywhere in the country is Windsor, where unemployment is the highest, and we don't have seats in these places. We are simply doing what's right and making sure that we create jobs where and when they're needed.

To those who accuse the government of partisan infrastructure spending, I want to respectfully disagree, and so does Ontario's Deputy Premier, George Smitherman, who said last week:

I think overall when we see how all the infrastructure dollars that are stimulus related have been allocated, I am pretty confident that there is going to be a very, very equitable...distribution.

With respect to transparency reporting, as soon as we announce a project, it's made public and posted on the web. We will continue to report on our progress to Parliament. This government has provided detailed spending plans in the original budget documents last January and three follow-up reports to Canadians, and the extraordinary stimulus spending is the right thing to do.

A request from the Parliamentary Budget Officer for a status update on the infrastructure projects under the purview of Transport and Infrastructure Canada was received on September 2. This is a substantial request and the reply to the PBO on September 16 indicated that. Of all the 5,000 announced projects that are currently verified on a project-by-project basis, this process is nearing completion, and today we began sending the information to the PBO as per his request.

Our government continues to focus on getting projects approved and creating jobs. Together with our funding partners, I think we're having a meaningful impact on job creation.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Minister Merrifield.

Hon. Rob Merrifield (Minister of State (Transport)): I want to say thank you for inviting us to come and give you as much information as we have with regard to infrastructure. My specific responsibility is working with Minister Baird with regard to Alberta, Saskatchewan, and some of the crown corporations. I'll explain some of that.

Really our focus is jobs and the economy and making sure that we get through this very difficult economic time on behalf of Canadians. Canadians are coming out of it. We didn't ask for this recession, we didn't cause it in any way, but we are certainly dealing with it as best we know how.

Most of my remarks will be focused on Alberta and Saskatchewan. That's my specific role with regard to the infrastructure dollars. We work very closely with the municipalities and the

provincial governments, and this is a very important part of it, understanding that they put up two-thirds of the money and we leverage three to one as much as possible. So we dovetail alongside in a coordinated effort, not only in choosing the projects but also in funding the projects and how they are administered. We work very closely with them in the whole area of stimulus funding, and actually the acceleration of the \$33 billion, which is the Building Canada fund. So they have been accelerated as well.

We have listened to the small communities, such as Vibank, Saskatchewan, which selected projects for quality drinking water. It's important to know where our priorities were, where the provinces' priorities and the municipalities' priorities were. No question, waste water was number one. Roads, bridges, and highways usually came in at number two. Then transit and also ring roads became very hot and very important to the areas of Alberta and Saskatchewan. I believe that is reflected right across the country.

I'm pleased to report to the committee that of the 28 members of Parliament in Alberta, I have not heard one complaint of any of the infrastructure spending. That includes the member from Edmonton—Strathcona, who is the only opposition member. In fact, this is what she said: "To tell you the truth, I've noticed that I am attracting a lot of money to my riding." That was the member from Edmonton—Strathcona in the *Edmonton Journal* on September 25, 2009.

We have to understand that the leveraging part of this is very important, making sure that we leverage two to one, three to one, wherever possible, and we've been able to do that. I can get into the numbers in the question and answer part more clearly.

In the time I have left I'd like to talk a little bit about some of the crown corporations, because they have a significant amount of stimulus as well. We have 16 crown corporations under Transport, 15 under my jurisdiction. Many of you have been watching VIA Rail very closely. VIA Rail is one. There is \$407 million in the economic action plan primarily to be able to deal with the refurbishing of the locomotives and making sure they are more energy efficient and more environmentally acceptable and also able to provide the service for Canadians long into the 21st century. The corridor between Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal is where the bulk of the money is being spent with regard to rail upgrades. At the end of that, we'll have a half-hour shorter train ride when it goes from Montreal to Toronto. That is very important.

Marine Atlantic is another one that is very important to us. We brought on a new *Atlantic Vision* ship that will help, and it has helped, although there are some significant problems with Marine Atlantic yet. We were out there a week or two ago to address some of that and look at the long-term goals. But we have been able to invest in some of the harbour infrastructure as well as CATSA, the airport security—a significant amount of money, \$355 million, in the economic action plan. We dare not be the weakest link when it comes to security.

Our project is timely. We have to get this money out now. We have to make sure we deal with putting people to work and getting Canadians good infrastructure. It has to be targeted so that it's projects that are very important to Canadians and to long-term sustainability and competitiveness. Believe me, it has to be temporary.

With that, we do see the green shoots coming. We do see some positive signs, but we have a way to go. We just have to work hard together to be able to make these green shoots take root.

Thank you.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister Merrifield.

We have the ministers for one hour so we will have to have very succinct—

Hon. John Baird: On a point of order, Madam Chair, I'm told by my staff and officials that the committee was informed that we as a team could be here for an hour, and the officials had not agreed to stay for the second hour. I am informed that if you want to put a request in, they could come back at a later date.

The Chair: The committee had requested the officials to stay because we knew you were busy as ministers. We appreciate it.

Hon. John Baird: That's very correct, you did, but I think it was informed before the meeting that they could stay for one hour.

The Chair: What I said was the committee had requested that they stay. If the ministers are leaving and the department officials can stay, that would continue.... We would like to bring closure to this issue. We would really like to put it to bed. It has been going on for too long. So if they could stay, that would be what the committee would like to do, and then close this subject.

Hon. John Baird: I don't disagree with what you're saying, but they had agreed to stay for one hour, and I understand you were informed of that before the meeting. The deputy informs me they are willing to come back.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): On the same point of order, we've got the biggest outpouring of money since the Second World War flying out the door at breakneck speed. We're the parliamentary committee that oversees the estimates of the spending and the veracity of the claims made by the government. I don't think the bureaucrats get to say whether they will or will not stay for the second hour of this meeting. If a parliamentary committee says we want you to stay, you stay, ministers notwithstanding. We can't compel ministers to stay here. The House of Commons can, but the committee cannot. But the bureaucrats: what have you got that's better to do? What else have you got to do that's so important you can't answer a parliamentary committee about the management of these billions and billions of dollars?

Hon. John Baird: As I've said—

The Chair: Minister, it's okay.

I have Madame Hall Findlay and then Mr. Jean, and we will then bring it to a close, because I need the ministers to answer questions.

Madam Hall Findlay.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I share my colleague's frustration at the lack of time. I will say we understand all the department officials have a great deal of work to do, and we appreciate the work you all do, but recognize that one of the most important jobs for us as parliamentarians is oversight of government spending. This is a huge outpouring of money.

I would like to ask the chair if we could ask the committee if we can get unanimous consent to ask at least the department officials to stay for the second hour, because we need these answers now.

● (1545)

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent that the officials stay?

There is no unanimous consent.

Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Let's be clear, Madam Chair. An invitation was sent to the minister along with his officials. There was a request for an hour and a half. They said they could spend one hour here. This is the second appearance by the minister in some two weeks of committee hearings in relation to the same issue. Certainly, he's suggested they come back at a later date on an invitation from the committee. I think that's very reasonable, and I think the request of Mr. Martin, quite frankly, is not reasonable.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jean.

Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin: I would like to move, then, that the officials be compelled to attend this committee for the second hour of this meeting, and instead of unanimous consent, it should be put to a majority vote of this committee.

The Chair: I can't have unanimous consent, but I can put it to a vote.

Are you asking that we ask the committee to vote whether the officials stay here for the second hour?

Yes, Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean: There's no notice in relation to his motion. We need 48 hours' notice in relation to a motion.

The Chair: Just one second. Instead of going into a procedural debate, I'll consult with the clerk.

The clerk informs me that the 48-hour notice is not relevant in this case. The motion Mr. Martin has put forth is in order, because it relates directly to the business under consideration. Therefore, I would like to call the committee to vote.

Yes.

Mr. Brian Jean: Is this motion not debatable?

The Chair: It's the ruling of the chair, and the ruling of the chair is not debatable. You can challenge the chair and we'll take the vote.

Mr. Brian Jean: I challenge the chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

The ruling of the chair is that the motion of Mr. Martin—

Mr. Brian Jean: The motion itself is debatable, and this is another motion that is debatable.

The Chair: No, I've made a ruling.

In consultation with the clerk, I made the ruling that the motion is in order because it deals with the business under consideration. Let me finish my sentence. Hence, that was the ruling. I asked you if you are challenging the ruling of the chair. You said yes. The ruling of the chair, according to Standing Order 117, cannot be challenged. If you challenge the chair, she has to call a vote for the ruling. You have challenged me, and we're going to call a vote.

Mr. Brian Jean: Is the challenge not debatable?

The Chair: The challenge is not debatable. The process is that my ruling has been challenged. I am consulting the clerk. The clerk informs me that the motion is in order. I would therefore like to pose the question.

Shall the chair's ruling be sustained, i.e. acceptance of Mr. Martin's motion?

Yes, sir.

Mr. Brian Jean: Could the clerk confirm whether or not your motion itself is debatable, the challenge to the chair? Is that not debatable? I understand that the motion put forward by Mr. Martin is, but if I could be so obvious as to state the obvious, we are talking about a situation that is, quite frankly, taking away from the time of members to ask the officials questions. So why don't we go past Mr. Martin? They've already come here for an hour and we're going to spend time debating whether they are going to stay for another half hour. It's going to take us half an hour to debate that.

The Chair: That is exactly what you are doing. I have to get the vote on my ruling. You cannot challenge the clerk because the clerk has given me advice based on the fact that the motion is in order. The motion relates directly to the business under consideration. You are challenging my ruling. I will call the vote.

Those who wish to sustain the chair's ruling, please indicate.

(Ruling of the chair sustained)

The Chair: The ruling is sustained. Mr. Martin, your motion is carried.

We will now start off with the questions—

• (1550)

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): On a point of order, it's fair enough for your ruling, but we haven't had a discussion of Mr. Martin's motion. We should be given an opportunity to offer some input on his motion.

The Chair: Unfortunately, it is now the apple before the cart, and the cart has gone forth.

Mr. Patrick Brown: You called for a vote on your ruling. Did you call for a vote on his motion? Was that a double vote?

The Chair: Mr. Brown, I'll explain. Mr. Martin put a motion and I consulted the clerk. I was told that it is in order. I stated it is in order. Mr. Jean challenged that ruling. When a ruling is challenged—and I'm sorry, Ministers, that you have to put up with this—then under procedure I have to call a vote. We voted, and Mr. Martin's motion is deemed to have stayed. There is no other debate.

I think we would like to have some input from the ministers, and we will start with our first....

Mr. Jean, you have a point of order.

Mr. Brian Jean: I'd like a ruling from the clerk in relation to this, Madam Chair. This is a debatable motion, and we have the opportunity to debate his motion whether I challenged you or not. That has nothing to do with the motion that Mr. Martin has put forward. That motion is fully debatable, and I want to have the opportunity to do so.

The Chair: Yes—

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Madam Chair—

The Chair: —I think it was Mr. Gourde first, and then Ms. Hall Findlay.

Go ahead, Mr. Gourde.

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Madam Chair, can we really vote? We voted on the motion, but we did not have the French version. I am not sure I properly understood the motion.

[English]

The Chair: Give me one second.

Do you want to have a look at the motion? Because the motion is from the floor, Mr. Martin, do you have a French version of the motion, or did you just present the motion on the floor, which was relevant to the business of the committee?

Mr. Pat Martin: I gave the motion verbally, but it's—

The Chair: Mr. Martin, it is okay. I am told you can submit it unilingually.

Mr. Pat Martin: Of course.

The Chair: Madam Hall Findlay.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Because we do actually want to hear from the ministers, I would just ask if we can postpone debate on that particular motion, which relates only to asking the departmental officials to stay, until after the ministers have left.

The Chair: Fair enough. Thank you.

Shall we start with the first round of questions?

Madam Hall Findlay, for eight minutes.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Once again, thank you, everyone, for being here.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for spending some time with us this afternoon.

[*English*]

One of our most important responsibilities as parliamentarians is in fact the oversight of government spending, and this here involves a great deal of government spending. Unfortunately, despite repeated requests....

Minister Baird, you appeared before this committee many months ago in the spring, and at that time I was already asking you for answers identifying projects and how much money had been spent. I had a real concern about announcements and announcements, but announcements don't create jobs, and we asked for details.

We have continued to ask for details. We have had very little response. To do our jobs, to fulfill our responsibility to Canadians, we then asked the Parliamentary Budget Officer to assist us by providing us with that information.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer appeared before this committee two days ago, and his answer to our questions about the details on government spending was that he had not been given adequate information to be able to answer us. So I will repeat: for us to be able to do our jobs, to fulfill our responsibility to Canadians, we need this information.

When I asked the Parliamentary Budget Officer why he was not being provided that information, he replied, "I think you'll have an opportunity later this week to have the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure and perhaps the deputy minister as well", suggesting that because he couldn't give us that information, we had to ask you for it.

At this point, I would very much like to ask you, because I recognize your enthusiasm to be able to speak in front of a committee, Minister, and I acknowledge your unique abilities in that regard, but we do have specific questions and I would really appreciate succinct answers.

The first question is, why has the Parliamentary Budget Officer not been given adequate information so that we can do our jobs for Canadians?

• (1555)

Hon. John Baird: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I say to the member for Willowdale, thank you for the question. I'll commit to you to give just as succinct answers to the questions as your questions are. You gave a five-minute preamble before you asked the question, so I promise you I will take less time than you took to ask the question.

As soon as an announcement is made, the information is posted on the government's website, including the project description, the exact amount, and the location. We'll continue to provide an unprecedented amount of information on all of our infrastructure projects being funded. In fact, in the first seven months of the fiscal year, we committed more money in the infrastructure stimulus fund than the previous Liberal governments spent in seven years. Under the previous government, all the public ever received was a press

release; you really had to dig around to get even the most basic information.

Earlier today we provided more than three boxes of information to the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: If I may interrupt, and I don't like to do that, what you have just given to me is exactly the same thing we have been hearing for months. You've referred to announcements, you've referred to amounts—

Hon. John Baird: I hadn't completed my answer.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: You've referred to announcements.

Hon. John Baird: I hadn't completed my answer.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: You referred to amounts of money being committed—

Hon. John Baird: I hadn't completed my answer.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: —and I will refer to the information we are seeing being given to the American public, which includes specifics about money actually being spent.

Mr. Brian Jean: Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: If I may finish my question—

Mr. Brian Jean: It's a point of order.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Your answer was not answering my question, sir.

The Chair: Minister and Madam Hall Findlay, I have a point of order to address.

Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean: Thank you, Madam Chair.

There has been a question asked. Why don't we give the opportunity to the minister to answer it?

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I started to give that opportunity and —

The Chair: Madam Hall Findlay, I need to respond to him.

When a witness is here and you have your eight minutes, you can cut off the witness if the witness is not giving you the information you want. That's her prerogative, and it will be your prerogative if you want to say the same thing. I now would like to proceed with the questioning.

Your point of order has been taken. It is out of order, really, because you have no right to tell another member—

Mr. Brian Jean: She's cutting off the witness when he's giving his answer.

The Chair: That's her prerogative.

Mr. Brian Jean: That's not just against the rules, Madam, it's rude.

The Chair: That's her prerogative, and I'm moving on.

Martha Hall Findlay.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I sure hope, Madam Chair, that his intervention did not actually take away from the time allotted to me.

The Chair: No, it won't be taken away.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I stress that I am asking for answers, and if the minister is not in fact providing satisfactory answers, then I will insist on getting answers that are satisfactory. It is not satisfactory to be told once again about announcements; announcements do not create jobs.

We have been asking, and the Parliamentary Budget Officer has been asking, for detailed information about moneys spent and jobs that have been created. My question was not about announcements, but very specifically about why the Parliamentary Budget Officer has not been given the information he has requested.

Hon. John Baird: Madam Chair, I'm going to go back to completing the answer, because I think it was an important point.

What I had said before I was interrupted was that earlier today we provided the Parliamentary Budget Officer with even more detailed data to allow him to conduct his financial analysis per his mandate. We provided him, as I was just about to say, with three boxes of information to assist him in conducting his job, and we'll continue to do that.

In the United States, they did set up an agency that cost over \$100 million for communications and promotion of the various infrastructure grants. We have not gone down that road with respect to municipalities and provinces, telling them every day they have to define how many tonnes of steel have been used or how much payroll has gone out.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Minister, I think the following question is relevant to everyone here as witnesses. It deals with the accountability of accounting officers within the framework of ministerial accountability. This is our law. I'm quoting from the statute:

...the accounting officer of a department...is accountable before the appropriate committees of the Senate and the House of Commons for

- (a) the measures taken to organize the resources of the department to deliver departmental programs in compliance with government policies and procedures;
- (b) the measures taken to maintain effective systems of internal control in the department;
- (c) the signing of the accounts that are required to be kept for the preparation of the Public Accounts pursuant to section 64;

As we heard from the Parliamentary Budget Officer, and have heard repeatedly from others as well, there is significant frustration within the departments at not actually being able to give full information. Based on this, those accounting officers must have that detailed information available, but they are not in a position, or have not been able, to give that information required by law.

Is it not inappropriate to be putting public servants in that type of position when they know what their obligations are to us as parliamentarians and to the Canadian people, but are being prevented from...arguably for political reasons? Do you not believe that's putting the civil servants in a very difficult position?

• (1600)

Hon. John Baird: I wrote that section from which you read. It was part of the Federal Accountability Act.

Could you name me a single public servant who has expressed frustration?

The Chair: Minister, did you finish your response?

I'm sorry, I have to cut you off.

Hon. John Baird: If you have that, I would welcome hearing it.

The Chair: Minister, you just informed us that you've given the information to the budget officer. I am wondering whether that information gives the exact dollars that have flowed through, because we were following the dollar signs and saying, committed or flowed. Is that what he has, and will we be able to get that from him?

Hon. John Baird: We delivered three boxes of the best available information we're able to present. As we get more information from the provinces and municipalities, we'll be able to forward it.

The Chair: But will the budget officer be able to give us that information?

Hon. John Baird: This is unique for me, having the chair ask me questions. I haven't seen this before.

The Chair: I'm just clarifying this, so there's no confusion.

Hon. John Baird: That's very good of you.

The Chair: I don't want confusion here.

All I want are the dollar amounts. If we ask the budget officer, is this the amount that has been spent, and he says yes, that will bring the end to the subject.

Hon. John Baird: You ask him.

The Chair: Okay, we will, if that's the information he has.

Madame Bourgeois.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon Mr. Minister, Mr. Minister of State, ladies and gentlemen.

First, allow me to express my disappointment in not having the numbers. As you can appreciate, I am especially interested in seeing how Quebec compares to the other provinces. A little earlier, the Minister of State spoke of Alberta and the different projects that were accepted in the Canadian provinces. I would have thought that you would have the numbers given how important the nation of Quebec is to you. I would have liked you to arrive with some numbers. I have some very specific questions for the minister and the Minister of State.

Could you provide some figures on the infrastructure spending in Quebec? Would it be possible to have those?

[English]

Hon. John Baird: With respect to the infrastructure stimulus fund, we gave Quebec a full per capita share of it. That is something important to note. With the Province of Quebec, we respect *les compétences provinciales*. It's a provincial prerogative when you're dealing with provincial assets and municipalities.

In the infrastructure stimulus fund, there have been 394 projects approved in the Province of Quebec, with a total eligible cost of \$1.320 billion, with federal funding green-lighted at \$539,400,000.

I hope that responds to your specific numerical request.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: If I could just add with regard to the specifics for Quebec, because we are talking about VIA Rail as one of the crown corporations, there is \$100 million that has been allocated for the F-40 locomotives that were built in Quebec. It is an open contract that was bid there.

[Translation]

Hon. John Baird: Over the past few months, it has been somewhat difficult, what with the municipal elections that were planned in 30 days. We ended up making our announcements to the municipal authorities. It is not the time to be making announcements, but I am proud to give you the details and the specific numbers you are asking for.

• (1605)

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: We heard from the Fédération Québécoise des Municipalités last week. It seemed to be telling us that there was a certain delay in the funding from the federal government.

In light of the specific agreements between the federal government and the Government of Quebec, are you going to give the municipalities more time to submit requests to you?

We know that the infrastructure program has a specific end date. Have you taken into account the delays surrounding the elections and the agreements you have with Quebec?

Hon. John Baird: I will speak in English because I want to be very precise.

[English]

On infrastructure funds, there are moneys available that can flow immediately to help with start-up costs. Then the municipalities, through their provinces, submit invoices, which we have committed to paying within 30 days.

I would be very happy to receive any concerns you have about any municipal project. If there is a single one where the invoices haven't been paid within 30 days, if you could bring it to my attention, we'll ensure that it's completely rectified.

To date I have not seen a single municipality that has invoiced us, as there is always a desire to get the cheque up front for the whole amount. We heard that concern, and that's why we responded with the gas tax transfer. This year we doubled it, and we front-end loaded half of that in April instead of July, so they would have immediate cash in their hands. And the rest of the invoices we committed to pay within 30 days. If you can name for me a single municipality that hasn't been paid, we will see that it is dealt with immediately.

I am told by my officials that the Province of Quebec has not submitted a claim for reimbursement under the stimulus fund to date, and because

[Translation]

the Government of Quebec is responsible for the municipalities, that is who we have to work with. As soon as we receive an invoice from the Government of Quebec, it will be paid in 30 days. That is very important.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: In other words, if the Fédération Québécoise des Municipalités felt the need to extend the deadlines for the infrastructure programs, it could go through the Government of Quebec, who would then ask you for an extension.

Hon. John Baird: No. The government and the House of Commons supported the budget implementation bill and have said that the stimulus fund would end at the end of March 2011.

The Building Canada Fund is much more flexible, but I have not heard that a single dollar was sent late to the municipalities. If the municipalities have specific projects and need to receive their money, we would be pleased to ensure that they get their cheque.

That is something that was discussed during a meeting with the Fédération Québécoise des Municipalités, the premier, Denis Lebel and myself. We listened to their concerns and their opinion and we are prepared to work with them.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Did you go far enough to tell us how many jobs will be created in Quebec through the infrastructure projects you have granted?

Hon. John Baird: The best figure was given by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, when Jean Perrault, the Mayor of Sherbrooke, was the president. That agency conducted a major pre-budgetary study and said that for every \$1 billion spent on infrastructure, 11,000 direct jobs would be created through the purchase of materials and the labour that is required.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Mr. Minister, with all due respect, I must say that is just an estimate. It is an estimate by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

As minister—and you, ladies and gentlemen, as public officials—could you have conducted a feasibility study of this economic stimulus plan?

• (1610)

Hon. John Baird: We accept the figures from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Our goal is to not tell every municipality in Quebec and Canada that Ottawa will micromanage every project before they even make a request,

[English]

before they make an order for steel, before they make an order for concrete, before they issue a tender or a contract, exactly how many jobs.

There are 200 people at Infrastructure Canada. We made a decision quite early on that we weren't going to try to micromanage 7,600 different infrastructure projects, ranging from \$20,000 to \$666 million. We simply don't have the capacity to micromanage 7,600 contracts, and I don't think any province or municipality is asking us to do so. I haven't heard of a single one. If there are, I'd welcome hearing them.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Madame Bourgeois.

We now go to *M. Gourde, pour huit minutes.*

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Thank you, Madam Chair. My questions are for Rob Merrifield, in order to give him a chance to speak. Mr. Baird has been very busy today.

Infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and water treatment plants, represent a significant part of our economic action plan. I know that we have announced our financial support for thousands of projects. I have had the chance to make several announcements in Quebec. We also often hear about Ontario. However, in western Canada, we do not often hear about the progress of projects.

Could you say a few words about the infrastructure projects in Alberta and Saskatchewan, for example?

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Sure I can.

We've been working very closely with the provinces and the municipalities. We have 280 announced projects in Alberta on the go. The federal portion is almost a billion dollars; it's \$975 million. The total cost of those projects...they are almost leveraged. They're actually a little bit more than three to one, so it's a little over \$3 billion in Alberta alone. When it comes to Saskatchewan, we're talking 390 projects. Federal money is \$450 million, but that is leveraged and it's almost three to one as well. It's \$1.2 billion.

When you look at our stimulus program, because we want this money out, as I said, timely, targeted and so on, in Alberta we're very close to 100% of the stimulus money allocated and announced. And in Saskatchewan we're also very close to the 100%. So we are moving to push the provinces and moving on accelerating the \$33 billion, which is Building Canada funds. Some of those funds are accelerated, the base funding as well as the major infrastructure funding.

To give you an idea of what's happening, particularly in Alberta, the \$100 million in a ring road around Edmonton was actually only one intersection. It was engineered for \$300 million as a cost. It was actually tendered and came in at \$168 million. So those are the kinds of savings we're seeing. When I talk to Minister Ouellette, who is in charge of transportation in Alberta, and Minister Snelgrove, they're telling me they're getting bids right across the province on all these projects that are anywhere from a 20% to a 50% reduction for actually building them this year compared with building them this time last year.

So we are getting the job done. We're putting many Albertans and many Saskatchewan people to work, and I believe that's reflected right across the country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Minister, earlier, in your presentation, you talked about VIA Rail.

VIA Rail plays a key role for travellers across the country. This summer in Montreal, I had the pleasure, on behalf of our government, of announcing the new F-40 locomotives. We could see how proud the VIA Rail workers were about this project and to what extent this is important to the future of the corporation.

Thousands of people use VIA Rail every day. Since 2007, the government has invested more than \$1 billion to improve this infrastructure, including \$407 million from Canada's economic action plan.

Mr. Minister, could you tell us the status of these projects and how the users can benefit from them?

•(1615)

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Yes. You should be very proud of VIA Rail. It's a national institution, and as you said, we've put in almost \$1 billion over a two-year period—\$407 million of that in this economic action plan.

And thank you very much for helping out with the announcement on the F-40 locomotives, a \$100 million project.

We have another \$98 million in New Brunswick to refurbish 79 light rapid comfortable passenger rail cars. We are getting a lot of Canadians working on a lot of infrastructure through the dollars that VIA Rail is investing to put it on a sustainable course.

The big thing we're doing is on the corridor from Windsor to Quebec City, with the refurbishing not only of the engines and the cars, but also of the rail.

And we have done even more than that. To understand, VIA Rail doesn't have its own lines so it has to negotiate with CN or CP to run on their lines. Those negotiations with VIA—which were addressed by the Auditor General in the last study—have been dealt with at this stage, and we are progressing very aggressively to refurbish the lines so that VIA can accelerate the speed. It may be a bit messy right now, like most renovations, but when it's all done you're going to have a half hour faster ride between Toronto and Montreal.

The Chair: Monsieur Gourde, you have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Okay, no problem.

CATSA plays a major role in ensuring the security of Canada's air transportation system. As hon. members know full well, every passenger of a commercial flight has to go through pre-flight screening. The 2009 budget allocated \$355 million to CATSA.

Mr. Minister, could you give us more details on this major investment?

[English]

Hon. Rob Merrifield: It's an important investment. Last year there was \$240 million, but there is another \$355.7 million investment in CATSA.

When it comes to security, we take it very seriously. With regard to security at our airports, we're going to have to invest in the best of technologies to make sure we don't fall behind our international counterparts. It's absolutely critical that we keep pace.

A lot of this \$355.7 million is invested in new technology to get us where we need to go. There are 125 new multi-view X-ray scanners to make sure that luggage and carry-on luggage is dealt with using the best of equipment. We have added dozens of new screening lines across the country so we increase the flow and make sure we not only have state-of-the-art technology but we're not holding up traffic.

We have 10 portable security units for the Olympics, to make sure the Olympics are about the athletes and not about any kind of a threat. We are prepared for what's going to happen in the Olympics and we are very proud of where CATSA is going with regard to investing these dollars. We're also putting many Canadians to work at the same time, because it's very labour-intensive work that CATSA does. It's not only high-cost equipment, but there are a lot of dollars being spent on employment. This is indeed a stimulus, but it's more about security than stimulus when it comes to CATSA.

The Chair: I think Minister Baird wants to answer.

Hon. John Baird: Actually it's about the matter earlier.

Because of my high regard and respect for the member for Willowdale, and for the vice-chair, the member for Winnipeg Centre, and to prevent my officials from being held against their will, we've cleared our schedules so we can all stay...at least the deputy and I can stay until 5 p.m.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that.

We will now go to Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Gracious to a fault, as always, Mr. Minister.

Sir, you will be the first to admit that oversight of the executive is a key function of Parliament. In fact it's a constitutional right and duty of parliamentarians to rigidly oversee spending of the executive.

• (1620)

Hon. John Baird: Are you asking me?

Mr. Pat Martin: No, I think you will agree with me there; I think we could take that as a given. I know you and I have worked on the Federal Accountability Act—

Hon. John Baird: As it is for the government to maintain the confidence of the House every day.

Mr. Pat Martin: Well, this is key, too. So far you've been lucky enough to maintain that—with some help from your friends, of course. Yes, with a little help from your friends.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer I think was one of the most important things we did in the Federal Accountability Act. We are very proud of that achievement. It's a necessary office. He does a

great job. His frustration was palpable and tangible when he appeared before our committee. He said the information that he's given to assess on our behalf was...he says the government's report is uneven information, inconsistent in its presentation, lacks the appropriate disclosures necessary, etc. In other words, it's a polite way of saying he was handed a pile of incomprehensible financial gobbledygook, that he's had a difficult time assessing whether the figures he's been given have any relationship whatsoever to the claims being made.

Wouldn't you agree with me, Minister, that an effective way to conceal hanky-panky is to couch it in financial reporting that's incomprehensible? In a way, it gets to be a matter of privilege in that we're being denied the information we need to do our job as parliamentarians to oversee the executive office. More and more it seems like there's this elaborate shell game taking place so that we can't figure out if the stimulus spending is achieving the goals you claimed it would achieve.

He's put forward some really helpful templates in his report, in his assessment of your third report to Parliament. He suggests that if the information were laid out in a way that was easily understood, in plain language, financially, we would all be better off. Have you seen the template that he recommends, and have you considered providing information to him in these simple one-page documents that outline the projected spending, the estimated job creation, and the realized benefit from each individual project?

Hon. John Baird: Earlier today we gave a significant amount of information to the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Obviously, we get the information from provinces and municipalities when they do their quarterly reports. I haven't seen the document in front of you, but I'd welcome the opportunity to review it.

I, like you, agree that it's important, the check on the government. I do think that you should know and be reminded that every single project that is approved is immediately posted on the website—the project, the location, the dollar amount, and the funding partners. We think that's substantial. The Parliamentary Budget Officer would like more, and we're very pleased to work with him in that regard.

Mr. Pat Martin: He's probably begging for mercy right now. I think you dumped 4,000 pages on his desk today, did you not? I mean, we don't know.

Hon. John Baird: Across the government, I think there are some 7,600 projects, so we're dealing with a lot of work, no doubt about it. Just as, if you want these one-page forms, when you have 7,600 projects, that means 7,600 pages. My first priority I think is to have the officials work with provinces and municipalities in getting the money disbursed.

Mr. Pat Martin: It seems to us at this committee that the government reporting so far has been long on propaganda and short on any meaningful information. There's no yardstick we can measure progress by. We have an unprecedented amount of money flying out the door at breakneck speed. We were concerned at the front end that there would be compromises in due diligence, etc., but we were willing to help you fast-track that money to get it out into the community. At the very least, we need to be able to measure whether or not it's having the desired effect.

Let's face it, this spending is driving us into a deficit situation of billions and billions and billions of dollars. I'm not going to get into the debate about where the money is being spent. I think a lot of NDP ridings actually fared fairly favourably from the spending, so I have no evidence that there's any hanky-panky going on in where the money went. We want to know, though, if the money was necessary.

You're checking to see that the journalists got that.

Hon. John Baird: I just always like to look at my friend, the badger.

Mr. Pat Martin: Minister, what can you say that would assure us that the information will be in a clear, transparent, comprehensible manner so that the parliamentarians here can do their job in assessing the veracity of the claims being made by the government, and that it's having the desired effect, so that we're not driving ourselves into a sea of red ink without the corresponding measurable outcomes?

• (1625)

Hon. John Baird: Listen, we provided a substantial additional amount of information to the Parliamentary Budget Officer. I have an indication from you, your concern that it might be too much information. I'm happy to review the documents that you've cited and to look at them.

Mr. Pat Martin: I notice the Parliamentary Budget Officer also did a comparison study. It's a very interesting report. He actually compared the reporting in the United States on their stimulus package to the way Canada reports ours, and he found us severely lacking. I urge you to have a look at that page in the report too, because the Obama regime in the States is being a lot more open and transparent, and it's a lot easier to understand not only where the spending is going but the projected outcomes.

In a previous meeting, I used the example of Wal-Mart. Now if Wal-Mart can tell you every pair of jeans that is sold at every one of their stores in real time on a graph—so sales of jeans are going this way, sales of shoes are going that way.... If they can figure out how to do that with far more financial transactions than the Government of Canada has, surely we can design a way to be transparent about how we're doing in this particular stimulus package.

Hon. John Baird: I am stunned. I am stunned that you would cite a union-busting large employer who doesn't provide health care to employees as—

Mr. Pat Martin: I should know better than to give you an opportunity like that.

Hon. John Baird: I find this most interesting.

Mr. Pat Martin: As soon as it was out of my mouth—

Hon. John Baird: I find this most interesting. It reminds me of a conversation we had about the type of coffee they sell in the cafeteria.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Madam Chair, could I just add this, because I think the concern is somewhat legitimate? The concern is whether the federal money is spent appropriately, and fair enough.

Mr. Pat Martin: That's all we want to know. It's not harassing to ask.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: One of the comfort zones that gives me great comfort and should give Canadians great comfort is that most of these projects are not our projects. They're provincial-municipal projects, and most of them have to dig into their pockets and take out a third of the cost of that project as a municipality and a province, and all three orders of government have to agree on it.

So I don't hear a lot of provinces yelling foul play in any way. They have actually come alongside on these projects and actually are administering the dollars to a large degree. So that should give Canadians and this House some comfort as to where we're going to go, because this is all about Canadians, about jobs, about the economy, and that's our focus.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Martin.

Yes.

Hon. John Baird: For example, in your province of Manitoba, the government and the economic action plan identified, as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities suggested, that putting money into public works and infrastructure would help create jobs, both from a material standpoint and from a construction standpoint. That's the premise. We're working collaboratively with the provincial and municipal governments. What I don't think we can do is simply impose a level of bureaucracy and micro-management to say, "Great. You're building a new building. Where did that steel come from? How many jobs are created by the steel? Listen, you've put a tender out. You got two bids. Which one is going to hire more? Which one is the best cost?"

There's a fundamental principle: to get people to work and to build public infrastructure so we have cleaner water, better public transit, safer bridges, better highways, etc. I am loath to say to every municipality that they have to hire a bunch of accountants to report back on a day-to-day basis or an hour-to-hour basis how many people are being employed. I would encourage members to look in their own constituencies, look in their own regions, talk to their municipal leaders, get the list of the projects, go to the Internet where all the details are, travel around, and see the work that's being done. I think it's pretty positive.

The Chair: Thank you.

Before I go to the second round, Mr. Martin, since the minister has agreed that they will stay here till 5 p.m., would you like to withdraw your motion?

Mr. Pat Martin: Sure.

The Chair: Could I have unanimous consent that this motion be withdrawn? Yes? Is there unanimous consent from the government side that we're withdrawing the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll proceed now to the second round.

Madam Foote, you have five minutes.

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. It was interesting listening to the Parliamentary Budget Officer at our last committee meeting. We sensed his frustration at not being able to get the information he felt he needed to do his job. His only recourse, in fact, was to rely on committees like ours to get the information for him, to enable him to do the job.

So I'm pleased to hear you have in fact dropped off information for him. And you've referenced the expenditure by the U.S. in terms of having a very good reporting mechanism, but in fact the Parliamentary Budget Officer told us there were a number of countries that had a much more robust quarterly reporting than Canada does. I think when we're talking about the significant expenditure of taxpayers' dollars, it's all about being accountable and transparent in how that money is being spent.

So that's why we're here. That's why we're asking for these answers. I'd like to know if the information you dropped off to the Parliamentary Budget Officer talks about the project, the location, and the amount or the value of the project. Did you as well include the amount of money that has actually been already spent on the projects, not just the value of the project but how much has already been spent?

• (1630)

Hon. John Baird: Sure. Our goal is to have the most robust delivery of the stimulus, not necessarily the most robust Internet site. I think if you compare Canada to the other G-7 industrialized countries, we would compare very favourably. I can't tell you on a day-to-day basis.

I mentioned that Quebec hasn't submitted their first invoice yet. I can't tell you where every single project is because they submit it by invoice. In Newfoundland and Labrador, we gave them their full per capita spending four months ago, and in Newfoundland they had the highest number of government tenders ever go out. Until they submit the invoice, we can't say on a day-to-day basis whether the steel has arrived, whether the workforce has been paid.

I could call upon my associate deputy minister, John Forster, to give you a better sense with respect to your question.

Ms. Judy Foote: What I'm looking for is whether or not the information you gave Mr. Page includes the amount of money that's been spent to date on all of the projects that have been approved and announced.

Mr. John Forster (Associate Deputy Minister, Infrastructure Canada): Thank you.

I'm happy to describe what we've given him. As the minister mentioned, today we dropped off over 4,400 pages of information on 3,000 projects that were approved under the stimulus fund. What the Parliamentary Budget Officer asked for was two things in September. One was information on the projects that were approved, which is what we provided to him. The second thing he asked for, and when he asked for it in September it did not exist, was information on the claims that had been provided in the quarterly

claims submitted by provinces. At the time he asked for it, in September, we did not have complete claim information provided by all provinces and territories, so it was not possible for us to respond to him.

Ms. Judy Foote: At this point, then, the information you've given him does not have the actual money that's been spent to date on the infrastructure projects?

Mr. John Forster: What we provided him today is a list of all the stimulus projects approved, where they are, what the project is, the cost of the project, and the federal-provincial contributions.

Sorry, I'll get to your answer. What we've indicated to him is that this is the first cycle of claims under a brand-new program on 3,000 projects, so we're going back with the provinces and territories and reviewing the information they provided, clarifying it. They have questions, we have questions, so as that data is verified and accurate and complete, we will then be providing it to him over the coming weeks—on the claim information that's provided.

We've given him a complete data set on all the projects and we've done that within 37 days of his request. I would point out that other requests responded to, to him, range anywhere from 25 days to 125 days, and the rest of the—

Ms. Judy Foote: Okay, I appreciate that, Mr. Forster. I was looking for yes or no, or if you could give us the dollar figure, and apparently you can't because of the mechanism of the report.

Hon. John Baird: The difference is, until Newfoundland submits their invoice.... I drove by a project this morning, a public transit expansion of some bus shelters at Baseline Station for Ottawa-Carleton Regional Transit, and there's a certain amount of construction going on; there are people at work. The City of Ottawa has not yet submitted their invoice to the province.

So we, the 200 people who work at Infrastructure Canada, lack information for the 7,600 projects across government that would have been funded, until the provinces submit the invoices for payment. Just like for the home renovation tax credit, not a dollar of it has been spent because people haven't submitted their income tax forms yet.

Ms. Judy Foote: I would expect if we're a year into it, construction has already taken place on some of these projects; dollars have been spent and invoices have been in and have been paid, I would hope, for some of those municipalities—

Hon. John Baird: Every invoice has been paid. They are paid within 30 days. You can talk to your government in Newfoundland and Labrador. I think they'll say that the relationship has been very constructive and very productive.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Dorion, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Jean Dorion (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is for Minister Baird.

The media has reported that stimulus spending has not been uniform across the country. In your opinion, has federal stimulus spending been allocated equally across the country?

• (1635)

[English]

Hon. John Baird: I would say, with respect to the infrastructure stimulus fund, for example, that it's been fairly well distributed. Others have said that. Mr. Martin, the vice-chair of this committee, just said that. In the case of your province, Quebec, you got your per capita share. In Quebec's case, they have the law that requires the federal government, in areas of provincial jurisdiction, to work with the province. That is not something I have a problem with. I respect that. So we work with the province.

We don't make all the decisions about how the money is spent. Generally speaking, we try to ensure that it is spread evenly around the country. Does that mean that it is done by electoral district? Not necessarily. For example, here in Ottawa, there is a convention centre that happens to have been built 100 metres inside the riding of Ottawa—Vanier, but it will be of benefit to the entire region, frankly, on both sides of the river. Carleton University is building across the river from the Ottawa South riding, but it will benefit people across the region, and indeed in the country. Generally speaking, we have tried to make an effort to ensure that it is fairly well distributed.

It won't be perfect on an electoral boundary by electoral boundary basis. But generally speaking, we look at all regions of Quebec. We look at all regions of Canada. We've tried to ensure that it is, by and large, fairly distributed.

We are only one player of the three. Some municipalities requested very little money. Others requested substantially more money. Some municipalities came to the table with phenomenal projects. One municipality requested money to build a new house for an elephant at their zoo. I didn't think that was a very good idea to fund, and we didn't. It depends on the quality of the project.

I am a former environment minister. Quebec has put great priority on clean water. We have a partnership with them, something called PRECO, that works very well. They have responded to a pretty core infrastructure need very well.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: The third progress report specifies that the government expects the economic action plan to generate or maintain 220,000 jobs.

Could you tell us the number of jobs created to date in the wake of the economic action plan?

[English]

Hon. John Baird: I was talking about the infrastructure stimulus fund. If you want to talk about the credit facilities, if you want to talk about the auto strategy, if you want to talk about the community

adjustment fund and the investments in forestry, the best number I can accept is the one from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. For every \$1 billion we've spent on infrastructure, 11,000 jobs are created. That is the best number for us to fall back on.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean Dorion: Do you mean 11,000 jobs out of 220,000?

[English]

Hon. John Baird: The 220,000 is for the entire economic action plan, of which, for example, the infrastructure stimulus fund is one. There are credit facilities. There are tax reductions. There is the auto strategy. There are efforts with respect to forestry. There are efforts with respect to the community adjustment program. There are many. There is a mortgage program. The government bought mortgages to provide more liquidity for small businesses and families. It is not exclusively infrastructure. Some people equate the economic action plan with just infrastructure. In fact, it is much broader. It's one of the things under the umbrella.

We've also tried Building Canada. It took a long time to get the agreement signed with every province. It took a lot of time to make decisions. We've had a major acceleration in Building Canada. Things are happening in a big way now, and accelerating is part of the action plan. We've told Quebec that we are happy to move as quickly as possible on the seven-year action plan to get projects approved so that engineers and architects can get to work and tenders can be issued, and we can sustain economic growth.

I think there has been a problem over the last 20 years, by our government, frankly, earlier, and by previous governments, to get things going. That's why we've really put our foot on the gas pedal with respect to infrastructure.

The Chair: Merci.

We now go to Mr. Anders. I guess you will be sharing your time with Mr. Brown.

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. We'll see how much time I take here, but there are a few things I'd like to get on the record.

One, I'm very excited about Mr. Martin being as big a fan of Wal-Mart as he is. I, like the minister, am quite impressed. Many in his party should come to embrace Wal-Mart the way he has.

I'm also impressed with the opposition generally today. I think the more time they focus on the economy, that's wonderful. The economy should be the central issue in the next election campaign, and if the Canadian public focuses on the economy as much as the opposition has, the Conservative Party will be elected with a larger number of seats. So I think that's fantastic.

I'd like to ask the two ministers two particular questions.

One, Minister Merrifield, I know that Alberta does not have many opposition MPs. If memory serves me correctly, I think we have only one. But if you have any information with regard to how the opposition MPs—or MP—in the province in Alberta have felt they've been treated, it would be lovely if you could tell us. I'm sure they must have some thoughts with regard to how they're being treated in the province of Alberta—that one NDP member in the opposition.

For our other minister today, I'm going to ask the question, and I'm sure he'll be caught up with regard to what's happening.

As far as another opposition riding is concerned, I know that at our last committee meeting I talked about the LRT program that's going on in the city of Toronto. Our chair, who's also a member of the opposition, expressed surprise. She didn't know, for example, that there is \$333 million—and I'll add \$330,000 on top of that—being spent for the LRT extension.

If I can quote, I said, "I don't hear the chair or the opposition members taking issue with \$333 million being spent in her riding in Don Valley East."

The chair's response was, "There's \$333 million?" Then I said, "For the LRT expansion." And she said, "In my riding?"

So I wonder if maybe—

• (1640)

Hon. John Baird: We're obviously not communicating and advertising enough. We have to do a better job.

Mr. Rob Anders: I understand, Minister.

I'd like the two ministers to talk about how they feel about those particular ridings, the one for the chair here in opposition, and also for the one opposition member in Alberta.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I think what we have to understand is that we're actually trying to build infrastructure for all Canadians. It's difficult when you get into some of these larger urban settings as to whether an LRT infrastructure project or a ring road project is specific to the riding it's actually in or a benefit to a whole entire area. We're seeing that, actually, in many of the urban settings. Unfortunately, some of the opposition parties try to play silly with the numbers, because it's a benefit to everyone; it's a benefit to Canadians. Even some of the rural major highways or major highway corridors help perhaps even the neighbouring province as much as the province they're in, because they are through routes for a lot of goods.

I say that because that's kind of the case in the riding you're suggesting, which is the only opposition riding, Edmonton—Strathcona. There's \$14.8 million there, going to the GO Community Centre. It's a disproportionate amount of money in that riding, compared to the neighbouring ridings around it. That's because it is part of a project at the university.

So it's silly to get into the numbers as to whether this riding has a little bit more than that riding, because what we're really focused on is what is in the best interest of infrastructure long term, giving us the competitive edge coming out of this recession and far into the future.

To do that, you have to put politics aside and start looking at what is in the best interest. The provinces have done that; so have municipalities and so have mayors of cities. We're just very pleased to be able to come alongside, to be able to help out, to stimulate the economy at a time when jobs need to be created and good projects are being created. I guess that's the best way I can answer that.

Hon. John Baird: Just to respond about the LRT in Scarborough and Don Valley East, the City of Toronto has a master transit plan. We work with them. The mayor has identified the LRT as the number one priority for the Building Canada plan. We accepted his suggestion. I suppose people in south Scarborough will complain that they don't get enough in comparison to north Scarborough, but that's where the city chose to build the LRT.

I look at one investment. There is one with respect to Union Station. The federal government is putting about \$120 million into the revitalization and expansion of Union Station. That just happens to be one block inside the riding of Trinity—Spadina, but that investment will be great news for people in Etobicoke. It will be great news for commuters from Oakville and from York region. It will be great news for people in north Toronto and for downtown. It's a resource. It's probably the most important building in the province, and it will have great benefit for so many people.

• (1645)

The Chair: Please wrap up, Minister.

Hon. John Baird: It's not just one riding that benefits.

The Chair: You have members of your caucus wanting to ask you questions.

Hon. John Baird: You have to go to the other party because they want to ask....

The Chair: And then we'll come to them.

Madam Foote, I understand you are sharing your time with Ms. Findlay.

Ms. Judy Foote: I meant to mention to Minister Merrifield that I was really pleased to hear about the \$407 million spent on VIA Rail, when we have so many problems going on with Marine Atlantic. The ten percenter didn't leave a good impression on the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, since we have no trains. Money for Marine Atlantic is what we're looking for.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: Marine Atlantic is a very important corridor.

Ms. Judy Foote: There was no question.

Hon. John Baird: I'd like the comment to get a response.

Ms. Judy Foote: There was no question.

The Chair: Please address the chair.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I'd like to respond to the comment on Marine Atlantic, because Marine Atlantic is absolutely critical to the people of Atlantic Canada and particularly Newfoundland. We have a long-range plan to deal with that.

The Chair: Madam Findlay.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: That wasn't a question; it was just a moment of frustration on the part of my colleague, which I think was well placed.

First, I want to thank you for agreeing to stay an extra half hour. I would like to thank the minister for his magnanimity in allowing his departmental officials to grant us an entire half hour more. It is much appreciated.

My question is for Madam Baltacioglu. You've seen the reporting being done in the United States under the stimulus package. The projects are listed, spending is quantified, and the number of jobs created is disclosed. Is that information in the Canadian government? Do we have that information? If not, why not?

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu (Deputy Minister, Infrastructure Canada): We have a website and the information, which I'm sure all members have seen. As my colleague John Forster said, we have the basic project information and we get reports from our partners. These are partnerships, and our partners are reporting on actual projects. It is not exactly the same kind of information.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I'm not asking for the information on how much your partners have spent. We are asking how much this government has spent. You cannot create a job if you can't write somebody a cheque for his or her wages. We are asking the government how much money has been spent so far. We have heard announcement after announcement. The government is benefiting from all these wonderful let's-pat-ourselves-on-the-back announcements. We continue to ask for details on how much the federal government has spent. We understand that you cut the cheques only after you receive the invoices, but you can't tell me that you don't have a record of the cheques that the federal government has signed.

How much money has this government spent so far? We need the answer to this question to get some idea of how many jobs have been created. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has asked. We have asked. It's a simple question: can you tell us how much money the federal government has spent so far under this program?

Hon. John Baird: I'll ask the deputy minister to respond. But first I want to correct the record. You said that if the federal government hasn't issued a cheque, no jobs have been created. That's not true. Once we make an announcement, those municipalities, those provinces, and other not-for-profit groups are free to begin to spend money immediately. We tell them not to wait—they have the green light. So jobs can be created before cheques are issued.

I'd like to turn this over to the deputy minister.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I asked the deputy minister a question and I'd appreciate an answer.

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu: We won't know exactly how much they have spent until the bills arrive.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: No?

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu: We don't spend until we get invoices.

•(1650)

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: But when you spend, you must know what you've spent.

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu: Of course we do.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I don't ask the provincial government —

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu: I'm trying to give you examples of where the spending is. For example, there have been advances that have been paid. We have that number.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Then why do we not have that number? Those are the numbers we are asking for.

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu: I believe, Minister, you have mentioned the advances to provinces.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: We have not had an answer to this simple question, and we've been asking for months. How much money has the federal government spent to date? We need to compare that number with the announcements that are being taken full advantage of. Simple question: how much money has the federal government spent so far?

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu: Maybe I can explain the way the programs work.

When the commitment is made, our partners start to work, and that means economic activity starts taking place. They hire engineering firms or do certain kinds of construction, and when it is time for them to report, they send us the bills, which we pay.

So we have the full picture of economic activity in terms of the projects, and we have given it to the Parliamentary Budget Officer. We don't have information on the actual spending until the bills come in.

I think you might want to look at spending versus commitment. There are too many pieces of the puzzle.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: We just want information on federal spending, and we don't have the answer.

The Chair: Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean: I know we were both elected by Canadians, and I have a job that's very similar to hers, but is she telling me that she gets paid before she works for a month?

The Chair: Are you addressing this here?

Mr. Brian Jean: I'm just curious. This is a point of order. She mentioned that people don't work without getting paid in advance.

The Chair: What is your point of order? What standing order did she violate?

Mr. Brian Jean: She didn't. It is a point of order to ask specifically—

The Chair: She is allowed to ask questions like you are allowed to ask questions, so I really want to go—

Mr. Brian Jean: She just mentioned that her job wasn't created without money going first. I'm sure she worked for 30 days before she got paid. That's what I do.

The Chair: You can look at the blues.

Mr. Holder, you have five minutes.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thank you very much.

I have a comment and a question. Mr. Brown would like to have a comment and a question as well.

I was part of the group in the past meeting that had the opportunity to listen to the Parliamentary Budget Officer. I want to remind members around the table what Mr. Page said about the reporting. He acknowledged that he'd received three reports thus far, and each report was better than the previous one. He had no reason to believe that the fourth one wouldn't be better still. He indicated he was looking forward to receiving the reports as he had requested.

I was quite pleased that the Parliamentary Budget Officer took an optimistic and positive view. I need to put that on the table, because the politics of politics sometimes doesn't get the complete story out.

I come from a business background and have a sense of running a small multi-million dollar company. But on cashflows in and out, it's a very complex process. I'm not sure whether all the folks around the table are aware of the magnitude of this, with almost 8,000 projects out there. That's phenomenal.

I'd like to compliment all of our guests here—our department officials and ministers. I think it's a huge undertaking to do this as promptly as you have.

I've also heard broad references around the table that somehow preferential treatment has been given to government ridings and the like. I've referenced before some "gotcha" politics that need to be taken out of the equation in this.

Minister Baird, are you aware whether any provinces or municipal leaders have complained that infrastructure dollars might have been directed for Conservative Party gain?

Hon. John Baird: You know, I'm actually pretty proud when I look on balance at all the infrastructure programs under our department. We've been trying to be careful to ensure that all areas benefit. Frankly, if our goal is to create jobs and we were to spend the money all in one part of the country, every contractor would be quickly busy and there would be a line-up, which wouldn't spread the wealth.

If you look at the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, we have not always had the best relationship with the province, but Mr. Williams, the premier, put politics aside. It was the first government we came to an agreement with on how to spend the infrastructure spending. Do you know what? The jobs were created a little bit faster as a result of that.

If you look at the Province of Ontario—and I used to sit in the Ontario legislature in opposition as the critic to the current minister of infrastructure—we put aside politics and worked fairly well together.

If you look at the Province of Manitoba, with the Doer government, and now the Selinger government, I think on balance we work pretty well together.

I think if you look at the Province of Quebec, the Premier of Quebec has made some comments recently in an announcement in Pontiac. I think by and large we have worked fairly well.

We've been able to work...I haven't heard a single complaint at a senior level from any of the provinces or territories. We've managed to work with them well. We've tried to distribute it fairly. Newfoundland and Labrador, despite the fact it didn't elect a single returning member, got its full per capita share, because that's the approach we took.

Is every square inch going to get the same amount? Probably not. But on balance, I think it has been fairly well distributed. If you look around the country and talk to Denise Savoie, the member for Victoria, she pushed hard for a project that I was able to announce only the other day. If you look at Halifax, we announced a new library. If you look at Madame Gagnon-Tremblay in the Province of Quebec, we've been able to work together. We have always ensured that we respect provincial jurisdiction, because that is something that is fundamentally important.

Look at the investments we have made in Sault Ste. Marie. I was in the east side of Vancouver with the member for Vancouver East, making two announcements to help aboriginal Canadians who live in her constituency.

We haven't been perfect, but I think by and large we've been pretty good. It's a bit much to hear someone like Ken Dryden get up and say we are not spending the money fairly, when his riding got the largest amount of infrastructure in the country. I think by and large it has been fairly well distributed. I'm pretty proud of that.

I think Canadians, in this unprecedented economic downturn, don't just expect, they demand, that their elected representatives work together, and we have seen an unprecedented amount of that. Frankly, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has been incredibly complimentary about the officials within my department for the excellent job they've done. They have worked their butts off with their team to make these decisions.

I couldn't ask for a stronger team at the federal level. We couldn't ask for better cooperation with provinces and territories. Every single one of them of any political party have put aside petty politics, and I think that speaks well of all of them. Frankly, when people see different parties working together, they're really pleased.

● (1655)

The Chair: Mr. Baird, I have to cut you off.

We have a last, very quick question, because the time is up for them.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Baird, I want to make sure I understand that your officials have to report the numbers only when they receive invoices, after projects have been approved. I have a few comments to make about that.

People, whether parliamentarians or the general public, do not necessarily know the numbers because they are waiting for data from the provinces and the municipalities. You must have received some applications. If you could share some of the numbers, that might give the public and parliamentarians an idea of what this all means.

On October 9, the Public Service Commission released the results of its audit. It found that in the 45 appointment files it reviewed, essential qualifications were not respected when it came to hiring. In the framework of this economic stimulus plan, additional staff were hired who did not have the qualifications stipulated in the Public Service Employment Act.

Given that this stimulus plan was put together quite quickly, how can you expect us to trust the numbers you are giving us? Furthermore, these numbers give you a lot of political mileage, whereas we do not even have the numbers and cannot give you any feedback on them. For now, you can tell the public whatever you want. We cannot even verify what you are saying.

Thank you, Mr. Baird.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Hon. John Baird: In fairness—and I have great respect for the work that you do on this committee and great respect for your role as a member of Parliament—you just said two things: one, that we aren't giving you any numbers; and two, how can we trust the numbers we're giving you, which is very difficult.

Every time a commitment is made, the starting pistol goes off and money can be expended. If the project can't start for two months because they have to order the steel and concrete, obviously they don't pay for that steel or concrete until it arrives, and then an invoice is made.

I would encourage you or third parties, if you seek clarification from the provincial government of Quebec, or if you talk to individual municipalities, to ask them how their projects are going. If there are any concerns about how they are going, in your constituency or elsewhere, I would be very open to responding to any concern.

I think the one biggest discussion we have before any decision is made is about whether the project is eligible for funding. On rare occasions we have to seek an exemption, or there's a funding amount that can be somewhat different, depending on the project. For example, we did a library in Halifax for which we gave \$18 million, as I recall; the province only gave \$13 million, and the municipality had to come up with the difference. There might be the odd exception that has to be made, such as that.

I'll turn it over to the deputy, if she can add anything else.

• (1700)

Ms. Yaprak Baltacioglu: Thank you.

Madam Chairman, the member has asked for the commitments. That's exactly what we have given to the Parliamentary Budget Officer. It's also on our website.

Regarding the Public Service Commission audit, the department has received and has accepted the audit, and we have an action plan in place. However, I would like to point to the fact that the audit timeframe was January 2006 to August 2008, which was before the economic action plan had started. By the time the economic action plan had started, the department had taken significant steps to

basically bring more capacity into a relatively small but mighty department.

The people in my department are proud of the work they do and are very honoured that they're part of delivering projects that mean quite a lot for the Canadian economy. We're very proud and we stand behind our numbers, in terms of whatever numbers we have.

Hon. John Baird: I could add just one little point. I said—

The Chair: Minister, I will give you one minute to wrap up, but first, give me a second.

I've been listening to all the questions that have been asked, and generally the confusion comes because we do not have a clear idea of the application process, the approval of the commitment, and then the spending and the outcomes. Do you have a flow chart that clarifies how this happens?

I think a very relevant question has been asked. That is, since March 2009 this stimulus funding has been in place. Have there been invoices submitted? If so, how much are they for? Could that be given to us by the officials? It appears that the Parliamentary Budget Officer still doesn't have that information.

If you have claims, or if you don't have claims, just tell us that the claims have not arrived or that the claims have arrived and here is what we have paid, because you must have cut cheques. If that could be done, I think it would clarify, and we won't have to go through this round again. We would really like to bring this study to an end.

We appreciate your being here. We appreciate that you have your right to say what the government wants to do, but we would like the public servants to be honest and open and say what they have done: this is the reality, here are the numbers, and here is how you can verify.

With that, I would request Minister Merrifield to make any closing remarks he may wish to make.

Hon. Rob Merrifield: I thank the committee for their questions. I think they're valid and good questions.

What is important is to understand that what we're trying to do is get Canadians through this global economic slowdown in the best way we possibly can, creating as many jobs as we can.

When it comes to the numbers, it's not so important whether the bill was submitted last month and paid this month as it is that the point when the starting gun goes is when the project was announced and the municipalities and provinces are prepared to move on those projects. The money will come and flow in due process.

We have professional people in the department who take their job very seriously. That's why they are doing that job very professionally and making sure that due diligence is done on this. I think Canadians can rest assured that this is the way it's being run.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Minister Baird.

Hon. John Baird: In response, I also think the question was rather thoughtful from the Bloc Québécois representative on the committee: are we just to take the federal government's word for it? We're sending a substantial amount of information—on the web, and here today, and to the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

I would encourage each member of the committee, whether the chair or another, to sit down with the mayor of their municipality. Sit down with Mayor Miller and ask him how the relationship has been. Sit down with the provincial minister of infrastructure and ask him about the relationship and get specific on-the-ground progress reports. I think that would be of great benefit to you.

I would encourage my friend Mr. Martin to sit down with Ron Lemieux or Greg Selinger in Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg. Ask them how it has gone. I could go on to each member of the committee.

I think there has been a pretty good partnership, and that's a significant check to ensure that taxpayers' dollars are spent wisely and well.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you all for being here, and thank you for staying until five o'clock.

Before you leave, let me say that, as you can appreciate, the only frustration has arisen when things are stated and we can't see the real dollars; that's where our issue is. So we will be sending a note over to the deputy minister for clarification and for information that we have requested.

Oui, madame.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Madam Chair, I am not talking to Quebec's cities and municipalities today. I am talking to Minister Baird.

As much as you respect Quebec's jurisdictions, which I appreciate greatly, I respect those of my mayors and the Fédération Québécoise des Municipalités. I do not find it very amusing that you are asking me to address my questions to the mayors. Minister Baird, I am here to represent the people of my riding and to ask you questions. I prefer to be in touch with you than with my mayor.

[English]

Mr. Ed Holder: I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Holder.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thanks very much.

I thought we all had our appropriate rounds and opportunities to speak. If we're going to go through rounds again, I'd like to have another opportunity.

The Chair: No, we're not going into further rounds. I just recognized her because I thought she had some motion or something.

Mr. Ed Holder: I thought it was a point of order as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jean, you had put your hand up. The floor is yours.

Mr. Brian Jean: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I was just going to refer the chair to page 827 of Marleau and Montpetit in relation to the role of the chair, specifically what the role of the chair is:

The Chair of a committee is responsible for recognizing members and witnesses who seek the floor and ensuring that any rules established by the committee concerning the apportioning of speaking time are respected. Furthermore, the Chair is also responsible for maintaining order in committee proceedings. However, the Chair does not have the power to censure disorder or decide questions of privilege; this can only be done by the House upon receiving a report from the committee.

I have looked at the role of the chair, the role of vice-chairs, acting chairs, elections, etc., and nowhere do I see that specifically the chair can ask questions directly of the witnesses.

I am a little curious about that, because I have seen it many times, and I was wondering.... You have the clerk next to you, and certainly it seems as though it would be an appropriate situation, but it does not refer to it in Marleau and Montpetit. I was wondering whether that could be clarified.

The Chair: Since you have the book, you can go to page 862 and look at the two paragraphs, under "Testimony" and the one before it.

Mr. Brian Jean: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to let committee members know the order of business for next week.

For November 3, we had requested the Minister of Treasury Board to come, but he's not able to come. He's going to send his deputy minister. I think we are fine with that, because we wanted to do the study on the advertising aspect of it.

I want to let you know that the Clerk of the Privy Council is confirmed to appear, along with another official. The President of the Treasury Board is unable to attend, so Ms. Michelle d'Auray, Secretary of the Treasury Board, is ready to come.

On Thursday, November 5, we have the public service commissioner confirmed.

Is there any other business?

Mr. Brian Jean: I was just wondering, Madam Chair.... I'll refer you to that particular page, if I may: "Committee members are usually given priority in the questioning of witnesses" over the chair. Is that, indeed, the normal course of the business in this?

I'm just asking because the allocation for witnesses is obviously.... Mr. Brown, for instance, hasn't asked a question in a month. And quite frankly, the questioning you had was, in my mind, more than ten minutes in length; I can check that out in the blues. Just your interference between each segment of the questioning.... It seems to me that your role as chair is taking up quite a bit of the time of the committee.

• (1710)

The Chair: I would suggest that you look at the framework of the time I spent. I introduced and welcomed the ministers; I advised them what we were here to study.

The only time I will interject is when I find that the witnesses and the members are at cross-purposes, when they don't understand each other. But I do not think I go.... I actually watch the clock.

Mr. Brown had his time not given.... There's an allocation; there's a process. And if your time—

Mr. Brian Jean: Well, I agree, there is an allocation, and it's actually covered by the rules, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Jean, let me finish talking.

If there is an allocation process, I follow it, and if the minister keeps on talking for seven minutes, I cannot stop him, if you guys don't stop him. If he's responding to your question and you're allowing him to do it, that's not up to me. You can interject and stop any witness, if you feel that witness is not responding to your question.

So that's exactly what I do, and if you feel that the chair is...if you feel it, that's your opinion.

I'm sorry, but I have the prerogative to interject when I have to.

Mr. Brian Jean: I'm not talking about the interjection, Madam Chair. I'm talking about the questioning—

Mr. Pat Martin: It's not a one-on-one conversation, though.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Martin.

Mr. Pat Martin: It's a committee, not just the two of you.

I wanted to add to the same point that Brian raises. I have been a member of Parliament for five terms and sat on 12 different committees. I've never seen a committee where the chair did not take the liberty to interject from time to time, especially if they thought there was something the committee should hear that it was not hearing in the course of questioning. In those committees, the chair doesn't always wait until everyone else has had their turn. Sometimes the chair even interjects after the first speaker has their questioning. The chair may make one little comment, then another one later on, and then at the end take one complete round for themselves, if they

chose. It certainly is the practice and the norm, notwithstanding what Marleau and Montpetit says.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean: I understand that would be the opinion of somebody who has been here for five terms. I've been here for three terms, and he's a member of a party that gets three rounds for every one opportunity that a government member or, for instance, an official opposition member gets.

What I was asking—you do get more rounds, Mr. Martin—

Mr. Pat Martin: I get one round in a whole day. Did you notice that?

The Chair: Mr. Jean, what you are arguing is moot, really. If you read carefully, it says:

Following this opening statement, there is a period for questioning. Any member of the committee may pose questions to the witnesses. The Chair may, on occasion, also participate in the questioning of witnesses. Other Members of the House in attendance at committee meetings may also be permitted to pose questions....

And I think I am in my right—

Mr. Brian Jean: It continues, Madam Chair. It does continue:

This depends, in part, on the amount of time the committee has accorded to dealing with each witness and the number of committee members who wish to ask questions. Committee members are usually given priority in the questioning of witnesses.

The Chair: The clerk is explaining to me that you have not understood it well. It is that non-committee members should not ask questions over committee members. It does not talk about the chair.

With that, I will end debate, unless anybody else has any issues.

Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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