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Chair

Mr. Bruce Stanton

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. It's great to see you all here this morning on what is sure to be a busy day here on Parliament Hill.

We're delighted to have back the Cree-Naskapi Commission. We have the chair, Richard Saunders, as well as two of the commissioners of the commission, Mr. Philip Awashish and Mr. Robert Kanatewat.

You'll know, members, that we had representatives before this committee earlier in this Parliament, and we welcome them back today for this, our study of the 2010 report of the commission.

We have a full hour. As is customary, Chair Saunders, we go ahead with ten minutes for your presentation. You're welcome to have your colleagues take any part of that, as you may wish, and then we'll go to questions from members.

So go ahead with your opening presentation, and welcome again.

Mr. Richard Saunders (Chairman, Cree-Naskapi Commission): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members.

We appreciate the opportunity of coming back to the committee. We find these are very useful in making us focus very clearly on what's important and what you need to hear, and on what's not so important and can be left to be read. It's also very good because it focuses the attention of other policy-makers in government that we deal with on some critical issues.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I'll concentrate on some of the highlights from the chairman's remarks in the report. I'll elaborate on a couple of those that need some elaboration. My colleagues will deal with an executive summary of our other findings and recommendations.

First of all, it's approaching two years since we were before the committee, and during that time there's been some good news, rather than problems. There have been problems too, but there's been some good news and I'd like to report on that first. As you know, there were some amendments to the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act immediately following our last presentation here. We know that members did a lot to expedite those and move them forward. We very much appreciate that sort of progress and focus.

Since then, there have been two additional agreements made between the Cree and Naskapi nations and others. One is the Eeyou Marine Region Land Claims Agreement. Under that agreement between the Cree of Eeyou Istchee and the Government of Canada,

the islands offshore and inshore along the eastern coast of James Bay and Hudson Bay, which were not included in the original James Bay agreement because they weren't in Quebec—they're technically in Nunavut—are traditional Cree territory. We're happy to see that there's an agreement in which those islands, for the most part, are now within Cree jurisdiction. That's an excellent development. They're still within Nunavut, but they're now essentially part of the Cree governance in Eeyou Istchee. That's a very positive development.

On the part of the Naskapi nation, a new Naskapi–Quebec partnership agreement deals with some community development issues and some economic development issues between the province and the Naskapi of Kawawachikamach. That's another good development.

So there's been progress in negotiations and successful conclusion of negotiations in those two areas.

The amendments to the act, which were passed by Parliament shortly after our last meeting, include the full recognition of the Crees of Oujé-Bougoumou as a Cree band within the meaning of both the Cree-Naskapi Act and the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. That had been outstanding for more than 20 years, and it's good to see that concluded.

One work in progress is the recognition of the final group of Crees, who are not included in either way—the Washaw Sibi Eeyou Cree. They are currently moving forward on becoming recognized as the final Cree band in Eeyou Istchee, and we look forward to having some good news on that to report, hopefully soon.

Some problems continue to exist in housing, and I think this committee is very familiar with the problems manifested across the country. On-reserve housing continues to be a problem. It continues to be a problem for the Cree. We have highlighted what we think are some reasons for that. Part of it is in fact the success of the Cree. Young people in the Cree communities have a 95% retention rate. That's unheard of in first nations across the country. Young people stay in the communities or return to them, form families, and consequently the demand for housing is very high.

• (0850)

The Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development uses a formula that's based on regions. The housing formula, and the money available under that formula, is determined region by region.

It's certainly true that housing conditions in the Alberta region are different from those in the maritime region. That's fair enough. We argue that within Quebec a regional formula that encompasses all of Quebec is inappropriate given the very high level of family formation and retention of young people in the Cree communities. That needs to be looked at. They ought to be looking at demographics specific to the Crees.

Problems continue in a number of other areas. There are needs for further amendments to the Cree-Naskapi Act to deal with local government issues. There's the problem of quorums. We've mentioned it before at this committee. The act requires fairly high-level quorums to approve things as simple as a transfer of land from a Cree community to, say, the Cree school board. Now, that's not the kind of issue where you're going to get a huge turnout of voters. Some of those quorums need to be looked at again.

Those issues are being moved forward by the Grand Council of the Crees, Eeyou Istchee, in terms of their further discussions with the Government of Canada on Cree governance. So that will move forward.

A couple of other developments are probably of interest. The Cree have long had a traditional Eeyou hunting law that covered a lot more than hunting. It was a traditional and customary law for the management of Cree resources. A tallyman played a key role. Stewardship of the land, for example, was a major concern of that.

My colleague Philip Awashish has now completed developing, on behalf of the Cree, the traditional Eeyou hunting law document, which I think is a major development.

There's one other thing I would mention. We as a commission have begun to understand some of the issues around administrative law and its interface with aboriginal and treaty rights and the newly evolving law coming from the courts and elsewhere relating to aboriginal and treaty rights.

The body of administrative law that's been developed in this country is very effective. It's based on English law concepts. It's based to some extent on European concepts of natural justice. It works pretty well for such things as the Immigration and Refugee Board, the Ontario Municipal Board, and the Ottawa taxi commission. There are some good principles there, and they work reasonably well. Some of them, which are regarded as fairly basic among those commissions and boards, don't work particularly well for aboriginal communities.

When we began in 1986, we were the only aboriginal commission, tribunal, or board of our sort legislatively based in Canada. Now there are about 50. So the issue of the need to reconcile administrative law as it's generally understood around Canada with aboriginal and treaty rights is becoming important. We've been doing some work with colleague organizations around the country about that. Our mandate clearly does not extend to doing very much outside of our territory. We've been in discussions with AFN about picking up the ball on that issue and doing some of the moving forward on that. We'll have further discussions with them.

We found there's an interest in this across the country in other aboriginal boards, tribunals, commissions—particularly, obviously, those that have some administrative law responsibility. We expect to

be able to report back at some point in the near future on some progress in that area.

I'll just give you a very quick example of the areas where that doesn't work too well. It's a normal principle of administrative law that if I appear before a board that's adjudicating my rights or dealing with an application I've made or something of that sort, I don't expect to see sitting on the board the opposing party's mother-in-law. That's a basic principle. It works quite well. It's a shortcut to getting fairness at least in terms of not being a judge in one's own case, or in the case of one's relatives or friends.

However, if you look at this commission and the folks appearing before us, the chances that neither Philip nor Robert nor I will know them fairly well are remote. You're looking at 15,000 people; chances are we know most of the leadership, and we know a lot of people who aren't leaders. When a group appears before us, chances are we'll know some of them. One of my colleagues could possibly be related to them.

● (0855)

When you look at administrative law bodies in smaller communities of several hundred or a couple of thousand, the chances go up that somebody's related to somebody, or they had an old business relationship, or they went to school together, or they had an affair 20 years ago, or whatever. There's frequently some connection. So you have to find other ways of getting to fairness than by saying that nobody related to you can be on a board. It involves greater transparency about reasons for decision-making, very likely, greater transparency about the process that goes on within the board or commission, and greater availability to the parties of all—and I mean all—the relevant information.

There may be other approaches. Another example would be the consensus model. We've made hundreds of decisions on this commission, for example, over the years, and only once did we ever actually have a two-to-one vote. We don't have votes normally. We all agree, and that's how it works. It takes a bit of discussion, but that's how it works. That one decision, by the way, was on an internal administrative matter of very little importance.

The Chair: We are quite over the ten-minute mark, there, Mr. Saunders. I didn't know whether either of your colleagues had just a very brief opening comment, and then we'll go to questions, or whether we'll perhaps take—

Mr. Richard Saunders: That was actually my last comment.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Richard Saunders: I'm sorry for the overage, Mr. Chair. I'll ask my colleague, Robert Kanatewat, for his comments.

The Chair: We'll hear a very brief comment from each, if you will, and then we'll go directly to questions.

Mr. Richard Saunders: Commissioner Awashish will start.

The Chair: Mr. Awashish, go ahead, sir.

Mr. Philip Awashish (Commissioner, Cree-Naskapi Commission): Thank you, members of the committee.

The Cree-Naskapi Commission was established by special federal legislation, the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act. This act flows from a modern-day treaty. There are actually two treaties, the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement and the 1978 Northeastern Quebec Agreement .

The commission established by the act, as I mentioned, has a duty to prepare biannual reports on the implementation of this act to the minister, who shall cause the report to be laid before each house of Parliament. The commission also reports on the implementation of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement and the North-eastern Quebec Agreement, as particular sections of these agreements contemplate the powers and duties of the local governments of the Cree-Naskapi first nations.

The present report that we did last year, the 2010 report of the commission, constitutes the 12th biannual report to the commission, pursuant to subsection 165.(1) and in accordance with subsection 171.(1) of the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act.

The commission holds special implementation hearings to prepare for these reports. These hearings provide an opportunity for representatives of the Cree-Naskapi nations and the Government of Canada to express their concerns and to discuss their issues. The principal comments, issues, and concerns raised by the representatives and noted in the 2010 report of the commission are the following. I believe each member has the executive summary of the 2010 report of the commission. They are listed at the bottom of page 1 and include page 2. So there is a series of these issues and concerns raised by the Cree-Naskapi representatives as well as the federal representatives. I don't think I'll read through them all. I think the members of the committee can very well see there are quite a number of these issues.

The findings and tone of this report are based on the commission's understanding and analysis of the comments, issues, and concerns raised in these hearings. Chapter 1 describes the background, mandate, and activities of the commission. The chapter notes that Bill C-28, an act to amend the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act, was introduced in the House of Commons on April 27, 2009. Chapter 2 of the report describes the roles and duties of the mandate of the commission in a consolidated manner and as a consequence of the recent amendments to the act. Chapter 3 of the report describes recent developments respecting the Cree Nation governance and the future of Cree Nation governance.

Since its response to the 2002 report of the commission, the Department of Indian Affairs has provided a comprehensive response to the recommendations of the commission. The responses of the department represent an entirely different approach in the dealings with the commission. It appears that the department wants to improve its relations with the commission as well as with the Cree-Naskapi communities. Consequently, the commission reports and comments on these responses of the department in its biannual reports.

● (0900)

Chapter 4 of the present report outlines and comments on the response of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development to the 2008 report of the commission.

Chapter 5 of the report outlines the issues and concerns of the Cree and Naskapi nations as expressed at the special implementation hearings of the commission. These issues and concerns are outlined in the present executive summary, as I noted earlier.

The commission, in chapter 6 of the present report, discusses the importance and role of the Cree Trappers' Association in relation to the Cree First Nations and the Cree Regional Authority, and in the implementation of section 24, "Hunting, Fishing and Trapping", of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. In addition, the Cree Trappers' Association has been involved in the development of a written compilation of Cree customary law and practice. In particular, the CTA has engaged in an important exercise regarding the development of *Eeyou Indoh-hoh Weeshou-Wehwun*, or the traditional Eeyou hunting law. Chapter 6 of the report describes the importance of this development.

In chapter 7 we outline the recommendations for the commission. And I'll let my colleague Commissioner Robert Kanatewat brief you on these recommendations.

● (0905)

The Chair: Go ahead, Commissioner.

Mr. Robert Kanatewat (Commissioner, Cree-Naskapi Commission): Thank you.

We're honoured to be in front of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs.

When we first began this commission, we were hardly noticeable as a force in government. We were more or less told that whatever we reported was outside our mandate. Recently it appears that we are gradually being listened to, as we are coming before the House, making these recommendations, and responding to questions.

Our recommendations are what we find in the committee—all the recommendations we've put out in our biannual reports to the House of Commons. The commission submits the following recommendations:

1) The Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee)/Cree Regional Authority should have as a priority in these discussions with Canada to seek amendments to the Cree-Naskapi Act pertaining to the quorum provisions of the act, which have seriously hindered the decision-making process of local government and administration.

2) The Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee)/Cree Regional Authority should discuss with Canada particular arrangements for the enforcement of bylaws such as: (a) an agreement with Canada for the prosecution of offences under certain federal legislation or regulations if such legislation or regulation is referred to as part of a band's bylaw; (b) adequate support systems to enforce band bylaws; and (c) provision of federal prosecutors or funding for prosecution.

There are several other things that we have been recommending. Some have been noticed and some have been ignored, that is, considered outside our mandate. This is precisely what the commission is looking at to amend some of the Cree-Naskapi Act.

3) The Government of Canada should initiate discussions with the Cree Nation on the question of whether the Corbiere decision of the Supreme Court applies or does not apply to the Cree bands. If the Corbiere decision applies to the Cree bands, then Canada and the Crees must discuss any subsequent amendments to the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act and its implementation.

4) The Cree Regional Authority and the Crees of the Waskaganish First Nation should determine innovative means of improving the present voting process of the band so as to enable and permit voting by beneficiaries or electors who normally reside outside of the community.

5) Block "D" should be transferred to the Cree Nation of Chisasibi forthwith.

6) Canada and Quebec should enter into discussions with Cree bands and/or the Cree Regional Authority for adequate funding arrangements respecting the costs incurred by bands in complying with the financial reporting requirements of the governments.

7) The federal, Eeyou (Cree), and Naskapi authorities should determine and agree on the present and future needs of the Cree and Naskapi communities for housing and implement a strategic master plan, in the short and long term, to address these needs.

8) Canada, Quebec, and the Cree Regional Authority should determine and agree on the present and future needs of the Cree communities for police services and a Cree justice system and implement a strategic master plan to address these needs.

9) Canada and the Cree Regional Authority should review sections 21 and 22 of the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act with the objective of seeking amendments to the act in order to enhance and promote local economic development.

10) Canada and the Cree Regional Authority, in collaboration with the Cree bands, should determine innovative measures to ensure efficient collection of rent for band houses and residences.

11) The Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee)/Cree Regional Authority and the Cree Nation of Washaw Sibi should establish a process of discussions and planning to enable the realization of the objective of the Cree Nation of Washaw Sibi for the establishment of a distinct Cree community with their own category one lands so that they can receive programs and services at the same level as the Crees in the other nine communities. Canada and/or Quebec should be invited to participate in this process on matters under their respective responsibilities and jurisdiction.

●(0910)

12) Canada and the Cree Regional Authority, in collaboration with the Cree bands, should review the present terms and provisions of the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act with the objective of seeking amendments to the act to ensure, where practical, compatibility with *Eeyou Eehdou-wun*, or the Cree way of doing things in governance and administration.

I won't bore you with the rest of it. You have the paper in front of you, I hope.

The recommendations, right up to recommendation 20, were put in our report. We were expecting that some of these things would be

responded to and would be implemented. Some of them are very awkward problem areas for the Cree bands in these nine Cree communities that have been established. Pretty soon we're going to have a tenth one.

The 2010 report of the Cree-Naskapi Commission concludes, in chapter 8, that while principal primary authority rests with the local community, the Eeyou Cree Nation of Eeyou also recognizes that in practice, powers and responsibilities would often have to be exercised at higher levels by governmental bodies that represent the entire Cree Nation. The result would be multi-level Cree Nation governments in which authority spreads upwards from the people.

This approach is reflected in the current process, described in chapter 3 of the report, for negotiating an agreement and related legislation concerning a Cree Nation government. Consequently, the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee will have a Cree Nation regional government, in addition to the Cree local governments of the communities. This approach appears to be the manner in which the Eeyou Nation of Eeyou Istchee wishes to exercise self-government.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you for your presentations.

Members will now put their questions.

You have seven minutes, Mr. Russell.

[*English*]

Mr. Todd Russell (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning to each of you. It's good to have you with us again.

I have a couple of questions, and I'll leave it open to any of you to answer.

First of all, we talk about 12 reports, now spanning something like three decades, or getting up towards that. You talk about the challenge of housing on reserve and about the lack of funding. You say that it's partly the success of the communities that's adding to the pressures on this social need.

What can you observe and say to us today about what those improvements have been? I've never visited some of those communities. I'm just trying to get a firmer sense of how you see the improvements in the social and economic conditions of these communities, with the Cree-Naskapi (of Quebec) Act and the subsequent amendments that have been made. How would you quantify that or qualify that?

My next question, because it was raised at this committee a couple of years ago, is on the status of negotiations regarding the establishment or the creation of the Nunavik regional government. It seemed to be a bit of a contentious issue in terms of at least some of the Naskapi communities within that territorial area. I'm wondering if you could give us an update on where those negotiations are.

●(0915)

Mr. Richard Saunders: I'll just answer quickly, and my colleagues may want to add to my comments.

In terms of success having its price, employment levels in the communities are way higher than they are for most first nations communities across Canada—way higher. Problems do persist, and there is room for improvement, no question about that.

In terms of people with expertise returning to their communities after getting training and education and so on outside the community, it's at a much higher level than it is for other communities.

In terms of entrepreneurial developments and the number of corporations and businesses operating in the communities, again there is still room for improvement but it's far better than most other communities. Everybody knows about Air Quebec, the airline; everybody knows about the trucking company. There are many businesses. And I say “many”—not compared to Toronto or somewhere, but many in comparison to other first nations communities around the country.

I think the resources that are available to the Cree, and the leadership they've had, have made the key difference in that.

Another area would be the use of the Cree language. I've been associated throughout my life with many communities around the country, and I don't know of any that have the high level of the use of the language throughout their community. The fact that we tabled this report in Cree and Naskapi, and are required to by law, is significant in that respect.

I said I'd be quick.

To be frank, we asked this committee some time ago to hear the Naskapi directly because of their concerns about the development of the Nunavik regional government. They came here and expressed their concerns. There have been some discussions between them and the Nunavik authorities. As far as I know, those have moved along to some extent. They're not resolved, by any means; however, with all due respect, the Naskapi have not pushed us to address the issue again. So we respect that, and I wouldn't want to speculate much more on that.

Philip or Robert, any comments?

Mr. Philip Awashish: I will just comment on the social issues.

Before the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement of 1975, the Cree had a population of about 6,000. In 2010 we had a population of about 18,000. So within that time period—1975 to 2010—the population has about tripled in size.

Back in 1975 the Cree communities were isolated. There was no access to these communities except by float planes. Istchee was one of the only communities that had some kind of access by road. It was a gravel road. Housing was very inadequate in all the Cree communities back then, but since the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement came into force with all the benefits of the agreement, and along with development of natural resources in the territory of the Cree—the hydroelectric development, mining development, forestry development—the territory has opened up. There are now roads everywhere throughout the Cree territory, access roads to all the Cree communities, and airstrips throughout the communities. So the north, at least the Cree part of the north, has opened up. It's accessible.

With accessibility of course the Cree have paid a social price, along with the impacts of resource development. Now we have social problems in the communities. As far as I know from the Cree Health Board, the Cree have a high rate of diabetes as well.

While housing has improved since 1975, the present allocation and construction of houses do not meet the demand of the rising population. There are still houses that are crowded, there are still houses that need to be renovated as well, and there is certainly a need for more new housing for the Cree community.

These are some of the comments I wanted to make.

● (0920)

The Chair: We're just about out of time here.

Mr. Kanatewat, do you have a very brief comment to offer—maybe 20 seconds or so?

Mr. Robert Kanatewat: My two colleagues have covered what the gentleman over there had asked. Because of the influx of youth returning to their communities—a lot more than in other communities—part of the big problem is crowding in houses. As my colleague described, we've almost doubled our population in 35 years or so. We have social problems in every community, and the suicide rate is getting higher and higher. Because of those things we have to adjust our way of life, which we never had to do before.

In the old days we lived a quiet life. We were nomadic people who roamed the territory as we pleased, and so on. Nobody seems to be able to hide any more. You know where they are. In the old days you didn't know where people were. You didn't hear from them for ten months. But now you can almost hear them every day out in the bush with their high-frequency radios, and what not.

The Chair: I'm sorry, we have to move on.

Mr. Robert Kanatewat: We watch TV no matter where we are nowadays. Those are the things that have improved, but problems come with them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I do apologize and I appreciate your understanding on the time. In order for us to get at least one question from each of our members, I have to observe our timelines.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lévesque, for seven minutes.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): You are full-fledged members of my community and I am very proud of that fact. When I have something to negotiate, I will rely on you since you have strong negotiating skills. You have always managed to put the pieces of the puzzle together, one by one. Many first nations in Canada would be happy to be where you are today. However, I can attest to the fact that there are certainly many problems that still need to be addressed.

Earlier, you talked about community governance, about having the authority eventually to establish rules between school boards, communities and band councils. I think you have the ability to see to it that such authority is granted to you.

You are very skilled negotiators. However, your closest representatives generally are unaware of where you stand or of the exact nature of your demands. We usually find out what these are when you table your report to the committee. That is what I deplore the most. Regarding the vision that you have just shared with us, you could let us know when and where you want this vision to come to fruition and with whom you have shared it. We could then accompany you in this endeavour.

For example, the Chisasibi Cree Nation has had recurring problems with turtle grass flats. This matter has been brought to the committee's attention. I'm not sure where things stand but this issue, which affects geese, is important to the Cree Nation. It's part of its culture.

The residents of Whapmagoostui need a bridge for community expansion.

You spoke of another problem that concerns me as well as my colleague. Some of his constituents are planning to move to our community if the problem is not resolved. As you know, we favour nation to nation negotiation. Negotiations are set to take place between the Cree and Algonquian first nations. I will let my colleague Marc talk more about this later.

I would first like to know your opinion of the bill calling for first nation transparency. We hear a lot about new housing, but in several coastal villages, existing housing was built on soil that while not unstable per se, is currently reacting to the thaw. Houses are greatly affected by mould. Has this problem been resolved? Lastly, can you tell me how many reports you are required to present at this time? Do you not think that you could present all of your demands in a single annual report?

Please respond quickly, so as to give my colleague time to put his question. He is also very much interested in this issue.

● (0925)

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Saunders: Thank you, Monsieur Lévesque.

On the first comment, certainly every member of Parliament, I think, is entitled to know what's going on in our processes and everybody's processes that involve people who work for the public and who are paid for by the public. For members who like to be more involved or briefed more frequently or attend processes or be given notice that we're having hearings—things of that sort—we can do that, and we'd be happy to. That's the first thing.

Particularly with regard to transparency vis-à-vis members of Parliament and other interested members of the public, we can certainly inform you when we're having our special implementation hearings. You'd be very welcome to attend, and we will do that.

With regard to the number of reports, I think the Auditor General has talked about the number of reports that first nations are required to submit to government agencies of various sorts. She's also talked at length about what happens to those reports, which is basically nothing. She's made some recommendations, and we agree with her recommendations.

On mould in the houses, I must confess I'm not in a position to give you a straight answer on that. I have some anecdotal things, but I don't have facts. Maybe that's something we should have a look at.

On transparency, I say the more the better. We'd welcome any suggestions that members have on how we might be more transparent.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Vous disposez d'une minute et demie.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): I'll try to be quick.

Regarding your third recommendation about the application of the Corbiere decision, I believe it applies to the Cree. I want to give you a heads up at this time. I suggest you start talking to the federal government, because as a lawyer, I can tell you that this decision should apply to the Cree. You have some work to do in this area.

I'm interested in what is happening with the Washaw Sibi nation, the 10th Cree community. Members of this community live on Algonquian land near the town of Amos.

Have any negotiations taken place? Can you update us on the situation? Is everything going well? We must not upset one community just to please another. Many Algonquians are of Cree descent. It's entirely normal to see some blending of these nations. Was this one of the concerns you raised during negotiations over the establishment of the Washaw Sibi nation?

● (0930)

The Chair: You were not supposed to take up the full minute and a half with one question, sir.

[*English*]

Go ahead with a short response, if you can.

Mr. Robert Kanatewat: We don't directly get involved with the Washaw Sibi Eeyou, but we do understand that they're in the process of negotiating. The problem is their selection of land on the outskirts of Amos, and that's an ongoing process.

What we do know is the fact that the community may start in 2012-13. Somewhere around there it will start. Right now they are slowly negotiating the process. We understand that in the new relationship with the federal government the Crees are responsible for establishing the community.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Fine then.

Thank you, Messrs. Lévesque and Lemay.

[*English*]

Ms. Crowder, for seven minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you once again for appearing before the committee. I've been fortunate enough to have been on the committee when you've come before us.

I have a quick question before I go into my other question, because it shapes the rest of it. Have you had a response from the government on your 2010 report?

Mr. Richard Saunders: Yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Okay, in that context, by looking at a couple of your recommendations, and again, Mr. Saunders, just noting your own presentation, I want to talk just a little bit about housing.

When you came before the committee in 2008, at that time you highlighted the critical and urgent need around housing. And here we are in the 2010 report continuing to highlight the critical and urgent need around housing. So I am curious about what the government response has been to your 2010 recommendation around housing.

Mr. Richard Saunders: The government did, as we said, respond to each of our previous recommendations. They did also respond to housing. There are discussions under way at the moment between CMHC and the Cree. However, to be entirely blunt, what we're hearing from the Cree is that CMHC—and you'll find it in the report in our section on responses—has been doing a lot of organizing itself to discuss the problem. And it would be good if they could resolve the issues between themselves and the Department of Indian Affairs and within themselves on how best to address the issue.

When we asked questions of Indian Affairs at our hearings, you'll notice we got a very convoluted answer—extremely convoluted. It was based on, well, we're getting our act together, we're planning to get ready to run to consult. It was that kind of an answer. It was the bureaucratic runaround answer, to be blunt about it.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Saunders, this is not a new problem. You've highlighted it in a number of reports that housing is an issue, so this is not new information for either CMHC or INAC.

What do you feel is getting in the way of seeing some progress on this?

Mr. Richard Saunders: Well, I'll give you a frank answer that's just my opinion. That's all it is at this point. And that is that they probably haven't identified how they're going to find the money or where they're going to find it, so they're going through some bureaucratic delaying to get an answer. That's not a very nice thing to say, but I think that's probably the truth.

• (0935)

Ms. Jean Crowder: In that light—and this fits into it as well—I notice you've also talked about water and sewage treatment. What's happening on that front?

Mr. Richard Saunders: Some progress is being made. There are discussions under way.

Ms. Jean Crowder: What kinds of discussions do you mean?

Mr. Richard Saunders: We certainly will monitor it. We've said we'll monitor that, and we hope there are positive outcomes. If there are not, we will highlight them and let the chips fall where they may.

Ms. Jean Crowder: At this point there are talks going on, but there hasn't been commitment to resources?

Mr. Richard Saunders: Yes. I think you also have to keep in mind that certain infrastructure matters are covered by the supplementary agreements that have been made, the James Bay agreement, particularly the La Paix des Braves agreement, in which the Quebec government has responsibility, and the new relationship agreement with Canada, in which Canada has responsibility. So there's some sorting out to be done there as to the responsibilities of the Cree flowing from that and the responsibilities that remain with the federal government.

I think the key here is that federal responsibilities to first nations people across Canada are also responsibilities, generally speaking, to the Cree. And what the Cree have received as compensation is an additional matter: it's for concessions made in relation to the development of the dams and all the rest of it. So we would say the federal government continues to have responsibility for federal programs in the area of housing, and they have a responsibility, we think, to address the issue on its merits, which has to do with the size of families, the formation of new families, and that kind of thing.

We'd be happy to follow up with a briefing on that.

Robert.

Mr. Robert Kanatewat: In terms of housing, the problem would be worse if the Cree Nation, as a whole, didn't have programs like "House to Own" and that type of thing. A lot of the native people own their houses now. They have paid for them, and so on and so forth. I, for one, have never received any of this Indian Affairs housing. I put up my own house and so on. There are quite a number of natives in all nine of those Cree communities who have done that. Now, if that weren't done, the housing situation would have been worse.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Do I have time, Mr. Chair? Two minutes?

Can I turn to policing just for one moment? I know that in recommendation 8 you touched on the needs of Cree communities for policing services and a Cree justice system. Recently we saw the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador and the Assembly of First Nations nationally highlight some concerns around potential cuts to policing services. I wonder if you could comment on the state of policing services and the state of funding for policing services.

Mr. Richard Saunders: In our previous report I think Canada's response—which we're printed, and it's on page 46 of the English-language edition—speaks for itself. Let me just quote part of their response briefly here. These are the actual words of the Department of Indian Affairs at our hearing:

In terms of recommendation number 8, policing, just as a lead-in, some of the work that we've been doing internally in the federal government is to try to build what we're calling the Implementation Management Framework. Yes, Indian Affairs coordinates on behalf of Canada the implementation of obligations...

Blah, blah, blah. That speaks for itself.

Ms. Jean Crowder: It doesn't say anything.

Mr. Richard Saunders: Exactly.

Ms. Jean Crowder: So how are you managing policing services in your community when this is the kind of response you get?

Mr. Richard Saunders: Do you want to...? How do you manage policing?

Mr. Robert Kanatewat: Right. I'm not a policeman.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank heavens, if that's the response you're dealing with.

Mr. Robert Kanatewat: We have a program that the justice system established, and they just now put up the regional office in Chisasibi, which is going to be operating possibly at the end of this year or next year. They've already put up some housing for people who are going to be working there.

So the police and justice system per se are improving, in a sense, compared to what they used to be. Every Cree community has its own police force, but what you would call a regional police force will be established. This justice system will be on its own in the Cree Nation. It's going to be more or less governed by the Cree Regional Authority.

• (0940)

The Chair: That's about all the time we have, Ms. Crowder. Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Rickford for our last question, for seven minutes.

Mr. Greg Rickford (Kenora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you to the witnesses for coming today.

My name is Greg Rickford. I am the member of Parliament for the Kenora riding and parliamentary secretary for Indian and northern affairs.

First of all, I want to congratulate the commission on its important work. In fact the communities, by way of this important work on some impressive statistics, which you've indicated has resulted in high retention factors, young people returning from substantive training, and family formation in those communities.... It's a bit of a nuanced dimension to some of the ongoing housing issues that remain in first nations communities and that are in fact long-standing.

Mr. Saunders, I want to respectfully say that I'm not completely persuaded by your opinion with respect to the role of CMHC and the work that the Cree Regional Authority is doing. As you can imagine, I have some information and experience in these regards. In fact I was in Thunder Bay not too long ago, making some announcements for a number of first nations communities in the northern Ontario region. This is obviously a region where first nations communities have not had some of the processes and good fortune that by your own admission have benefited your communities greatly.

The overall response was favourable, to the extent that funding formulas through CMHC provided communities with more flexible models to meet the changing demands, as Mr. Kanatewat has pointed out, around things like home ownership and the ability of bands to have leasing and renting agreements. I recognize of course that this isn't a panacea, but it does represent a substantial change, if you will, in some of the intractable problems historically that the department and the bands have had.

I see that you're nodding; you may have some agreement with this.

My question might be more appropriate for the Cree Regional Authority. I was wondering if you could comment on any knowledge you have with respect to housing programs, and funding formulas

specifically, as they relate to CMHC, which take us a little further down the road in terms of overall flexibility for housing programs in those communities.

Mr. Richard Saunders: Thank you. I think you're making some points that are quite important for us to focus on a little.

You really should talk to the Cree Regional Authority about the details—

Mr. Greg Rickford: I understand that.

Mr. Richard Saunders: —of the negotiations, and that's fair enough. You may wish to do that, and I would encourage you to do so.

At a more general level, though, I think part of our problem with CMHC, and indeed with many government agencies many times, is the tendency to not come to grips with the issues and to spend a lot of time, as I said earlier, getting ready to plan, to prepare, to think about, to develop a committee to look at it, rather than getting on with things. There's a little too much of that.

I'd like to be very clear that this is not a partisan matter in any way.

Mr. Greg Rickford: It's not intended to be, Mr. Saunders.

Mr. Richard Saunders: We met with one of your minister's predecessors, Jane Stewart, and we told her, "Minister, you're impotent". "Well," she said, "maybe some of my colleagues are, but I'm certainly not".

What we meant by that was that very frequently the political leadership—ministers, parliamentary secretaries—the government, regardless of who they are, Liberal, Conservative, whatever, make decisions, or appear to have made decisions, in good faith—

Mr. Greg Rickford: What I'm suggesting, Mr. Saunders, if I may—

Mr. Richard Saunders: —with the chiefs and so on, and it doesn't happen.

Mr. Greg Rickford: What I'm suggesting.... And certainly partisan never even crept into my mind here; the question was actually fairly objective. The federal government's responsibility in these regards, and by way of extension, CMHC, is to look at hundreds and hundreds of first nations communities. It is a very dynamic situation, particularly with respect to the economic conditions, or lack thereof, that prevail in one region versus another. And they are diverse.

It appears as though this question might be better for the Cree Regional Authority. I know that the commission recommended that the Cree and Naskapi authorities implement some kind of a strategic plan that takes into account short- and long-term needs of the Cree and Naskapi communities with respect to housing. Without perhaps commentary on any specific political party or the leadership in the first nations communities, can you more pointedly highlight whether we have identified short- and long-term needs in these regards, with any specificities that might be relevant for our discussion today?

• (0945)

Mr. Richard Saunders: A couple of years ago the late Chief Billy Diamond, who was working on that, did produce a fairly substantial piece of research. I believe it was provided to the committee. I think at the time we were waiting for a French translation, and it was ultimately provided. Nonetheless, I think that's the basis of where the Cree are coming from at the moment.

Clearly more needs to be done, and I really would encourage you, and any other member who is able to facilitate more progress in this area, to talk to the Cree Regional Authority and look at specific things that can be done to move the process along, because the problem is stubborn. There's good will on all sides to solve it, and over a period of time no doubt resources can be found.

Your points about planning are well taken. I think the Crees have laid the groundwork through the late Chief Diamond's work. But I would encourage you to talk, either as a committee or as an individual member or as the department, to the CRA about the specifics.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Thank you.

The Chair: Members, thank you very much for your questions.

To our guests, we appreciate your time and attention to this report, and of course to your ongoing work at the commission on behalf of the people you represent and work with.

I must say, members, if I can be so bold....

You've given us some insight, shared your insights and experience with the committee today. They are the kinds of communities that I would hope in the future the committee will have an opportunity to visit from time to time, so we can see for ourselves the kinds of experiences you have taken the time to share with us here this morning, even if it is so briefly.

Members, we're going to suspend the meeting momentarily while we switch our witnesses. It will give us a chance to say goodbye to our guests.

Thank you.

• (0945)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (0950)

The Chair: We'll resume, members.

I'll just do a quick check. Does anyone have to run right out at 15 minutes to the hour, or are we okay to give our guests the full hour? We're running about seven minutes over right now, but if you don't have to run right out at—

A voice: There's house duty.

The Chair: Do some of you have house duty? Well, we'll see how we do. If we lose a couple of members, I don't think it's anything we have to sweat about.

We have with us today the representatives of the National Association of Friendship Centres, on their request. I'm glad we could work out the timing.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr is going to lead off. Mr. Cyr is the executive director for the association. With him, of course, is Mr. Conrad Saulis, the policy director, as well as Tricia McGuire-Adams, who is the research manager on the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network.

Mr. Cyr, we're going to lead off with you. We have up to ten minutes for the opening presentation. If you want to split that with your colleagues, that's your choice.

Let's go ahead.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr (Executive Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): Mr. Chair, thank you very much. I think I will monopolize the first ten minutes of it.

Allow me to begin with acknowledging the Algonquin Nation, who inhabited the land we are sitting on today.

My name is Jeffrey Cyr. I'm the recently appointed executive director of the National Association of Friendship Centres. This is my fourth week at the organization.

I am a proud member of the Métis Nation. I am originally from Manitoba. I am a father of six children, Métis and first nations. We are a product of the urban aboriginal experience.

I am joined today by Conrad Saulis, our policy director, from the Maliseet Nation, and Ms. Tricia McGuire-Adams, who is our Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network research manager, of the Ojibway Nation.

I want to thank the standing committee for the invitation to present today. The NAFC is very encouraged to have this opportunity, and we hope our dialogue will support our organization's ability to improve its reach and capacities.

As I am sure you are aware, the National Association of Friendship Centres consists of 117 urban-based aboriginal service organizations across the country and in many of your ridings. We are working to meet the needs of Canada's urban aboriginal population, which according to the 2006 census comprised 54% of the total Canadian aboriginal population. That is an increase from 47% in 1996, so you can see the migration trends.

The NAFC's 117 centres and seven provincial and territorial associations are well known in aboriginal Canada as highly respected service centres that provide vital programs and services to aboriginal peoples of all ages. We have been around since approximately the 1950s.

We are also becoming better known with other populations in Canada, including members of Parliament and your committee.

I am very glad to be the NAFC's new executive director. My learning curve has been extremely steep in the last four weeks, which includes learning of the Friendship Centres' all-party caucus. I want to thank Jean Crowder, and formerly Chris Warkentin, for helping to establish and co-chair that. We have had successful lobby days on the Hill as a result.

I hope the all-party caucus will continue to be available to me and to the NAFC executive committee for continuing dialogue and support.

To my knowledge, this dialogue session with your committee today marks the first opportunity the national association has had to take an hour of your time. I thank you for that opportunity again.

Over the past two years, NAFC delegates have been meeting with members of Parliament in efforts to seek your support for increasing federal funding to our friendship centres through the aboriginal friendship centre program, which is our core funding program.

Each year the NAFC publishes a report outlining the state of the friendship centre movement. Data for the report is gathered from friendship centres' applications for core funding.

Our 2010 report demonstrates, once again most emphatically, that governments—federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal—rely on friendship centres to deliver key programs to urban aboriginal Canadians. However, local friendship centres face tremendous challenges in sustaining core operations with funding allocations that have not increased since 1996, have not had a cost of living increase since 1996.

On a personal level, I refer to that as structural impoverishment of the program.

Talking a bit about how friendship centres are relied upon across this country, in our last report we gathered the statistics from the friendship centres. There were 2.3 million points of contact at friendship centres across the country. Each time a client accesses a program or a service, it is referred to as a point of contact. It's been a marked increase since 2009. That's mostly because we're getting better at capturing the data over time.

The top three programs offered at friendship centres, as you can imagine, are health, family, and youth. Health comprises some 27% of all programs, family 14%, and youth 14%. This pattern has been consistent at least over the last three years.

In 2010-11, friendship centres will offer more than 1,264 programs across the country. In my opinion, it is the pre-eminent national urban aboriginal service provider.

• (0955)

Just to give you a snapshot of how the funding works for our organization, combined federal-provincial-territorial funds to friendship centres is over \$100 million a year. Own-source revenue for friendship centres is about \$3.8 million a year, and cities, towns, and other funders provide about \$4.1 million per year.

This is the key point of our presentation today to you: these tremendous challenges and what they mean in operating costs for us. The annual aboriginal friendship centre allocation covers less than 40% of the annual cost of operating local friendship centres. Local friendship centres cost approximately \$325,000 a year in core funding to run. That's averaged across the country.

We receive approximately, on average, \$140,000 per year to do that, and for the last 16 years the friendship centres have continually put in applications to the federal government for core funding based on what we actually need to do the job. What we receive is less than half that. In essence, current allocations do not meet core funding costs, and this puts a lot of strain on program centres, services, and people.

The average friendship centre executive director's salary is \$56,000 per year. The average salary in comparable positions in other non-profit organizations is at least \$10,000 higher. And if the friendship centre executive directors are making \$56,000 on average, then their staff are making considerably less.

“The State of the Friendship Centre Movement”, our report, clearly demonstrates that governments rely on friendship centres to deliver key programs to urban aboriginal Canadians, one of the fastest-growing populations in the country. The report also shows that local friendship centres face tremendous challenges due to the insufficient amount of funding to run those centres.

There is a need to ensure that friendship centres can address challenges and continue delivering for governments. Increased funding to local friendship centres needs to come through an increased budget for the aboriginal friendship centres program, which is now run through the Department of Canadian Heritage.

As a parliamentary standing committee, your efforts are crucial to helping us achieve budget enhancements for friendship centres. It enhances our ability to leverage funding from municipal, provincial, and other sources.

This is the main body of the presentation. I just want to add that the National Association of Friendship Centres here in Ottawa and my staff were involved in a lot of other initiatives as well. We work with the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development on the urban aboriginal knowledge network. This is a research effort on urban aboriginal needs that takes the community's direction on where research needs to happen. We're also involved in other initiatives, such as Elections Canada's encouraging aboriginal people to vote. So we work across a spectrum of policy and other issues at the national association.

• (1000)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cyr, and congratulations on your new post. I'm sure that learning curve will continue to escalate as the weeks go, as it generally does.

Let's go to our first round of questions. We're going to lead off with Mr. Bagnell.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you all for coming. It's a great pleasure for me to have you here. I was a board member for many years at Skookum Jim Friendship Centre, the treasurer and the president. So you've always had an ally here and I've always pushed for your budget increases. In fact, if it isn't in today's budget, the media will hear about it again, and I'll be encouraging the committee to make a motion to that effect.

I'm just wondering if society hasn't really caught up to the democratic trends. I'm talking about large structural issues. Does it not seem a little bizarre that we have a \$10-billion Indian Affairs budget and yet 54% of aboriginal people live in urban centres, not on reserve? If you took all governments combined, the figure you gave is less than 1% of \$10 billion for 54% of first nations people and a few employees at Heritage Canada, compared with the 5,000 at Indian Affairs.

Doesn't it seem that we have to catch up to change that proportion dramatically to help urban aboriginal people?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: I wholeheartedly agree. The demographic trends have been shifting pretty rapidly in the last decade and a half. This isn't a trend limited to Canada; it's around the world. Migration to urban centres is an issue for all countries, and in particular it's an issue for aboriginal people, because what's been referred to sometimes as the urban churn—coming from a rural and remote or reserve community into an urban setting, taking people out of their cultural base—causes a lot of chaos in the urban environment for different aboriginal people.

I don't think that necessarily the policy thinking has caught up with the demographic reality, as you pointed out, both in a funding sense and actually in terms of focusing the policy agenda on where the issues are. I've met with some of my colleagues at the Assembly of First Nations and talked with some of my colleagues at the Métis National Council, and we agree that the urban policy issue is a key one and we are going to try to work together on that more and more. We have a very good working relationship with them. We are a service provider, as friendship centres, and we'd like to see whatever government of the day pay more attention to that. There's a lot of good work that can be done.

We have to remember that friendship centres are run by volunteer boards, by people putting in their own time. I sat on the board of the local Odawa Friendship Centre for two years as treasurer before I took this post. It was like a second full-time job. Many volunteers are working in these friendship centres.

So yes, I agree, we do need to shift our policy focus, or at least get more creative about our policy focus and how we're going to do that.

• (1005)

Hon. Larry Bagnell: I have to admit that I don't have experience in centres across the country, but from what I've seen, and as you've said, you're a service provider and in fact a very cost-effective and efficient service provider. I would suggest that you provide services to some extent on the mandates of municipal, federal, provincial, and territorial governments much more efficiently than other alternatives those governments might have. In the long run, in the prevention of down-the-stream social problems, you actually save those governments money, considering the tiny amount of money that you actually get. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Absolutely. If I return to the long-term funding of the AFCP, it hasn't received any funding increase since 1996, and even the issue around 1996 was that it was cut back dramatically at that point. Essentially, it's received an ongoing deficit of the cost of living per year: 1.4%, 2.2%...it depends on which year it is. So what's happened at the friendship centre level is they've cut back resources continually. They've taken it out of salaries of our people working there and they've put it into the programs and services. They are very good at running these programs and services in a cost-effective manner—extremely good—and these programs are very successful by any measure.

My argument would be that it would be good business practice for government to work with friendship centres in the delivery of programs and services to reach urban aboriginal Canadians across the spectrum. I see friendship centres as a spectrum of services.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: Is Canadian Heritage the best department for you to be in?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: It's a tough question. The first part of my answer would be that the best department would be the one that's funding us properly. Let's put it like that. It doesn't matter where it's housed. If it was in the Department of Transport and funded properly, that would be different.

There are probably synergies with other departments that are better suited, whether that's in something like the Department of Indian Affairs or somewhere else. If there are other policy initiatives going on, then I think we're open. But the question for us is the funding of the core program itself. That's where I'd leave that response.

Hon. Larry Bagnell: So my understanding is your number one priority is to catch up on the core funding. Are there other programs that you've successfully run that have subsequently been cut or not extended, or eliminated, or not given a cost of living improvement, that are major parts of your service delivery?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Sure. At a national level the other major program is the cultural connections for aboriginal youth, referred to as CCAY. It's run out of the Department of Heritage, as is Young Canada Works.

As far as I'm aware—Conrad or Tricia can correct me—they haven't received funding increases in many years. The cultural connections for aboriginal youth is an extremely important one, because it engages aboriginal youth, a major growing part of the population, in decision-making about programs and services.

There's some debate internally about how funding criteria are set up within departments. I think we'd like to see the department and the minister responsible for us engage us more in policy discussion, as opposed to arbitrarily handing us guidelines about funding and how it is supposed to work.

I think we'd be more successful—and we've proven we have been for five decades—if we were engaged in the policy question at the front end. We could make it work for how those centres are structured.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor, Mr. Lemay, for seven minutes.

Mr. Marc Lemay: Frankly, I don't think you will have a hard time convincing anyone here at this table that you have a vital role to play. Let's not play politics here. It's clear. Meetings were held and all parties were present. We know that native friendship centres do critically important work.

To be honest, you should not have come here this morning, in my opinion. You should have gone to the finance minister's office. That's where things happen.

Obviously, we can make recommendations and we will most likely table a motion that I'm quite confident will be unanimously endorsed. Clearly, your funding needs to be increased.

There are two native friendship centres in the riding of my colleague Mr. Lévesque. I was involved in setting up one of these centres in Senneterre several years ago. The nature of the work done by native friendship centres seems to have changed.

I do not have the latest figures, but you claim that native friendship centres delivered over 1,300 programs and services across Canada in 2007-2008 alone to several hundred aboriginals, whether first nation, Métis or Inuit. There is no question that the work you do is critically important. I personally have no problem with that.

However, I ask myself the same question as my colleague Mr. Bagnell. I'm not sure if I should speak to someone—I'm not sure who exactly—in government. Representatives of the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec told us that they were better off with Heritage Canada because they knew for a fact what their annual operating budget would be. They are not so sure of this with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. I know that you have certain needs.

You have come here to see us. What are your expectations, as far as we are concerned? How can we help you?

Everyone here is in agreement. What do you want us to do to help you carry out your critically important mission in urban communities?

In case you missed it, I can tell you—and my colleague can confirm it—that violence has been on the rise in a number of communities and towns in Quebec. I can't speak for others, but I'm fairly confident that Winnipeg and Saskatoon have also seen an increase in violence. There is no question about that.

What specifically can we do today to help you?

You can use the five minutes I have left on my time to respond. And if my colleague has a question—

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Yes, I do have a question.

•(1010)

[English]

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Specifically, I need the committee to have very loud voices very often in advocating for friendship centres, and particularly this core aspect of funding. I also think the committee members should look at the government of the day and say that if we need a service partner, a partner to work with and to get things done, and government always does—I'm a former public servant, I worked in government, and we need partners to do things—then they should look to the friendship centres.

We know what we're doing on the ground. We're front-line people, working with people every day in serious situations.

I need your voices very loudly around government. Specifically beyond that, meeting with your provincial colleagues helps as well. A lot of our provincial and territorial associations receive substantive funding from their provincial governments, particularly in Ontario and British Columbia. However, many provinces don't do that. Many of our associations need our voice at the provincial level as well. A lot of the programs and services that affect aboriginal people off reserve are offered by provincial governments. It's important to advocate in that direction as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Cyr, discussions are currently under way and a program will be in place shortly. I'm not sure if you are familiar with the Nutrition North Canada program and whether you have weighed its potential impact on friendship centres. The territories are going to see an exodus of residents to urban areas because people will no longer be able to afford to live there. I've been to Montreal and the number of itinerant people there is staggering. Even the native friendship centre is hard-pressed to accommodate everyone who comes to their door. I'm quite fortunate because my riding is home to two large centres, one in Chibougamau and another in Val-d'Or. The centre in Senneterre is a little smaller, but all of them compete for dollars and find ingenious ways of funding a wide range of activities.

At times, I think it would be better if either Heritage Canada or Indian and Northern Affairs Canada had sole responsibility for this file. I really think that this should be Indian and Northern Affairs Canada's responsibility, and that it could always request Heritage Canada's assistance if necessary. The two departments could work together. In the case of the nutrition program, Health Canada and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada worked together. While this hasn't always proven very successful, the results could be more positive in this instance.

Have you assessed the impact of the Nutrition North program on the various centres in your regions? I'm thinking primarily about Ottawa and Montreal, since most flights from northern Canada land in Ottawa and Montreal.

•(1015)

[English]

Mr. Conrad Saulis (Policy Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): Thank you for the questions.

We are somewhat familiar with Nutrition North. Obviously we are very familiar with the cost of living in the north and the cost of goods and produce. As Jeffrey said earlier, I think it would certainly be beneficial for NAFC to be engaged in more policy dialogue and discussion with federal departments, including the Department of Indian Affairs and the Department of Canadian Heritage, to see what role friendship centres can play in helping urban aboriginal populations and other populations.

Other populations, whether they're in the north or in the south, also come to urban areas and rely on what friendship centres provide. Our reach in many cases is beyond the core of any of the cities where our friendship centres are located.

The Chair: We'll have to leave it there. We're a little over time.

Let's go to Ms. Crowder for her seven minutes. Go ahead.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming before the committee today.

I just want to mention that although Chris Warkentin is no longer on the committee, he and I continue to co-chair the friendship centres all-party caucus, and I know Chris is as committed as I am to continuing to work with your organization around the all-party caucus.

Thank you very much for the friendship centre movement report.

I have a couple of questions. I think one of the dilemmas that's facing your organization and friendship centres across this country, and I have two in my own riding, is the fact that the federal government largely—and again, this not the current government, this is ongoing policy—says that once people are off reserves, they're no longer our responsibility.

So although there is funding coming into friendship centres federally, I think part of the dilemma you face is the fact that it's kind of a policy decision but it's not enshrined in any kind of way. When I looked at your national program funding by type, only 29% of your money comes from the federal government, and 62.8% comes from provincial and territorial governments. In my own province of British Columbia, 81.17% comes from the province.

I think until there is more commitment to recognizing that the relationship is changing, people are moving away from reserves and certainly Métis and Inuit are moving from their traditional communities into larger urban areas, until there's a recognition by the federal government that there's still a responsibility, whether you're on reserve or not, and quit downloading to provincial and territorial governments, you're going to continue to have this funding gap.

I wonder if you have a comment on that.

• (1020)

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Yes.

This picks up a question earlier from Mr. Bagnell. Indeed, the reality is changing. The reality of aboriginal people in Canada is changing, and this migration shift that's been going on for decades and increasing means that more than half of all aboriginal people now are off of a reserve land base. And the federal government tends to—in at least a strict, legal statutory way—look at their responsibility as an on-reserve issue.

There are important issues on reserve, don't get me wrong, that need to be addressed by the government. But there are increasingly important issues in urban settings that are suffering from this pull back and forth from reserve. And it's not one way; it's not reserve to urban. It actually goes back—reserve to urban, back to reserve, and back again—and you get this whole churn effect going on.

Yes, I think a greater commitment and recognition by the federal government across departments is important to say where are the issues we're trying to address in a socio-economic sense and to engage with friendship centres and our movement in helping to address those very serious issues.

The other point about downloading that I want to point out is that we, as you can tell, work well with provincial governments and we continue to want to work well with them. We see opportunities there for the federal government, the provincial governments, and us to work together. But there's also sometimes within government a decentralization trend with programming. If a program comes, and it's a \$20 million program, to the friendship centres and it says they're decentralizing, so you run it—you have the infrastructure, so you do it—one of the problems we're running into is that the infrastructure is not supported. Their rationale behind it is that the

infrastructure exists, so they shouldn't pick up any costs on the infrastructure; they're just devolving all the programs to us: you have the set little administration amount and away you go.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. To have a volunteer-based, democratic, structured organization that's effective, accountable, and efficient, which is the way the NAFC and the friendship centres are run, it takes some resources, and we should not be held to this sort of arbitrary “you've got an administration of 15%, you'd better be held to that”.

I think that's fine on its own, but there needs to be a recognition of the cost of governance, you could say, of having an organization that works at all levels. To be honest, we're running into a bit of that problem over the last four or five years or more about what's the cost of running an organization that has this breadth and depth to it. So there's downloading on one side. We'd like the federal government to commit to where the issues are in the urban setting and we'd like departments to realize that it takes more than a 15% administrative budget to run this. It doesn't quite work that way.

Sorry if I took too long, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I have another quick question.

You highlighted a really important issue related to the back and forth. I know, for example, that there was a project called the Cedar Project, which looked at HIV/AIDS infections in Vancouver and how people were returning to their home communities and taking that infection with them. You can't disregard the back and forth and the problems that happen, both urban and on reserve.

I understand some of the criteria you're changing on eligible expenses. For example, new friendship centres located on reserves may not be approved. I know that in British Columbia we have at least two friendship centres on reserves, and maybe more. I know that there are others across the country. There are some other things on capital construction, renovation, and mortgages and some changes in stipends, allowances, or honoraria for attending courses or activities.

There are some program changes coming. I wonder if you've had any input on how those changes are being rolled out.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: I think it was before my tenure as executive director. But my understanding is that the consultation with NAFC on some of these criteria changes was very limited.

I think it would behoove the officials to actually look at what the real situation on the ground is. The real situation is that you have a friendship centre on reserve, and it has a cost. On what basis should it be excluded?

I don't want to get into a jurisdictional debate. We're trying to serve the needs of the people. It doesn't have to be that way. For example, mortgages, for some reason, weren't allowed to be costed out. So they were encouraging friendship centres to not own their own buildings. Well, that's kind of a reverse logic, in my mind. Why would we do that?

That's my quick answer to that.

•(1025)

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Crowder.

Now we'll go to Mr. Clarke, for seven minutes.

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to acknowledge Ms. Crowder and Mr. Warkentin for the work they've done on the friendship centres. It's a great job, and keep up the good work.

With regard to my riding, I was in the RCMP for over 18 years, and I have a pretty good understanding, I believe and I hope, of the friendship centres and how they work, specifically in northern Saskatchewan, where I have five friendship centres throughout the region. I understand their important role. They are vital to the community. There are a lot of places where they are the main gathering point for community members.

I have just a couple of questions. Hopefully I'll have enough time.

First, the Government of Canada has the urban aboriginal strategy, which is coming up for renewal in 2012. I know that there's currently some pressure to expand the strategy beyond the 13 current cities of Vancouver, Prince George, Edmonton, and so on. From what I understand, there are over 100 friendship centres throughout Canada. Is there an opportunity here to consider expansion of the UAS by utilizing the friendship centres in smaller cities?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Yes, I'm aware that the UAS is up for renewal.

I guess that the short answer is yes. Now I'll make it a little more detailed for you.

The UAS has been around since 1997, first as a pilot project, then as a strategy. The friendship centres and the board of the national association have given thought to the urban aboriginal strategy. There are certain urban settings, in the 13 cities, where the UAS works extremely well for some of the friendship centres, and they've had the ability to access some of that. It's been, I would suggest, hit and miss at points.

I think what the National Association of Friendship Centres would like is to be engaged in a deep policy discussion about the urban aboriginal strategy as part of an urban policy discussion that looks at where it can go.

I think the friendship centres are interested in the UAS. We have an existing infrastructure, and it's an existing one that works well. We're in 117 cities. They're all, obviously, urban aboriginal populations. It makes good sense, on the face of it and when you get deeper into the policy questions, to utilize friendship centres somehow in that discussion on how UAS could be renewed and brought forward.

We want to work cooperatively with government on it. We're looking to be engaged. We're going to start putting feelers out on it, understanding that it's up for renewal, and see where the government is at in terms of having discussions on it. We're there to serve the needs of the people, and if the UAS is there to help do that, then we're there to work on it. We think it needs some policy work behind it, though.

That's where we'll leave that.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Okay. I noticed you mentioned some of the services. When I was in northern Saskatchewan, specifically at Île-à-la-Croise, the friendship centre was able to provide service. One of the services was the head start program, which my son was in for two years. I really noticed a big difference just in his reading level. He has continued with progress in his reading. It has helped him excel through further education. He's now in grade five and reading at a higher level than other students in the same grade, which is great. You can see how the friendship centres are vital even towards education in communities.

I have a question about something you mentioned on the services that you provide. Can you just list some of the services? There are a lot of people who don't understand how the friendship centres work and what types of programs they offer to communities. I understand it's not race-based. They serve all people in all communities. It doesn't matter if they're aboriginal or non-aboriginal.

Now, could you just explain some of the services that are provided?

•(1030)

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Sure. I tend to think of the friendship centres as a spectrum of services for aboriginal and non-aboriginal people alike.

Let's start with the head start program. You're talking about childhood development learning programs and parenting programs. A lot of places will provide child care services in the home, and out-of-home child care services as well. There are aboriginal justice programs run out of friendship centres, restorative justice. There are a lot of cultural events, of course, and a lot of community feasts and community events. That sort of thing happens as well. There are elder support groups. Right in Ottawa, we have a bannock bus that goes around every night and gives food to homeless people in Ottawa. We have a drop-in centre here at 510 Rideau, just down the street.

So these are the sorts of services they provide. There are many more. There are education programs. I'm part of the friendship centre healthy eating and active living program, which is about high rates of diabetes—we're trying to watch it now so it doesn't become a burden on the health care system and oneself later on. So there are nutrition programs as well. It's just a really big panoply of services and programs that are offered at friendship centres. Sports....

Mr. Conrad Saulis: I'll just add a couple of other things that we're currently working on at the NAFC. We're working on literacy, adult and youth. You mentioned your child's ability to read at a higher level. We're also involved in tobacco cessation, and we're obviously engaged in many health issues, as Jeff said, such as nutrition and diabetes. We're also very actively engaged in wanting to support youth, first of all on a prevention side but also on an intervention side.

I think the spectrum is from the cradle to the eldest people who live in our urban areas. I think friendship centres are very creative, as well, in meeting the needs of various populations. An example is single mothers. A lot of single mothers will leave their home communities for a number of reasons; we know that. They seek support, and friendship centres are the places they turn to.

Friendship centres will also help other organizations become established. Here in Ottawa, the Odawa Friendship Centre was supportive of the establishment of the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health. So they know they're not necessarily the be-all and end-all, because they're not health people. Health people need to create other programs and services that are very medically oriented. Yet on the prevention side, friendship centres have a major role.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Clarke.

We have time for two more questions. We'll go first to Ms. Neville for five minutes, and then we'll have one more question.

Go ahead.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you for being here this morning.

I have a number of questions. My understanding is that your funding is both through core funding and program funding. Am I correct? The disparity between the percentage of federal funding in each jurisdiction and the provincial funding would in part be related to the amount of programming a friendship centre chooses to do. Is that a fair comment?

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Yes. It's almost solely due to the programming side.

Hon. Anita Neville: Programming.

I'm from Winnipeg. I've been to the friendship centre there, which you know is a very large and vibrant facility. I'm interested in the gaps in programming that you see a need for, that friendship centres can address. Obviously I'm focusing on Winnipeg, and I'm focusing on some of the prevention programs that are needed for young people who are engaged in all kinds of unsavoury behaviour. I'd be interested in hearing from you what the glaring gaps are—either pick some communities or go nationally—you see friendship centres could address if the resources were in place.

•(1035)

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: There are a lot of gaps, so I'll try to pick a couple of the key ones.

Hon. Anita Neville: Prioritize them.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Yes. I'll come back to the spectrum of programs that a friendship centre provides for a person's entire life.

One of the programs has to do with employment and labour training and that sort of aspect. There are some programs being run throughout the federal government on this, of course, but I think friendship centres have been engaged spottily on that. I think what we would like to do is have a discussion about the urban economic development agenda and what that actually could look like. I don't think we've had a deep discussion in the Government of Canada about that. There's a gap there.

Part of that gap is also a gap in child care, I would say, for parents who are either in training or starting employment. I have six kids. Child care is a pretty expensive issue in my household. I can imagine it if you were a single mother or a single parent trying to cover your bases for child care while you're getting.... I've recently had stories

from Newfoundland and Labrador about people who can get a job but can't go to that job because they don't have child care.

Those two issues run hand in hand.

Another one is housing in the urban setting. Some provincial governments are engaged with our provincial associations; I think B. C. might be one of them, and Ontario a little bit. But for people coming from rural and remote areas and then being in the urban setting, housing is an ongoing issue. I heard you speaking about it with your previous witnesses in a different setting. Housing is an issue in the urban context. There just isn't enough, and it isn't accessible enough.

I'll just keep those two points brief.

Then, of course, on prevention programs, I think we'd like to do a little bit more on sport and physical activity with communities and see what they need to support physical activity for youth. Again, this is driven by personal experience. I'm trying to engage my kids in being healthy. In the urban settings for friendship centres, there is a paucity of programs that we can access and have the community engaged in. Also, I see that where it's successful, it's really successful. It really engages them and grounds them.

I'll leave it at three points.

Conrad.

Mr. Conrad Saulis: I just want to pick up on your topic about the youth. We all know the demographics, the statistics for the aboriginal population, the off-reserve population, and the urban population, and 48% of youth population is under the age of 30. That's a huge population. We're 54% of the almost 1.3 million aboriginal Canadians, and a lot of the youth are seeking support, whether it's in culture, language, or traditional knowledge, but they're also wanting to fit into Canadian society.

They're obviously a huge potential employment sector in the coming years. They need the right kinds of training and skills to be able to compete with other people to find the jobs, get the jobs, and keep the jobs, and to become a part of Canadian society, part of that infrastructure. Friendship centres are trying to do that.

Being shut out of federal programming, the assets programming, is something that we're trying to overcome on the one hand, but that's where I would say the largest gap is. It's in trying to provide positive environments for youth so that they don't turn to gangs and to becoming at risk of sexual exploitation and other very serious issues, such as drugs and alcohol. I think there's so much that's a gap in that area.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

Mr. Conrad Saulis: You're very welcome.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Neville.

Let's go to Mr. Rickford for the final question.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for coming today.

I am going to try my best to wrap up in three or four minutes, because I know the chair has a question for you.

I have a couple of friendship centres, obviously, in the great Kenora riding. These friendship centres are small, but important. I'm always struck by the sense of identity that people coming off reserve have with the facilities. To that end, I have two comments, and maybe one is more of a question, which I'll put to you in a moment.

With respect to some of the program funding that you get, as the former parliamentary secretary in Canadian Heritage, I came to understand that there were a number of really good reasons why program funding comes through them. I speak more of the aboriginal urban youth funding cultural connections—some definite connections there.

My colleague Anita has raised a good line of inquiry. I've always felt that part of the problem, whether it's federal, provincial, municipal, or specific program funding, is that it seems to be a bit fractured. There is a concern for folks leaving communities where there are, in fact, some rather stealth programs, particularly around maternal child health, early childhood development, and aboriginal diabetes initiatives—which work there, but aren't working quite as well as we'd like. Obviously, that flows out of Health Canada, and I have certainly thought that a more coordinated effort across the different departments might be a useful way of looking at some of the issues around.... And it's not necessarily, Mr. Cyr, a pure question of resources; it's more identifying priorities. That's the comment.

The second part of my question is a bit more focused. One of the things that works at the friendship centre in Red Lake is that they have a great facility that folks can identify with when we offer certain kinds of training, for example, for folks on reserve. In fact, a number of organizations, including the gold companies in the area, have come to understand that, and to increase the level of engagement they've had forums at the friendship centre.

These represent, in my view, additional sources of revenue. How closely, at the executive and national levels, do you work to foster that? I think we've heard through other lines of questioning that there's concern about government funding, perhaps federal, provincial, and municipal. But in terms of almost a strategic business unit, what kind of work are you doing to optimize, if you will, what I think is a great opportunity? Because when we're looking at levels of engagement from first nations communities, there tends to be more success with those activities that seem to be more private in nature when they're hosted there.

• (1040)

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Thanks. It's a great question.

In the beginning part of my presentation I talked a little bit about own-source revenue and how it's a very small part, but it's an increasing part of something friendship centres do.

From a strategic sense, in Red Lake a lot of that, as you point out, falls to what the local situation is all about.

Mr. Greg Rickford: We have a passport clinic there, Jeff, and we were able to get more first nation folks passports than we've ever

had—just as a non-private sort of function there. But I'm struck by the appeal the facility has.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: Yes, and we find that a lot. We find that people associate with the friendship centre, they identify with it, it's part of their life. It's been part of mine. And if you look around you find a lot of people involved in the friendship centre movement. This isn't uncommon. It's because it's a culturally respected zone for people to come together and it's safe, and they find friends and family there a lot of the time.

But when it comes back to the strategic planning around that, I think friendship centres are, as Conrad pointed out, incredibly creative about how we structure programs. They're incredibly creative about what we do in order to make things work, and they'll continue to be that way. Friendship centres, like everyone else, want to be incredibly successful.

The engagement of the private business community has been ongoing. I don't have statistics on it at my fingertips, and I don't think my colleagues do either, but it's something we're looking at. It falls down to a regional level, where they see what the opportunities are—if it's mining in the north, whatever that opportunity is. We're there to participate because we see it as a benefit to our local people.

I think a lot of friendship centres would be happy to have many types of funding that come into their centre to run the programs for the people. We're interested in those discussions, and that's what we meant by the urban economic development discussion being one that we want to have, about how we increase it.

I see your red light's on, so I'll keep it short.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rickford. I'd also like to thank our witnesses for their presentations this morning.

If members are still here on Thursday, we will examine Bill C-530. We will hear from four witnesses and possibly proceed to clause-by-clause consideration.

• (1045)

[*English*]

Hon. Anita Neville: Who will the witnesses be on Thursday?

The Chair: They will be from Finance, the Government of the Northwest Territories, and INAC. Mr. Bevington is coming back for a couple of questions on clarification as well.

Hon. Anita Neville: That's not on Bill C-575.

The Chair: No, this is on Bill C-530.

Thank you very much. Enjoy the rest of the day, members.

Thank you to our witnesses.

The meeting is adjourned.

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