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Chair

Ms. Candice Hoepfner

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC)): Welcome, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order.

As per the orders of the day, today we'll begin with Bill C-308, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act (improvement of the employment insurance system). We'll have the sponsor of the bill, Monsieur Lessard, testifying for the first hour.

I suggest—and I already spoke with Monsieur Lessard about this—that because we have votes today, we'll have to complete the entire committee meeting today by 5:15 p.m. We do have a little bit of committee business to look at, which means we have to complete the witness portion by 5:00. Therefore, Monsieur Lessard has agreed that he will take 45 minutes for his introduction and the questions from us. That will give his witnesses a little more time, and we can also do the committee business. He's agreed, so we'll move forward with that.

Monsieur Lessard, welcome today as witness as opposed to someone asking the questions. We look forward to hearing from you. You will have 10 minutes to present, and then we will begin our first round of questions.

Monsieur Lessard, I turn the mike over to you.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): I thought I was ready, Madam Chair, but I realized that I did not have the right file with me. That is what happens when you have to come here from the House of Commons in so little time.

Madam Chair, I would like to thank you for your welcome. Appearing as a witness before you is something quite new to me, as I was a witness on only one brief occasion in the past. I have been a member of this committee for the past six years and have considered all aspects and components of human resources and social development programs, and especially the issue of employment insurance.

This year, we have again tabled a bill intended to reform the employment insurance system. I believe this is the third bill, since we had previously introduced Bills C-280 and C-269. The latter is perhaps fresher in people's minds, because three opposition parties had agreed on a platform to move the planned reform as far forward as possible.

Madam Chair, you might wonder why we are so persistent in wanting to affect such far-reaching changes to the employment insurance system. The reason why is because the system is so terribly unfair to part of our society, i.e., the people who lose their jobs.

Before addressing the substance of the bill, I think that it is appropriate to remind ourselves of our shared motivation. I see colleagues here who, with myself and others, put forward changes to the employment insurance system in the past. That is extremely hard to achieve. Which brings us to the question: Why is it so hard to improve the lives of our country's most underprivileged people and yet so easy to feed or support the rich? We see that with the banks, the oil companies and the military industry. Madam Chair, \$1.2 billion in funding was cut from social programs in September 2007, whereas close to \$9 billion had been announced for the military sector in the summer, without any debate in the House of Commons. Why are things so easy for the rich and the military? We do not object to supporting the forces themselves, because they play a crucial role in our society, but the amounts that are committed to wage war, Madam Chair, are a matter of social choice—a choice that we do not share and call into question once again today.

Madam Chair, it is sometimes necessary to speak bluntly. I think that employment insurance represents a serious economic crime against workers, and particularly the unemployed, their families, regions and affected provinces. Why do I say that? I say that because money is being diverted from its stated purpose, i.e., to support the needs of people who have lost their income, people who have contributed to the fund along with their employers. That money is taken and used for other purposes. Over the past 14 years, \$57 billion have been diverted.

Madam Chair, I am talking about an economic crime and asking my fellow parliamentarians whether we have not become white-collar criminals.

• (1535)

It is the same as when the people we entrust our money to invest for our retirement use the funds for their personal benefit.

You might say that the difference here is that the government is doing so for collective purposes. That is the only difference because the harm is the same: it is attacking the less fortunate even though they had taken the precaution of contributing to an insurance fund in order to collect benefits in the event of job loss.

I wanted to begin by saying that because I believe that is something we need to think about each time we deal with this issue.

In 2004-2005, we produced the report I have here and completed it in February. Bill C-308 contains the thrust of the recommendations that we made.

Some of our recommendations are also contained in the committee's employability report that was presented in the House no later than April 2008. That report called on the government to take action in order to improve and broaden access to employment insurance.

I have these documents here. Is our work all done in vain? That would be most unfortunate because my colleagues and I believe in the work we do. We believe in restoring the important status of the EI system. How should we go about doing that? We must begin by putting forward a number of measures that I will set out. I will end with that in order to give my colleagues time to ask questions.

Needless to say, the bill includes a measure to improve accessibility through a reduction to a minimum of 360 hours of work, regardless of the regional rate of unemployment. We will see later how to calibrate access.

We now see that the government has tried to make some improvements to the system with partial measures, but they are temporary measures and have nothing to do with what is contained in Bill C-308.

We need to increase the benefit period from 45 to 50 weeks. The government has done so temporarily. In our view, that should be a permanent measure. By doing so temporarily, the government is confirming that there is a real need.

The rate of weekly benefits needs to be increased from 55% to 60% of insurable earnings. A 5% increase is not much, and I will show later that such an increase will not encourage people to remain unemployed.

We have to eliminate the distinctions between a new entrant and a re-entrant to the labour force. That is a measure that leads to some discrimination, which is also something I would like to touch on later.

We have to eliminate the presumption that persons related to each other do not form an employer-employee relationship. That concerns family situations where it is presumed that a person does not deal with a relative at arm's length. As a result, when that person claims employment insurance benefits, he or she is considered to be committing fraud. I would also like to come back to that issue.

I would like to welcome our colleague Diane Finley who has just joined us. Earlier, I spoke about those who contributed to reforming the system. Mr. Godin is one of them.

We also need to increase the maximum yearly insurable earnings to \$42,500. We had debated that amount in 2005. We had agreed on setting that amount at \$41,000, although we had considered a gradual increase. The government has taken the initiative of setting the amount at \$43,200. We find that that is a suitable amount and would be willing to make a consequential amendment to Bill C-308.

• (1540)

[English]

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Lessard. Your time is pretty well up. You have about 30 seconds to wrap up your initial statement.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Chair, the timing is just right, that is about how long I had expected to speak.

I would like to conclude with EI coverage for self-employed workers. We have seen that the government has put forward such a measure, but it is only partial; we want it to be broad, accessible and voluntary.

I am now ready to take your questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lessard; very good timing.

We'll probably have time for just one round of questions, because they're seven minutes each.

We'll begin with Madame Folco, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Lessard, it is a pleasure to see you in your new role before our committee. I have two questions. As I always tell the witnesses, I would like you to answer as briefly as possible so that I can ask a greater number of questions. You have heard me say that before.

First of all, back when I was Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources, I had been told that eligibility to regular employment insurance benefits varied depending on the number of hours worked as well as the regional rate of unemployment. At the time, I found that to be an excellent idea. I understood that there were regions in Canada where the unemployment rate was very high. Therefore, it made sense to require fewer hours of work from workers in those regions, so that they could access benefits. Your bill contains a rate of between 360 and 420 hours of insurable work, but that is invariable.

Could you explain why you are moving away from the former system, which seemed fair to me, and are considering a new one that is invariable?

Mr. Yves Lessard: Yes, it is invariable, but it seems quite fair. There is a difference of 60 hours. We are talking about between 360 and 420 hours. It is the same range that exists at present.

Unfortunately, I did not make a copy of the range of variance. The bill maintains variances.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: If you do intend to provide members with that information, it would also be useful to include a comparison between how unemployed workers would fare under your new system and how they have managed under the current system that has been in place for a number of years.

I would find it interesting to compare the benefits received by unemployed workers in regions with very high unemployment under the current system with those received under your system. I think that would allow us to compare apples with apples.

● (1545)

Mr. Yves Lessard: I can provide you with that. My assistant is taking good note of all the things I will be sending you. Explaining those things now will take a long time, and I would not be able to comply with your wishes.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Furthermore, Mr. Lessard, what is your assessment of how much the bill will cost? According to the analyses, it would seem that your bill would lead to a sizable increase in the premium rate. Do you think that employers and employees would be willing to accept such an increase? Let me know what you think about that. As well, do you think that the bill would have an impact on job creation across Canada? Would there be a positive impact, negative impact or no impact at all?

Mr. Yves Lessard: You have asked a number of questions at once. You do realize how many answers I have to provide.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: You know how it is.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Chair, we should start by saying that the government has frozen the premium rate until the fall. It will then be reassessed, but the chief actuary cannot have it vary by more than 15¢. This amount will determine, by 2012, the size of the deficit versus the EI fund's obligations. Well, at that rate, there will be a surplus in the fund again by 2012.

How will that happen? If the increase remains constant at 15¢ per year, the fund will have a balanced budget, and as of 2012, there will be a surplus because there will no longer be temporary measures in place. The current actuarial deficit calculations to determine the account fiscal balance point, which now stands at \$2.43, will no longer exist. It will not be the same in 2012, so, based on the calculations in the most recent budget, the fund will be generating \$19 billion in surplus between 2011 and 2015.

I will now get to our second question, in other words how much we anticipate this bill to cost. We believe it will cost a maximum of \$3 billion per year. This amount is based on the government's own figures. We can include this information along with the notes we will be sending you.

In other words at this rate, if we were to implement Bill C-308 over the next five years, there would be \$3 billion more per year, the fund would be nearing balance by 2012 and there would be a \$4 billion surplus in 2015. This is not a result of casual calculations, it is based on the current budget. These \$19 billion are not something the government is denying, because it will use them for other purposes, as was done in the past.

I do not know if this answers all of your questions.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: What about job creation?

Mr. Yves Lessard: If we were to say that the premium rate has an influence on job creation, we would have to be concerned today. Indeed, the government is intending to increase the premium rate as of the fall. That will not slow down job creation. Either way, the increase is there. What we need to find out is how much of a surplus will be in this fund and for what purposes it will be used.

[English]

The Chair: Merci beaucoup.

We'll now go to Madame Beaudin, please.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Lessard, it is an honour for me to ask you questions on this bill today. My first question will be simple. I'd like to take this opportunity to clarify some comments we've been hearing over the last few weeks, or even months, before prorogation. We often hear this in the House during questions asked by our Conservative colleagues. They regularly say that a 360-hour qualifying period amounts to 52 weeks of employment insurance for recipients. I would like you to clarify this information.

● (1550)

Mr. Yves Lessard: I think the Conservatives should have verified this information for reasons of rigour and intellectual honesty. In response to questions asked by Liberal members, the Prime Minister on two occasions referred to different figures. First of all, he said that with respect to the 360-hour qualifying period, people would no longer need to have worked 45 days to receive 52 weeks of EI benefits. Later, he referred to 60 days in order to get the 52 weeks.

There is a serious lack of rigour here. The rigour that is being used to best determine how to help the affluent is not being used to help those that are less well-off.

One just needs to think of the unemployment rate rule, for instance, which would apply here. If there is an unemployment rate of 6% on the basis of 360 hours, that would give an individual in the region 14 weeks of employment insurance benefits. If there is an unemployment rate of 16% in another region, another person will be getting 36 weeks of benefits.

As a general rule, we can say that the number of weeks entitling unemployed people to benefits would fall within this bracket. If they go beyond 36 weeks, there would be specific measures for the regions, and those would be exceptions.

When people say so flippantly that working 360 hours entitles people to 52 weeks of employment insurance benefits, it is misleading and absolutely frivolous.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Let's get back to these 360 hours. Our committee is currently working on a poverty study. We know that a number of women work part-time. Seventy per cent of part-time workers are women, in fact.

Would this 360-hour qualifying period make EI more accessible... and help pull segments of the population out of poverty, including women? Could my colleague elaborate on how this employment insurance accessibility measure could help in the fight against poverty?

Mr. Yves Lessard: It is a powerful lever in the fight against poverty. We've seen that in the study we've been carrying out for the last two years. We have covered almost all regions of Canada. We know what the situation of women is in terms of employment. We have also examined it in the course of another study, one on employability, in fact. I have the document here. The committee recommended that the government revise the definition of "insured participant" that can be found in section 58 of the Employment Insurance Act, so as to broaden eligibility to employment insurance benefits and support measures. That is one of the sectors of employability which is affected and includes women in short-term employment. HRSDC indicates that 54% of the non-working population is not receiving employment insurance benefits. In other words 46% do receive them.

If we look at women, we see that 36% of them receive benefits. To get to 46%, the rate for men would have to be slightly higher, they are in their early fifties etc. So, under the plan, there is discrimination towards women and young people. These are the people that are holding precarious jobs. This is why, along with our colleagues, and I was referring earlier to Mr. Godin, Ms. Folco and Mr. Komarnicki who were there at the time, we made these recommendations in 2005 and we used them again in the report on employability. This is why we are preparing to reissue them in our poverty report.

• (1555)

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

Do I still have some time left?

[English]

The Chair: You have one minute.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: So much is being said about what is being done now. But these measures deal more with extending the duration of employment insurance benefits. Well, first, one would have to be eligible for these benefits to have access to these measures. You believe that these measures are bypassing an entire segment of the population, in other words women, students, workers who earn low wages, may lose their jobs and become unemployed again, part-time workers and seasonal workers. You believe Bill C-308 will have a major impact on all of these workers who paid employment insurance premiums when they were working.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Yes. Bill C-50, for instance, which has become law, provides for an additional benefit period for long-term workers. This legislation targets one or two areas of activity but also the regions, including Ontario, although that province is not satisfied with the situation. Yet, it is a temporary measure, which has no effect on women, for one. In fact, as of next year, it will no longer have any effect on anyone.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Godin.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank my colleague Mr. Lessard for this bill on employment insurance. It has been before the House for a number of

years. A great deal of work has been done in collaboration with a number of groups. Later on we will be hearing from the Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses and the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, the CSN. The CLC has appeared a number of times to discuss bills. Construction worker representatives, in fact all those who represent the labour movement support this bill. Would you agree with me on that?

Mr. Yves Lessard: Yes.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It is as though the current government and the previous Liberal government believed that receiving employment insurance benefits was basically a sin. Today in the House of Commons, Ms. Beaudin asked a question and the Prime Minister responded by saying, in so many words, that all employment insurance recipients were paid to stay at home. That is basically what he meant. I do not know if you share his view, but I simply would like to know what you think about this matter.

Do workers throughout Canada and Quebec really want to stay at home, or do they have higher ambitions? Is it not rather that they want to work, but that there is a problem with the job situation? Under the plan, employers make contributions so that the needs of these workers' families are met.

Mr. Yves Lessard: At the beginning of my presentation, I said that the lack of access to benefits resulted not only in a greater rate of poverty for workers who lose their jobs, but also for their families, their region and their province. What is unfortunate, within the system, is that over time the original purpose of the plan has been hijacked, and as a result, today, a worker who loses his job and applies for benefits is considered as acting in bad faith. In fact, the legitimacy of the application is even questioned, and this happens in many ways. In my view, we are going through one of the worst periods ever. There are constraints in the regulations and there are restrictions in the application process.

Do people really want to be unemployed for a long period of time? No. They are entitled to 55% of their previous income which, in most cases, was already quite low. So if these people receive employment insurance benefits, they will be in a position to look for work. However, some of these workers do not even have enough money to take the bus.

• (1600)

Mr. Yvon Godin: Have you come back with any studies or research on what other countries are doing, such as France, Germany or other developed countries? Are you familiar with their employment insurance programs?

Mr. Yves Lessard: It varies. In fact, we put this question to officials who appeared before the committee. They gave us a report which we could distribute.

Without going into detail, I just want to mention that the Special Committee of the UN Commission concluded that Canada was one of the countries which treated its unemployed workers the worst because of the constraints built into the system preventing people from accessing benefits. This appeared in a report three years ago.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Madam Chair, I would like our analysts to find out how France and Germany are addressing this issue. What are their programs like, and how are other countries dealing with the matter? For example, in France, recipients of employment insurance benefits get 75% of their salary.

I put the question to elected representatives in France, when I visited the National Assembly in Paris. These were conservative members who probably felt that everybody would like to receive employment insurance benefits to avoid working. But the elected officials in France told me that French workers were very hard-working, that they wanted to work, that employees paid their own insurance, not the government. The system is based on the employer and employees. The officials added that when they invested in their community, it created jobs, since the money came from the community itself, that is, from small- and medium-sized businesses. It created jobs rather than eliminating them.

Do you agree with this?

Mr. Yves Lessard: During the 1980s, there was a period of economic growth. Benefits were much higher than they are now. I believe that they were 70% or even higher—we would have to check. Our system even worked well at times.

But things became complicated when the employment insurance fund was transferred to the consolidated revenue fund.

Mr. Yvon Godin: It has become the government cash cow.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Indeed.

The Minister of Finance of the day, or rather, the two ministers who succeeded each other, the Conservative and the Liberal Paul Martin, began to take this money, which belongs in the consolidated revenue fund, and used it for other purposes. Once they devised the recipe, they began to reduce accessibility to benefits in order to generate surpluses on the backs of workers who lost their jobs. At a certain time, over 70% of workers who lost their jobs were eligible. Today, it's 46%. People deserve better. These people were targeted and their money was stolen.

I will not be budged from this position, because this is nothing short of an economic crime, and we have to tell it like it is. I am not accusing anyone personally of having stolen the money, but rather, it is because of the system.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Do I have any time left?

[*English*]

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin: I call this “the government cash cow”, because since 1986, the government realized that it could take the money out of the fund and move it to general revenues. In reality, workers were not the ones who depended on employment insurance anymore. Rather, it was the federal government, which used the money to pay down \$57 billion from the \$92 billion debt. Those \$57 billion came from workers who lost their jobs. The debt was transferred to the provinces, because unemployed workers ultimately had to turn to welfare.

Do you agree with this?

Mr. Yves Lessard: It seems you are taking the words right out of my mouth. I could not agree with you more. We reached exactly the same conclusion. This is why the bill came about. I think that this bill is complete unto itself. If it is not, we will keep on putting bandages on a wound which will never heal. Those who are suffering are the workers from whom the money has been taken, money that is rightfully theirs.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Vellacott.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll thank Mr. Godin and Mr. Lessard while they're here. They made the case very well. Mr. Godin could be a very good witness for our bill. This new, independent, arm's-length entity has been put in place so that those kinds of abuses of the past won't happen again, where the EI surplus money was taken by governments and there were issues of either having to raise taxes or EI premiums. That was a problem, and that's why our government has moved and changed that. I need to get that on the record right off the top.

Mr. Lessard also said something to the effect that they're going to be taking the surplus in the future. But in reality—I think you know this, and can check on this—in the future any surplus in that arm's-length body, in those accounts, cannot be used by the government. So that will not be happening in the future. I need to make that very plain.

I wasn't really clear on the good questions of Raymonde Folco about the cost of the bill and the precise breakdown here. HRSDC has costed the 360-hour, 45-day work year at \$4 billion per year. You're saying this bill will come in at about \$3 billion. Am I understanding that correctly?

Mr. Lessard, HRSDC's costing is \$4 billion, and it seems to me that your bill here is significantly more than that. So I'm not clear on your math or how you arrived at that. Can you give me something more in the way of your costing and how you intend to pay for this bill?

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: As I indicated earlier, the amount is \$3 billion. The costs are based on data we collected from two sources. The first source is Mr. Brown, who was the assistant deputy minister for Human Resources and Social Development Canada back in 2005 when the study was conducted. At that time, we recommended that the coverage rate be increased from 55% to 60%. Mr. Brown concluded that when the rate was applied to everyone, it would cost \$1.2 billion. This has also been confirmed by the most recent data we have received. It is also the written response Ms. Folco requested, and which we will send her.

Let's now talk about the eligibility threshold. When it was established, the purpose was to cover 90,000 unemployed workers. That represented an additional \$390 million. But now, it's less than that, because more people have access to benefits under temporary programs. However, let's suppose the amount was still \$390 million. Based on our evaluation, which is the same one carried out by Mr. Malcom Brown, who was the assistant deputy minister of Human Resources and Social Development Canada at the time, for the 12 best weeks, the amount is \$320 million. Where we didn't agree—we will have to examine this a little more closely—was regarding the maximum amount when the number of weeks was increased from 45 to 50. We arrived at approximately \$200 million, whereas his total at the time was \$11 million. However, there are unknown variables which should be taken into account.

We also have to take into account the cost effectiveness of your approach. When the eligibility threshold rose from \$39,000 to \$43,000, it cost the system \$245 million in additional administration costs for the first two tiers of \$1,000. However, revenues totaled \$420 million. Your government raised the maximum insurable amount to \$43,000. In other words, given today's salaries, the amount must, at the very least, be doubled. So it's a greater amount. This brings us to at least \$250 million in additional revenues per year.

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: I'll have to examine that again. Maybe it's because some of those figures are outdated. I'm not sure what your response would be, but HRSDC costed it at \$4 billion. Your proposal seems to be a little more expansive than theirs. I'm still not clear how you conclude it will be \$3 billion, but I'll look over your remarks in testimony today.

How much time do I have left here?

The Chair: You have just a minute and a half.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Then I'll just pass it on to Mr. Cannan, because he has some good questions, and I want to share my time.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you for your generosity, my colleague.

I have a couple of quick comments. I appreciate that you are representing your constituents. What do you think of the work-share program? I know that it's been valuable for my constituents. Has it been successful in your community?

• (1610)

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Shared work is something which already existed in the past; it's nothing new. It is something which almost all members of Parliament have worked on at one moment or another by proposing formulas, with the purpose of helping employees and employers keep a business open for as long as possible. It is a good program which was adjusted over the course of the year, to the credit of all those who contributed. Therefore, we believe that the program should be extended. I am wondering whether, depending on the state of the economy, we could not take a second look at it. I have to say that it's a good program, which is why our party and the other opposition parties did not want to bring it up.

[English]

Mr. Ron Cannan: You didn't support it in the budget, though.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Excuse me?

[English]

Mr. Ron Cannan: You didn't vote in favour of it in the budget.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: You know, when something good is put into a pile of garbage, you don't accept the garbage.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, we'll end that round of questioning.

Monsieur Lessard, thank you very much for being here.

At this point, we will ask you to leave the witness area. We will ask the other witnesses to come forward, and we'll continue with testimony and presentations.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Madam Chair. I understand I will have 15 minutes to present the things I was asked to put in writing. I would like to make a presentation of those things to complete my hour.

[English]

The Chair: Right. We'll have more time to look at your bill, certainly.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you very much.

• _____ (Pause) _____
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[English]

The Chair: We're ready to begin.

Welcome to the witnesses who are here with us this afternoon. We apologize for the rush, but we have votes coming up. We're just happy that you can be here and we can hear from you.

Pardon my French;

[Translation]

I am a beginner in French.

[English]

I will try to read your names accurately.

We have with us today, from the Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses, Pierre Céré and Danie Harve; and from the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, François Lamoureux.

What I would suggest is that each of you keep your opening remarks to seven minutes. That way we'll have a little more time for questions.

We will begin with Monsieur Céré, *s'il vous plaît*.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Céré (Spokesperson, Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses): Madam Chair, if I understand correctly, we have seven minutes.

[English]

The Chair: *Oui*, you have seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Céré: Madam Chair, members of the committee, Mr. Lessard, sponsor of the bill, I would like to thank you on behalf of our organization, the Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses for this invitation to share our views on Bill C-308.

Indeed, there are two representatives from the Conseil national des chômeurs. Danie Harvey is a member of the CNC's executive and is involved with the Mouvement Action Chômage, or MAC, which is based in Charlevoix. Sitting with the public is Yvan Boulay, who is with the MAC in Saint-Hyacinthe, in the Montérégie, France Turcotte of the Comité chômage du Haut-Richelieu, and Ian Forand of the Comité chômage de Montréal, or CCM. This is not our first time before the committee to discuss employment insurance. To be blunt, we are absolutely in favour of this bill.

However, there is one little detail. It would be better to amend section 14 to abolish the notion of "rate calculation period", and to define, as pilot project number 11 did, the rate of benefits on the basis of the 12 highest weeks of earnings in the reference period. As I said, Madam Chair, this is merely a detail.

More importantly, however, and what leads us to support this bill, is the implementation of a single eligibility criterion, which will be established at 360 hours. Improving the rate of benefits and extending the benefit period are necessary improvements to the employment insurance program.

However, Madam Chair, I do not have a crystal ball, even though I would sometimes like to have one. I know, and everyone knows, that this bill will die on the order paper. It will die, as other opposition bills which had the same purpose, namely to improve the employment insurance program, have also died.

This bill will not pass third reading because the government will not authorize royal assent. This is what awaits this bill after its review by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. Yet on the issue of EI eligibility, a vast social consensus has been established.

I would like to remind you, Madam Chair, of what happened last year. This did not happen 30 years ago. It was in August 2009. Provincial premiers met in Regina to discuss the employment insurance program. Ten provincial premiers—not six or seven, but ten—agreed to call upon the federal government to solve the issue of EI eligibility. A large number of social movements, unions, the Church, various voices, political observers and institutions of all sorts joined their voices to those of the premiers.

At least one year ago, in the spring of 2009, we met with all of the municipal councils in Quebec, including large-, medium- and small-sized towns and localities. We all met with them in every region. We asked them to tell us what their position was on the employment

insurance program. A majority of these councils debated the issue, adopted motions and signed statements calling upon the federal government to settle the issue of eligibility, rate of benefits and the benefit period.

I have here the original signatures and the original documents related to those motions. I also have a letter signed by the Minister of Employment and Social Solidarity of Quebec who supports these demands. If I have a moment during the question and answer round, I can tell you what it says.

This majority of municipal councils also represents a majority of the population. In any case, I am talking about Quebec. Here, in the House of Commons, there is also a parliamentary majority. This majority is confronted with the stubborn refusal of the minority government. For us, this represents the thwarting of democracy.

This same thwarting of democracy by the minority government is reflected in its refusal to abide by a Supreme Court decision that it repatriate Omar Khadr, who was a child soldier, from Guantanamo.

• (1615)

It's the same kind of thwarting of democracy which we are witnessing with this minority government, which is trying to slowly dismantle the firearms registry, despite the fact that in our society, at least in Quebec, there is a consensus around the matter.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

One a point of order, I think the guest is brought before us today to discuss the bill, not the long gun registry or any of these other topics. I think it would be important for the committee to hear only about the bill in front of us today.

The Chair: Monsieur Godin.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Madam Chair, I have a point of order. There is no rule to that effect. Witnesses who appear before the committee can talk about what they want. It's their presentation, and the government should not try to prevent a witness from giving his presentation. This witness is using examples. We are not going to start splitting hairs in two, three or four. In my view, the point of order which my Conservative colleague is trying to make is certainly inappropriate. The witness should be able to make his presentation anyway he wishes.

• (1620)

[English]

The Chair: We have very little time; I can rule.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Indeed, it is ironic that the witness is talking about thwarting democracy. In fact, we have just had a living example of that. The witnesses can tell us what they want to say in the time which is given to them. We can raise points of order and raise issues of relevance amongst ourselves on the committee, but not with regard to witnesses. I think you will agree with me on that point.

[English]

The Chair: The witness can continue. He has one minute and 23 seconds left.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Céré: Madam Chair, are you telling me that I have 1 minute and 23 seconds left?

[English]

The Chair: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Céré: The time which has just been used up for this exchange has been deducted from my seven minutes.

[English]

The Chair: Sir, we stopped the time when we began the points of order.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Céré: We were talking about thwarting democracy. That is exactly what happens when a minority government breaks the Canadian social contract. For example, six administrators are appointed to the Canada Employment Insurance Financing Board, which was created in 2008. In order to respect the Canadian social contract, there should have been two workers' representatives, but that did not happen. All of the appointments to the Canada Employment Insurance Financing Board were partisan, and that is exactly what is happening everywhere else.

Madam Chair, I am seriously and deeply ashamed of being represented by a government which acts against the best interests of society.

Let's come back to employment insurance—what is it that employment insurance is supposed to do, gentlemen? I saw the best example of this last year when I found myself facing the workers of Kruger. You all have the same card in your pockets, a card which looks like the health insurance card. In Quebec, it is called the “sun card”, but I don't like it very much because I don't like my picture. I am a little vain, but that doesn't matter. Further, I don't like illness, hospitals, doctors, nor do I like waiting rooms in clinics. I would not wish illness on anyone, well, almost anyone.

However, I am proud that our society, in Canada and Quebec, offers universal health care services that are accessible to everyone. In our opinion, the employment insurance program should be the same. What is the role of an employment insurance plan? It is to help people who have lost their job by providing them with a form of economic security.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Céré: I only want to add one more sentence. It is up to a responsible government to ensure that the employment insurance program does precisely that.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci beaucoup.*

We will now hear from Monsieur Lamoureux.

[Translation]

Mr. François Lamoureux (Assistant to the Executive Committee, Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN)): Good afternoon to everyone. First, I would like to thank committee members for inviting us and hearing our views on Bill C-308, which was sponsored by the member of Parliament Yves Lessard.

I would like to point out that the CSN represents 300,000 workers in every economic sector in Quebec. I say “every economic sector in Quebec” for the following reason. The CSN welcomes Bill C-308 because we believe that this bill contains elements, important tools to help fight poverty and inequity between unemployed workers in every part of Canada.

The CSN supports this bill because, in our view, it is based on an understanding of the real problems which unemployed workers in Quebec and in every economic sector are experiencing. All of the workers from the various economic sectors represented by the CSN have been harshly affected. This mainly applies to the manufacturing sector which is going through a major crisis. But there's also a major crisis in the pulp and paper industry, there is a major crisis in the shipbuilding industry, and there is a major crisis in the steelworking industry.

Today, workers who have lost their jobs in these sectors are experiencing situations which have led to family crises. The CSN agrees with all of the proposals contained in Bill C-308, but we support in particular the proposal that sets the eligibility threshold at 360 hours.

We wish to express our position as follows. Why do we need an eligibility threshold? For us, it is a matter of treating all unemployed workers, regardless of where they are in Canada, fairly. In our opinion, an unemployed worker is an unemployed worker, and this person needs a temporary income in order to look for work. Premiums are not based on the regional unemployment rate. Premiums are the same, whether one is a part-time worker, a seasonal worker, whether one works on call or full time, whether one is young, a man or a woman. Workers are not responsible for being laid off. A worker can be laid off in a region with a very low unemployment rate, either because that person was working for a company which went bankrupt, which decided to decrease its activities or terminate its operations, or a company that is operating in a shrinking economic sector.

Why do employment benefits depend on the unemployment rate of the region we live in? Do we receive less health care in a region where there are fewer sick people? No. Does it make sense for people who are laid off by a company, but who live in different administrative regions for the purposes of employment insurance, not to be eligible for the same benefits?

In our view, workers who lose their jobs in a low unemployment area suffer just as much as those who lose their jobs in a region with a high one. Losing a job is a personal tragedy which leads to a loss of income and an increase in stress. Everyone needs a temporary income to find a new job, regardless of what the regional unemployment rate is.

Canada seems to be the only industrialized country, with the exception of certain U.S. states, to apply variable eligibility standards. Why should we have a threshold of 360 hours? We think it will make the system fairer. Despite what some unemployment statistics might indicate, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, who is an independent government official, estimated that if the threshold was brought down to 360 hours, 165,000 additional unemployed workers would be eligible for regular benefits, excluding new recipients.

• (1625)

In the same document, the Parliamentary Budget Officer noted that the department estimated that over 330,000 additional unemployed workers would be eligible for benefits if the 360-hour threshold applied to everyone, that is, to all categories of beneficiaries, including those eligible for regular and special benefits.

A little earlier, questions were raised about how this would affect women who work part-time. When the eligibility criteria were changed from weeks worked to hours worked, the purpose was to help more workers qualify for benefits, at least in theory, including people working fewer than 15 hours per week. So, theoretically, these changes were supposed to benefit women, because 40% of women work in irregular employment, such as part-time or casual work. In this regard, the statistics are interesting. The eligibility criteria were established in such a way that the original objectives were not met and, in fact, they greatly penalized workers, especially women, who engage in irregular types of work.

From 1971 to 1978, a woman working 15 hours a week on a part-time basis could qualify for benefits with 120 hours, or 8 weeks. However, over time, this same worker would need between 150 and 210 hours from 1978 to 1989, 210 hours in 1990, from 150 to 300 hours from 1991 to 1994, from 180 to 300 hours from 1994 to 1997, and from 420 to 700 hours since 1997. That's more than double.

In our opinion, the 360-hour threshold is essential, because, pending a major overhaul of the system, it is the only way to restore a minimum degree of fairness for workers, whose employment regimes vary. We believe the current system discriminates against women, and that the new rules had a huge impact on women. Indeed, in total, the average number of hours worked by women was set at 33.8 hours per week, but women work, on average, 29.8 hours per week. Therefore, women need to work more hours to qualify for benefits, and they are entitled to fewer weeks of benefits. Eighteen per cent of jobs are part-time, which explains why, in 2007, barely

one-third of workers, and especially women working part-time, were eligible for employment insurance benefits.

In our opinion, this bill is a step in the right direction as far as the fight against poverty is concerned, and it also creates more fairness in the way all workers are treated.

• (1630)

[English]

The Chair: *Merci beaucoup.* Thank you very much.

We will basically have time for one round. You will have seven minutes, so if you wish to share it, you will have the time.

We'll begin with Mr. Regan, please.

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being with us today. I appreciate your comments.

First, I don't know whether you heard what the Prime Minister said. During question period, I believe it was today, he spoke about the opposition parties' proposals concerning the number of days required for a person to receive employment insurance benefits.

Do you have any comments on this?

Mrs. Danie Harvey (Executive Member, Conseil national des chômeurs et chômeuses): We did indeed hear that a little earlier. You realize that we were travelling today, and so we didn't actually hear the Prime Minister discuss this, but Mr. Lessard referred to it earlier. Obviously, it's wrong because that is not what the bill stipulates. It does not say 52 weeks of employment insurance benefits, because it will depend on the number of hours that each person has worked. So the 52 weeks is not accurate. People should look at the numbers carefully before speaking out. That is it not exactly what the bill says.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Do you have any other comments?

Mr. François Lamoureux: It's a shame that the human aspect is not more present when employment insurance is mentioned. It's as if injecting more resources had no developmental effect on Canada's economy and that of its regions. People who have access to employment insurance are able to benefit their community, because they must spend money on clothing, food and transportation. So these people are reinvesting government funds.

So why doesn't the same principle apply? Investing in infrastructure helps stabilize the economy. Why do people not use the same reasoning by making the same investment in employment insurance and understanding that it has the same developmental effect, both in human and economic terms?

Hon. Geoff Regan: The idea is that people whose income declines will spend the money they receive on the things they need. Have you compared this bill with Bill C-280? Unlike Bill C-280, this bill does not relax the eligibility criteria for parental and maternity benefits. Do you prefer this change?

Mr. Pierre Céré: I'm not sure I understood the question. In Quebec, we have a parental insurance plan. It's not a question of accumulating working hours in order to be eligible—we're fairly modern in that regard—but rather a minimum income of \$2,000 during the qualifying period. As concerns the issue of parental and maternity benefits, I would say we've settled it.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Do you believe that there should also be an eligibility criterion for special benefits?

• (1635)

Mr. Pierre Céré: In general, the system must be unlocked. An editorialist for the daily newspaper *La Presse*, Mario Roy, concluded his editorial last year by saying that the employment insurance system must be unlocked. In other words, the issue of eligibility must be settled, because many people are currently not entitled to benefits.

Allow me to give you an example. Last week someone called our office from Lachute, which is not far from Montreal. The person's administrative region for EI is Centre-du-Québec. This person is a construction worker who applied for EI benefits in December. He had accumulated 594 hours of work. When he submitted his application to the Lachute office, he was told that it was fine and that there shouldn't be any problem. Two months later, in February, he received a reply. His application was refused whereas one of his construction colleagues, who lives in Mirabel, which is not far from Lachute but part of the administrative region of Montreal, had his application accepted.

In Montreal, 560 hours of work is required. So his colleague was eligible. There was nothing that could be done legally because of this rather arbitrary division that should not exist.

Hon. Geoff Regan: The Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Human Resources refer only to the costs arising from such a change. Have you evaluated the costs that this bill would entail?

Mr. François Lamoureux: First, with regard to costs, the following aspect should be noted. Canada is below the average of industrialized countries with regard to the GDP-value-of-EI-benefit ratio. Canada has one of the lowest employer-employee contribution rates. The current rate is something like 1.73.

The current contribution rate is the lowest it has ever been in over 25 years, even when the federal government was contributing to the EI fund. Adopting a national standard of 360 hours to qualify for regular benefits would cost, according to TD Bank, some \$1 billion per year. The Parliamentary Budget Officer estimates the cost at \$1.14 billion. This would enable over 165,000 unemployed Canadians to receive regular benefits this year. This does not include new entrants.

If the 360-hour standard is broadened to include all categories of regular benefits, benefits for new entrants and special benefits, the number of eligible Canadians would double. Over 330,000 additional unemployed people would have access to the system. The amount of the benefits paid would be \$2.3 billion. This means that roughly 20% more unemployed Canadians would be entitled to benefits.

The Chair: Thank you. Mr. Guimond, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I would like to commend you on your presentation. You are talking about real things and real values. It's good to hear that kind of thing in a parliamentary committee.

My question goes to Ms. Harvey, who represents the region of Charlevoix and the Haute-Côte-Nord, which are hard hit by unemployment and have a large portion of seasonal jobs. People sometimes make the mistake of referring to seasonal workers, but it is not the workers who are seasonal. They're not labelled that way and don't have it tattooed on their forehead. They are workers in the seasonal job industries. You may think that this is a question of semantics, but I think that we should set the record straight, so people realize that we are talking about the whole range of seasonal industries, forestry work, fishing, tourism, and hotels and inns. It would be nice if these industries functioned year-round, but that is not the reality. Frequently, in our regions, things shut down in October, after Thanksgiving, and do not open again until May.

I would like you to explain to committee members—especially since today is March 17—what is commonly called the “black hole”. This hole is something the bill is trying to fill by adding weeks of benefits. Please explain the phenomenon that you experience in the Charlevoix region.

• (1640)

Mrs. Danie Harvey: As you say, it is seasonal work. What is seasonal is the economy, the nuance is important. People want to work. This concept that people want to work their hours and get EI benefits is quite simply not true, because bills come anyway. When people call our office and they're in a tight spot, we have to help them, things have to go on. They are on the edge of the “black hole” and there are some people who are in it right now, meaning that their work has not resumed and their benefits have run out. What can we do with that? What can we do with these people? There are very long periods between the time work starts and the time benefits run out. This is a reality in our neck of the woods and elsewhere, but I am going to talk on behalf of my region.

I have been working at the MAC for 23 years, and the situation has never been as dramatic as it is now. People are worried. When we talk about 490 hours in our parts, that is a lot. Last summer was terrible, as we know. It was difficult for these people to get the hours they needed to qualify for employment insurance. Three hundred and sixty hours is realistic, it is achievable, but we should not expect either that these people will only work 360 hours and then go home. That is not true, it's no longer true. Three hundred and sixty hours makes them eligible for EI. It's all fine and well to conduct pilot projects, but if people are not eligible, what is the point? There isn't one.

We need to ensure that workers can qualify and obtain EI if they lose their jobs. We mustn't forget that this is an insurance that employers and employees have paid for protection. For the government to come and interfere in this and decide how it is going to work is a bit problematic for me. In Charlevoix, this bill would have a major impact and could improve the quality of life of people in that region, there is no doubt.

Mr. Michel Guimond: Mr. Lamoureux, I would like you to go back to the issue that was addressed previously.

Mr. Céré talked about two construction workers who lived 10 kilometres away, and also the whole issue of accessibility. Let us talk about EI benefits. Governments have taken the surpluses and the current government wants to do it again. It was in the last budget. This money, as Ms. Harvey just said, belongs to workers and employers who contributed to the fund.

I would like to hear you talk about the EI fund surpluses, but also about accessibility. Accessibility is a little like having an insurance agent say, after losing everything in a fire, that it's true that you have lost everything and that you have been the victim of a fire, but you didn't read your contract: you can only get paid the second time you lose everything. We would call them thieves, because it's robbery. I want to hear your comments on this.

Mr. François Lamoureux: First, perhaps the economic crisis and its impact on the budget could be used as a pretext not to adopt this bill, but it would really be ignoring the structural effect of this bill on the economy.

With regard to your question, there are three important elements that need to be highlighted. Since 1990, the government has not invested a cent in the program. Unlike what people would have us believe, it is not, in our opinion, funding the deficits.

The law stipulates that the government lends money with interest to the EI fund and that this loan be repaid when there is a surplus. However, the system is important in order to support the economy and it becomes even more so during times of crises.

Yes, nearly \$60 billion were misappropriated from the employment insurance fund surpluses, when it's the employers and workers who paid into the EI fund. This goes beyond comprehension.

What also goes beyond our comprehension is the lack of vision and perspective with regard to developing the labour force, which is currently the most hard hit. We see older workers, people losing their jobs in industry and people who do not have access to EI benefits experiencing hardship or reaching significant crossroads in their careers.

I have witnessed some dramatic situations. People are losing their jobs. My friends at Aciers Sorel have lost their jobs. Furthermore, the pension fund is in a deficit position. Insolvency has meant that these people have seen their pensions cut in half. I have seen people at Aleris, in Shawinigan, in metallurgy, experiencing the same thing. The same thing is happening with AbitibiBowater's restructuring.

We are at a crossroads. People do not realize that these individuals really need a bridge to ensure they can have a decent income and try to find a new job. Soon, the opposite will occur. There will be a labour force shortage. Unlike now, we will be looking for people to work in our company.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Godin, it is your turn.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The problem with EI did not start yesterday. Mr. Céré, you said that this started in 1986 when the Auditor General recommended that

the EI fund be transferred to the consolidated revenue fund. That has become a cash cow. We know the rest.

I don't want to point the finger at the Liberals because they are in the opposition. However, this is part of the history of employment insurance. The Liberals tried to make everyone believe that they now want to save the day, but, in reality, after the Mulroney government tried to slash the program, the Liberals made drastic cuts.

If I recall correctly, it was in 1996, because I was elected in 1997. At that time the Minister of Human Resources lost his job and I beat him. Doug Young had imposed budget cuts, I remember well. At the time, the argument was that people would stay home, that the program would undermine employment and that the unemployment rate would increase if EI benefits were not cut.

Today, are we not experiencing the worst economic crisis? Will we blame the employment insurance system for having caused it, despite all the cuts? It is not because they cut EI that they prevented the economic crisis. Are there jobs or not?

At the time, Jean Chrétien sent a letter to a group of unemployed women in Rivière-du-Loup. He said that unemployment was not the most important problem and that the worst problem was the economy and that it had to be fixed. Our people are hardworking. Do you agree with me?

I want to mention something else. Are you not concerned when the Liberals say that they want the adoption of the 360-hour standard to be temporary, during the economic crisis? Do you agree that it should be temporary or would you like it to be permanent?

Mr. François Lamoureux: We would like to see structural change and long-term fairness. Some people believe that we are almost out of the financial crisis, but that is simply magical thinking. We are far from being out of it, despite what you hear. The economic crisis can be felt in every region, not only in the regions of Quebec, but throughout Canada as well. The country's economic situation will be such that in a few years, the poorest will need even more support from government.

Mr. Godin, as we speak, only one unemployed worker out of five is potentially eligible for benefits. This represents 571,469 unemployed workers who paid into the system, who have a valid reason for not holding down a job, but who have not accumulated enough hours to qualify for benefits. About 40% of workers who pay into the employment insurance system do not qualify. Therefore, in answer to your question, I would say that we need long-term structural changes. We cannot come back before the standing committee each year to discuss short-term solutions. I believe that job creation is linked to structural changes in the labour market, to a national employment policy, to a training policy and to the protection of those who are hardest hit, from coast to coast. However, as some people have said, Canada is one of the countries with the lowest benefits.

• (1650)

Mrs. Danie Harvey: You talked about measures, but in the riding of Charlevoix, we have pilot projects and temporary measures. This creates uncertainty and stress in people. We get calls from people asking when these measures will end, whether they will be extended, and so on. But we don't know. It is high time that the system be completely overhauled.

Mr. Yvon Godin: There is always a lot of talk of unemployed workers and employers, but when an unemployed worker goes to the employment insurance office, or puts in an application online, and then is turned down, not only is this worker turned down, but his entire family is as well, including his children. In fact, 1.4 billion children in Canada go hungry, which is a blight on our country.

Do you think that the employment insurance system contributes to this type of poverty in Canada? This is not only happening in Charlevoix, but in many other regions, be it in Prince George, Timmins, Hearst, in the riding of Acadie—Bathurst, in Caraquet or Shippagan. You can't go fishing for lobster in winter on St. Catherine Street in Montreal. You can't go fishing for cod on Yonge Street in Toronto, where the movers and shakers hold the fate of Canadians in their hands.

Mrs. Danie Harvey: Indeed, they really don't know anything about what happens in the regions. It is high time that we invite them to see what things look like in winter, in January, in Charlevoix.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In fact, Madam Chair, perhaps our committee could visit the regions.

Mrs. Danie Harvey: Yes, you are all invited.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In our study on this bill, I think it might be a good idea for MPs to travel across the country and meet with unemployed workers, so they can understand what it's like.

Mrs. Danie Harvey: You could hear these people tell you about how much they have to struggle between November and April, and sometimes until June. What do you do when you find yourself in a black hole?

Mr. Yvon Godin: We have been talking about employment insurance premiums. Isn't it insulting for workers to know that there is a \$57 billion surplus in the employment insurance fund?

Mrs. Danie Harvey: It doesn't matter if you increase the rate of premiums, as long as people can qualify for benefits.

Mr. Yvon Godin: In your regions, do employers support your position?

Mrs. Danie Harvey: Absolutely.

Mr. Yvon Godin: When I went to Forestville, employers were in the street with us.

Mrs. Danie Harvey: In fact, we have the letters of endorsement Pierre was referring to earlier. Most of them are from employers.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Perhaps Mr. Céré could read us one of them.

Mr. Pierre Céré: I could read you an excerpt of the letter from Minister Sam Hamad.

[English]

The Chair: Excuse me. You just have 20 seconds left, so I don't think there's time for you to read a letter.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Céré, please read us the conclusion of the letter.

[English]

The Chair: Excuse me. I'm sorry. Actually, your time is up. We'll go to—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Maybe my friend on the Conservative side would like to hear that letter.

The Chair: Maybe he will.

Mr. Vellacott, please.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Thank you, Madam Chair. I know my friend across the way, Mr. Godin, has good questions, but we'll move on to some other ones here, ones that I know he'll be very interested in, because it is difficult when people lose their jobs. It affects everyone in the family. It has effects in the community as well.

I have a question to any of the three witnesses. François might be the first to respond, as a union or syndicate representative.

Yes, it's difficult when people lose jobs. My question to you is simply this: if one of your unionized members unfortunately lost his or her job because of this global recession, and if that person could re-enter the workforce but in a non-unionized job—this is, I know, what Mr. Godin is interested in—would you support that?

François.

[Translation]

Mr. François Lamoureux: Did I understand your question correctly? You would like to ensure that self-employed or part-time workers are more eligible for employment insurance benefits? Was that your question?

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: No, I'm saying that if one of your unionized members who unfortunately lost his or her job because of the global recession could re-enter the workforce but in a non-unionized job, would you support that?

• (1655)

[Translation]

Mr. François Lamoureux: Absolutely. In fact, sir, people in the union movement who lose their jobs do not have the luxury or the opportunity of saying that they will refuse a job because it is not unionized. People are seeking permanent work that will help them earn their living.

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Exactly. You're right. I assumed that you might say that, and we certainly agree there in respect to that, as I think most around this table would.

Then my question in follow-up to that is can you tell us how much your organization spends to help workers directly with things like skills training, job searching, and other activities that help them return to work or transition into a new job or sector? How much money do you spend in respect to that?

François.

[Translation]

Mr. François Lamoureux: I don't want to give figures. There is a great deal of energy and resources invested in helping people re-enter the labour market. We work mainly and a great deal in tandem with Investissement Québec and the Quebec government to help people find work and to help businesses get back on their feet following restructuring when they apply for protection under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act. So we work very hard.

Indeed, that is what we have just done with AbitibiBowater thanks to a restructuring operation. We reached an agreement. Of course, we modified our working conditions and we think we will be able to see our way clear to helping AbitibiBowater withdraw from protection under this act. We worked with our colleagues from the rest of Canada. Between 8,000 and 10,000 workers were affected by this operation. Actuaries, legal counsel and services of all kinds were provided to us.

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Okay. Thank you very much. But you can't give me even rough numbers? Can you get back to us with that, with some numbers in terms of those particular types of things, money spent on skills training, job searching, and other activities that help?

[Translation]

Mr. François Lamoureux: This represents hundreds of thousands of dollars that are invested each year by the Confédération des syndicats nationaux in different programs. Some things cannot be quantified in terms of sums of money. However, the CSN sits on the Commission des partenaires du marché du travail where all training criteria for Quebec are developed. We thus work with government partners and other associations to ensure that training programs adapted to workers are provided.

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: So you obviously think that investments in training are important. I think you've inferred, and pretty explicitly stated, even, that investments are pretty important. I think you see that common heart; I think the number one priority of our government is jobs. That's kind of the outflow of the budget here, getting Canadians back to work, providing the kind of programs to that end.

What advice, if any, do you have for the government in terms of what should be done at this time to help Canadians get back into the workforce? Do you have specific suggestions for our committee here today in respect to this bill as well? What would be the specific suggestions to get Canadians back in the workforce?

[Translation]

Mr. François Lamoureux: Clearly, this is a two-pronged question.

To answer the part about the fight against poverty, the first thing is to make sure that people can regain their dignity and at least be eligible for employment insurance, because through the benefits they receive, they will be able to take customized training in order to retrain in another area.

The second part of your question concerns job creation. What is needed—and I would say this is the future, at least for the coming

years—are sustainable, green and permanent jobs that will help the country emerge from the crisis. We want to see as few as possible part-time and precarious jobs that cause people to jump from job to job and apply for employment insurance benefits. So we want to see the creation of the largest number of permanent jobs possible to allow these people to live a longer and greener life.

• (1700)

[English]

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: I have a couple of quick questions on that, because I think you mentioned the word “bridging.” I think that is the key thing sometimes when people lose a job before they pick up with the next one. I think you're well aware of the work-sharing program extended in the budget 2010 here as well.

The Chair: Mr. Vellacott, you have about 10 seconds.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Okay.

At any rate, it protected over 1,000 jobs in Mr. Lessard's riding, about 35,000 jobs in the province of Quebec. I think it is that kind of bridging thing, the work sharing....

I think I'm done.

The Chair: You're done. Thank you.

I want to say thank you to the witnesses for appearing today. We appreciate the information that you have provided.

Our time is up for this portion of the meeting, so I will dismiss the witnesses, and we'll carry on with our committee business.

Again, thank you very much. *Merci beaucoup.*

We don't need to go in camera, so as soon as the witness leave the table, we'll carry on with committee business.

We have a couple of things that we have to look at and just get completed, so that we can carry on with the work that we've agreed to.

The first thing we can look at is we need a motion in regard to the poverty study and the information that has been gathered. In front of you there should be this motion:

That the Committee continue the study of the Federal contribution to reducing poverty in Canada and that all the evidence and documentation received by the Committee during the 39th Parliament and 40th Parliament (1st and 2nd sessions) be taken into consideration and be deemed presented in the present session.

Excuse me, can I have order, please? Thank you very much.

Could someone please move the motion? Do I have someone to move it?

Hon. Geoff Regan: I so move.

The Chair: Are we all in favour? Do we have a consensus?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: The second matter of business that we need to do in order for some of our expenses to be covered is our operational budget request. Everyone has the operational budget request in front of them.

Could I have someone move that budget, please?

Mr. Rick Casson: I so move.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Good. Thank you very much.

We now have a motion brought forward by Mr. Martin....

Ms. Leslie, you'll be presenting it for Mr. Martin?

All right, go ahead.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Thanks, Chair.

You should have a copy of the notice of motion from Tony Martin. This is concerning Bill C-304, which we discussed before we adjourned. We actually got it through to the point that we were ready to report it back to the House. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened, so we're starting this over in committee. The motion is actually outlining the fact that we agree that witnesses have been heard.

I will read the motion:

That, the testimonies of all witnesses heard for Bill C-304, An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians in the last session be deemed to have been heard in this session and, that the Committee start clause by clause consideration of the said Bill on Monday, March 22, 2010.

That any amendment to the Bill be sent to the Clerk by Friday, March 19, 2010 no later than 2:00 p.m.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Folco, please.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I just wondered how that fits into the calendar that we established a few days ago in terms of what was supposed to be going on next Monday, March 22.

The Chair: On Monday we will be looking at Bill C-304. So this would fit in with that progress.

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): I have just a question with respect to this motion. It simply talks about evidence, and it also talks about potential amendments. Was Ms. Leslie intending to file an amendment or amendments, and when can we expect to see them? I was hoping we would have seen any potential amendments by now.

• (1705)

Ms. Megan Leslie: I can say with authority, right now, we don't have any other amendments that we're moving. However, just so the committee is aware, I did talk to the parliamentary secretary outside of this committee to say there may be an amendment coming, and if there was, I would certainly give the parliamentary secretary the heads-up.

Here the motion states that it needs to be sent to the clerk by March 19, so that's this Friday. But if I hear of any other amendments, I can certainly let the committee, even, know.

The Chair: Okay. So if there are any amendments, we need them by the 19th.

Is there any other discussion on the motion? Do I need to read it?

Some hon. members: No, dispense.

The Chair: All right, we'll dispense with reading the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Then I think we can go to Mr. Vellacott's motion. We actually have time before the bells are going to ring; very efficient.

Mr. Vellacott.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Thank you, Madam Chair.

This motion, verbatim, virtually, is what was passed in the House by all parties with unanimous consent in the name of Mr. Jeff Watson before we prorogued. So the motion doesn't get renewed, as with the bill itself. That's a different little wrinkle in respect to motions. So basically all I'm doing is putting the same wording forward in terms of the study that had been agreed to by all parties in coming to this committee prior to the prorogation. I would think, hopefully, that it's pretty straightforward.

Yes, we did add the words "be instructed to examine", so there is a difference, whereas the motion itself that was passed unanimously in the House would not have had the words "be instructed to". That's the nature of the motion that passed in the House.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I would suggest you maybe take those words out.

The Chair: Are you wanting to change your motion or do we want to...?

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Mr. Komarnicki is suggesting by consent or friendly amendment that we just remove "be instructed to", that we just do it.

The Chair: All right. Is there a consensus that we'll remove "to be instructed"?

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Yes. "Be instructed to" would be removed, then.

An hon. member: Carried.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on that motion?

None? Wow.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Terrific.

I'm realizing that we're even more efficient than I thought. It looks like we're finished.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: You're doing such a fantastic job.

The Chair: Oh, that's good.

I think I need a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Geoff Regan: I so move.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Regan—

An hon. member: No, we don't need it. We're just out of here.

The Chair: Yes? Okay.

We're adjourned.

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