HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

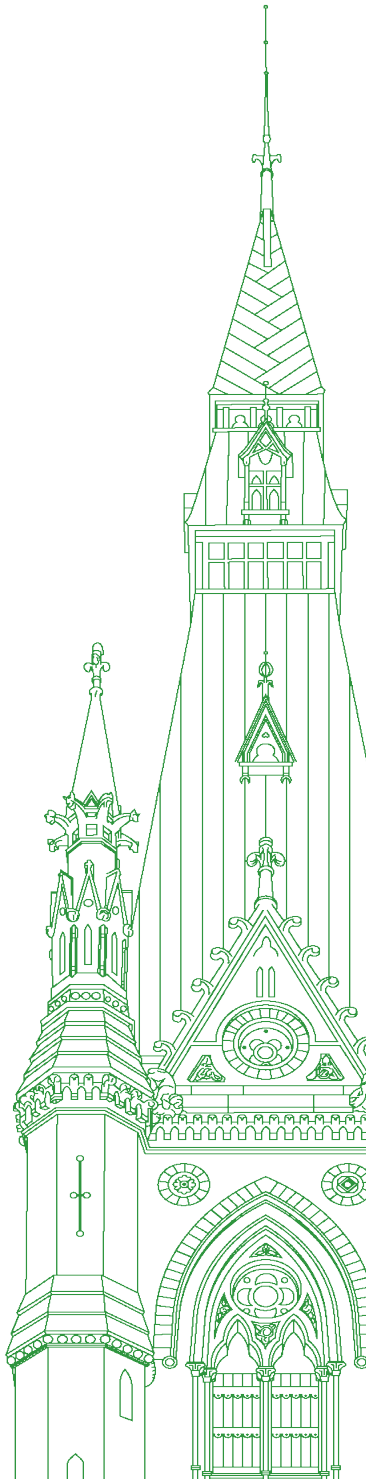
42nd PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 005

Tuesday, March 8, 2016



Chair: Mr. Andy Fillmore

Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

Tuesday, March 8, 2016

● (1555)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.)): I'll call the meeting to order.

I'm going to welcome our guests in a moment, but first, I want to go through a couple of quick things. The first is to apologize to everyone for the late start. It was business of the House that kept all committee members until just now.

I wanted to outline the time that we have today. We've lost half an hour because of this. I've heard a number of committee members and others express a desire to finish on time at 5:30, so we're going to have to absorb the loss of time within our allotted period.

I don't want to take any time away from the presentations from our guests. The way that the afternoon was intended to roll out was that the first group would present for 10 minutes, followed immediately by the second group for 10 minutes, leaving 40 minutes for the committee members to ask questions. That would be an hour, and we would have repeated that again for the second two groups.

Because we've lost half an hour, we're going to have to remove 15 minutes from each of the 40-minute question periods, leaving 25 minutes for questions. I'll ask the committee's preference on this. Last week, I tried to accommodate time loss by shaving minutes, and that didn't seem to go over very well, so it's my intention to stick to the minute allotments that we adopted in the routine motions until we run out of time. In other words, we'd let that run for 25 minutes and then simply stop, and move on to the next group of presentations.

Does that sound okay to folks? Okay, thank you. That's what we'll do.

I'm also going to get a little stricter about timekeeping. For the benefit of our guests, the committee members agreed ahead of time on seven minutes per question for the first four questions, followed by five minutes per question. This is a way to maintain fairness among all members. I will be letting you know when you have a minute left in the seven-minute period, and then again when there are about five or 10 seconds left, so you can finish up. I'm really going to keep it to those seven- and five-minute segments.

I would invite committee members to try to keep the opening soliloquies prior to the questions as short as possible and get right to the question so we can hear the most that we can from our guests.

With that throat clearing and introductory comments, I'm very pleased to welcome our first presenters, who are from the ITK.

Thank you very much for being with us. I guess it's Natan Obed, the president, who will be presenting to us today. At your pleasure, please, we'd love to hear from you.

Mr. Natan Obed (President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for having the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami here this afternoon. I look forward to the discussion later. I want to thank you for the invitation.

ITK is the national representational organization for Canada's 60,000 Inuit. We are spread across Canada's Arctic or as we call it Inuit Nunangat: Nunatsiavut in northern Labrador; Nunavik in northern Quebec; Nunavut, which is its territory and also has a land claim body within that territory; and then Inuvialuit region in the western Arctic.

The foundation of our relationship with the federal government is our land claim agreements. The first was signed in 1975 and the last was signed in Nunatsiavut in 2006. The relationship we have is one that is based on the Constitution. The organization that I represent represents a very defined link between each one of our beneficiaries, the members of each one of our four land claim agreements, and the regional bodies that represent them to the regional bodies that elect the national Inuit leader, which is me. Those regional bodies also elect an international leader on the Inuit Circumpolar Council Canada.

We have a very tight governance structure. Also, Inuit on the board that I'm president of have the insight and perspective of our women with the Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada and also the National Inuit Youth Council.

In these days of debate and discussion about who represents whom and the way in which indigenous peoples of Canada choose to represent themselves, I present you with a very clear model from the individual Inuit who live in Canada to the national body that is an unbroken chain of representation, an Inuit democracy, if you will.

Our rights stem from the Constitution. We also draw from international law through UN declarations and UN conventions. We also have the shared space, as I mentioned before, through our comprehensive land claim agreements.

We have a shared space that sometimes is focused on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, and often Indigenous and Northern Affairs is the place where everyone goes for the direction on the Inuit perspective. I'm always worried about that, because so many different government departments play a role in the way that Inuit services are delivered, the way that policies and programs are developed, and then the way the overarching relationship that Inuit have with the crown is actualized. While the lead per se always in land claim implementation has been INAC in its many different iterations, I think moving forward it would be safe to say that we would hope that this is expanding out and onward beyond just one department, because while the nuts and bolts of land claims may happen here within Indigenous and Northern Affairs, they spread out across the entire federal government.

Our population is unique. Our median age is 23 and that is a very different median age from the rest of Canada. Our population has grown 26% between 1996 and 2006. We have a very young and rapidly expanding population.

We also are unique in that many of us didn't live in settlements prior to World War II and so many of our people grew up on the land or were born in igloos or sod houses. The story that you often hear about, the very romantic version of Inuit, does exist still in our land, even though the reality for us of the younger generations is very different.

● (1600)

The challenge of our organization is to respect the relationship we have with the land and our traditions, the fact that over 60% of our population still cites as its mother tongue Inuktitut, which is the Inuit language in its many dialects, and the fact that we still feel like we live with the environment and are still coming to terms with this new reality of melding southern Canadian values and southern Canadian governance concepts with the way in which we've always lived our lives.

At the national level, our organization works with each of the four regions to understand what our national concerns are. We released our strategic plan today. In that strategic plan, we talk about seven different objectives and priority areas that we'd like to move at the national level.

Before I get into those seven objectives, I'd like to pause on the relationship piece. Politics may change very rapidly, but bureaucracies, programs, policies, and the implementation of indigenous rights move at a very different pace. We are very encouraged by the recent change of events that has allowed indigenous peoples to participate in events such as the climate change discussions last week in Vancouver, or the fact that the Prime Minister came and participated with us and our board at a meeting at our offices in January.

These changes are all welcome, and hopefully these are all signs of things to come, but we know there are systemic problems that we need to overcome with regard to the way in which we interact with the Government of Canada, and the way in which programs, services, and terms and conditions from Treasury Board all roll out in different ways for Inuit than they might for first nations, without consideration of the Inuit when those different programs, services, or terms and conditions are being drafted.

We think there should be a broad standard across each one of the federal government departments to ensure that whenever we go to talk to a minister, or to a deputy, or down at the program level, there is a structural relationship, and that it doesn't vary from person to person or from department to department. Our rights don't fluctuate that way, and therefore our engagement with the federal government should not be at the whim of a public servant, or at the whim of a particular minister, or be limited by the lack of understanding about the realities of Inuit who don't live on reserves, whose relationship is dictated by land claim agreements and public governments. There is a self-government in Nunatsiavut, but still, the way in which we interact with Canada should be at the forefront of the federal system as a whole.

● (1605)

The Chair: Mr. Obed, I have to let you know that there's about a minute and a half left in your time.

Mr. Natan Obed: I will now speak very quickly about the strategic objectives that we are laying out as we move forward for the next three years.

Suicide prevention is our first objective. To take action on suicide prevention, we will be releasing a national Inuit suicide prevention strategy this summer. We have a great belief that this particular strategy and accompanying action plan will create a new path and direction, one that denormalizes suicide in our communities and reduces the rate of suicide for Inuit as a whole.

We also have a housing crisis. Our second objective is to improve access to appropriate housing for Inuit.

Our third objective is to work toward reconciliation and that's reconciliation in the lens of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 calls to action, but also reconciliation amongst ourselves. Not all the things that we do as a national organization are outward-focused and lobbying for others to do things. We can do things as Inuit to bring ourselves together and to reconcile for the things that may have gone wrong within our families, within our communities, or across our regions.

Our fourth objective is self-determination in education. We have a national strategy on Inuit education and we have a long way to go to implement its recommendations. We look forward in the next three years to making substantial increases to student attainment, to curriculum development, and to the way in which our language and culture is infused in all that we do.

Our fifth objective is protecting the Inuit Nunangat environment and that links in with climate change. It also links in with the protection of our wildlife. We are a land-based people. We are of the environment. We want to be a part of the Canadian conversation on climate change, not just as a people but as a core component of all the work that happens.

Our sixth objective is strengthening Inuit self-determination in research. Evidence drives decision-making, but evidence also drives the creative process in which we solve our issues. We still have massive gaps in how we understand key components of our lives, which we want to improve. We have a fundamental disconnect with the academic community and also, sometimes, the federal government system for research in relation to how it functions versus how we want it to function. We want to improve those relationships.

Our seventh objective is to enhance the health and well-being of Inuit families and communities. We are working with Health Canada. We're working across different departments to work on these issues already.

I look forward to working with each and every one of you in improving the well-being, health, and economic status of Inuit in Nunangat.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Obed. That's much appreciated.

We're also very pleased to hear today from the Métis National Council. Speaking will be Mr. Chartier, the president, and Mr. Weinstein, the chief of staff.

Mr. Chartier.

Mr. Clément Chartier (President, Métis National Council): Thank you for the invitation. I assume there are a number of people here who are new to the Parliament and possibly new to the Métis nation.

Very quickly, we're an indigenous people who evolved into a new and distinct nation in primarily western Canada. Our traditional homeland is now encompassed by the three prairie provinces and extends into a contiguous part of British Columbia, Ontario, the Northwest Territories, and the northern United States.

Basically, the Métis National Council is the governmental body mandated to represent the Métis nation, and we do so at national and international levels. We engage in intergovernmental processes in Canada, such as the first ministers' meeting on climate change that took place last week.

We have a lot of challenges. We were dispossessed from our lands and resources in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The exception is, of course, in Alberta. The provincial government in 1938 established Métis settlements. There are currently eight Métis settlements in Alberta. That's an exception, but that's a provincial government initiative.

After 1870, with the fall of the Métis nation in defending itself against Canada, we were treated as individuals and no longer as a collective, and we were dealt with through a scrip process in contradistinction to treaties entered into with first nations as collectivities. We were dealt with as individuals, and the federal government's scrip process was meant to extinguish our aboriginal title.

We are challenging that. We filed a case in 1994, the Morin case in northwest Saskatchewan. It's sitting there because we don't have the money to take it forward, but nevertheless the challenge is there.

In Blais, unasked, the Supreme Court of Canada in 2003 stated that scrip speculation and devaluation were part of a sorry chapter in Canada's history. In Powley on the same day, the Supreme Court of Canada stated that Métis are full-fledged rights-bearing aboriginal peoples, and their rights are no less than those of first nations or other aboriginal peoples. In Cunningham in 2011, the Supreme Court of Canada stated that the Métis have the right to determine their own citizenship.

In Daniels, which is currently before the Supreme Court of Canada, the Federal Court appeal division stated that the Métis fall under number 24 of section 91, which is “Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians”, and therefore the federal Parliament has the necessary constitutional authority and responsibility or jurisdiction to enter into a government-to-government relationship with the Métis nation.

Of course, that appeal was argued on October 8 of last year, and we're currently awaiting a decision unless of course the current government withdraws its cross-appeal. CAP appealed it to expand the ruling. Canada counter-appealed to say neither the Métis nor non-status Indians fit within that term. I wrote a letter to the Prime Minister in November asking that the cross-appeal be withdrawn. I have not heard to date whether it will or will not be.

With regard to exclusions, the Métis nation is no stranger to exclusion. The only veterans in Canada from World War II who haven't been dealt with are the Métis nation veterans. Métis residential schools are excluded from the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, excluded from the June 2008 apology in Parliament, and excluded from the mandate, and hence, also the recommendations or calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

We're excluded from the majority of federal programs such as those of the first nations and inuit health branch, and post-secondary education assistance. We would invite a cap if we had something to cap. In any event, we're also excluded from the various land claims processes, again our only recourse being the courts, and as I say the 1994 statement of claim is just sitting there because there is no way we can afford to move forward.

I'll now talk about priorities on the positive side and about embracing the change in government.

● (1610)

During the campaign, the Liberal Party stated that Canada must complete the unfinished work of Confederation by establishing a renewed nation-to-nation relationship with the Métis nation. The platform or the policy put out by the party is in your kit. Of course we're looking to the government now to act on it.

There are a number of commitments, and it was unprecedented, and we have been working with the Trudeau government to put it into action.

The most critical test of the policy will be whether the federal government is willing to negotiate and reach just and lasting settlements of the unique rights and claims of the Métis nation. As its Métis nation policy rightly recognizes, it is essential to how reconciliation with the Métis people will finally be meaningfully advanced and achieved. The policy committed to by the current government is to immediately establish a negotiations process between Canada and the Manitoba Métis Federation, to settle the outstanding land claim of the Manitoba Métis community, as recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada in Manitoba Métis Federation Inc. v. Canada, decided in 2013. In fact, the government is acting quickly to engage the Manitoba Métis Federation in this process, and we look forward to the results.

This government also committed to establishing a federal claims process that sets out a framework to address Métis rights, protected by section 35 of the Constitution, which recognizes Métis self-government and would resolve outstanding Métis claims against the crown.

● (1615)

The Chair: Mr. Chartier, I should tell you that we're at about seven minutes now.

Mr. Clément Chartier: Yes, and I would have finished on time, but I'll still try.

It extended the mandate of the ministerial special representative on Métis engagement, Mr. Tom Isaac, who had been appointed by the previous government to explore the development of a Métis section 35 rights reconciliation framework. Given the commitment of the present government to move on the settlement of our rights and claims, and advancing Métis nation self-government, we are keenly anticipating the upcoming report of Mr. Isaac.

The Métis nation policy also contained a number of important commitments to us that we trust will be addressed in the upcoming federal budget. It committed to invest $25 million over five years in the Métis economic development strategy, which will identify strategic federal investments in Métis nation financial institutions to enhance Métis entrepreneurship and Métis participation in business development and economic growth.

It committed to renew the aboriginal strategic employment and training strategy, ASETS, including nation-to-nation and distinctions-based approaches that respect the unique realities of first nations, Inuit, and the Métis nation in the delivery of these programs and services to our respective communities. With the renewal, the government has committed to add $50 million per year to ASETS.

It committed to fulfill the commitment in the Kelowna accord to enhance existing scholarships and bursaries available to Métis students at various colleges and universities across Canada, in partnership with the Métis nation. It also committed to convert the year-to-year program funding for our Métis nation registries into a permanent program.

The Prime Minister invited the Métis National Council to a meeting with him and a number of his ministers in December 2015 to elaborate on how these commitments could be implemented in the most meaningful way.

We are definitely looking to the budget for the confirmation of these important investments in our social and economic development. The Prime Minister and his ministers have also engaged the Métis National Council, together with the Assembly of First Nations and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, in meetings with the provincial health ministers on a health accord, and with first ministers on climate change and clean growth. We appreciate the spirit of partnership surrounding this engagement, which is consistent with the new nation-to-nation relationship sought by the Prime Minister. Moreover, inviting only these three indigenous governments, or representatives of indigenous governments of the three constitutionally recognized indigenous peoples to participate in these intergovernmental forums is consistent with a nation-to-nation approach and the inherent right of self-government.

In closing, the Prime Minister has stated on a number of occasions since coming to office, “There is no relationship more important to me—and to Canada—than the one with First Nations, the Métis Nation, and Inuit.” It is our hope to continue working with the government in that spirit to achieve rapid progress.

Mahsi. *Merci*. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chartier. I very much appreciate your comments on behalf of the committee. Sir, I wasn't clear if you were going to be splitting time with Mr. Weinstein, but I think we're out of time in any case.

Let's roll right into the questioning. We have some eager folks with good questions. The question order will begin with Rémi, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rémi Massé (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to thank the witnesses for participating in this meeting. It is greatly appreciated.

If that's okay, I will ask my questions in French. It will be easier for me to express myself clearly. Mr. Obed, my first question is for you.

You listed seven challenges and the associated actions. I would like to hear your thoughts on the way the government could support you in a more concrete manner as you carry out this action plan.

● (1620)

[*English*]

Mr. Natan Obed: Thank you very much for that question. I won't go list by list, but I think there are a number of key departments that can play meaningful and substantive roles in helping us achieve success in our strategic plan, and I think that we're very practical and focused in the way that we would ask for that support.

We recognize that the federal space is limited in what it could do for, say, K through 12 education or any other situation in which provincial and territorial jurisdiction is the sole jurisdiction of the issue.

But there are many things that we can do to overcome gaps and outcomes. I will take Health Canada as an example, where there are a number of different programs and services that are designed to close gaps in health outcomes specifically for first nations and Inuit. A lot of those programs could be improved, and there has to be a discussion with Inuit about the things that are the biggest priority to us.

I'll focus on suicide prevention. There are very few dollars that are available for overarching suicide prevention measures for Canadian Inuit. In the past, we have had small pots of funding that have been rolled out to different territories or provinces, but when we are looking at 11 times the national average for our suicide rates and we're thinking of it as a crisis in jurisdictions such as Nunavut, more action needs to be taken. Sometimes I've asked the question, when is a crisis actually a crisis? When is the federal government going to help us when we call out for that help? How bad does it need to be?

Our tuberculosis rates are about 140 times the national average. Suicide prevention rates I've already mentioned. These are human challenges that do have solutions, and we can use evidence and we can use best practices to be able to design interventions that get us to the place that we need to be.

Sometimes federal investment is secondary to restructuring the way in which you help, but sometimes investment is needed. In the case of housing, I think there is a role for the Government of Canada to play as a significant driver in changing the way that our housing happens across the Arctic. Inuit Nunangat has a housing crisis. As I said, our communities were created mostly after the 1950s. We have huge infrastructure deficits and housing is one of the biggest. How are we going to create a sustainable housing structure in Inuit Nunangat? How are we going to go beyond just social housing? Are we going to create new solutions, whether it's private housing or whether it's a combination of social housing to home ownership or housing design? I think we can be innovative and I think we can find ways to make it cheaper to ensure that this problem, this crisis, doesn't persist.

The Chair: Thank you. There are a few minutes left. We're at 4:25, if you have another question.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rémi Massé: I have another question for Mr. Obed.

I would like to hear what you have to say about the education strategy. I would also like to hear your comments on the main principles or objectives. Once again, how could the government support you when it comes to education?

[*English*]

Mr. Natan Obed: Thank you again for the question.

It's a lifelong-learning holistic approach to increase the educational attainment for Inuit. In the early years, we focused on bridging the gap between parents and students, and the education system. With the legacy of residential schools and the newness of formal education as a whole, we still have to create a path where parents feel as though it is in their own and their children's best interests for there to be a strong bond between parents and children, and the education system. We've done quite a bit of work on that.

I think the work that is really going to change our society for the better would be in early childhood, and creating the best possible early childhood education program in Canada, or even in the world, for Inuit children. I talked a bit about our population growth. I talked about the socio-economic challenges that we have. We have an educational attainment rate for graduation of high school that is probably between 25% and 40% depending upon which region we look at. If you look at the majority of our children that aren't reaching grade 12 and try to understand why that happens, there has to be a focus on early learning and learning in our language and in our culture, such as curriculum development and accreditation issues for teachers ensuring that our language is the primary language of instruction. All these things play significant roles in the way in which we want to address attainment for education.

Post-secondary education is another area that we focus on as well. The lifelong-learning model is the one that we've ascribed to in the way in which we've developed our strategy and the way we want to implement it.

● (1625)

The Chair: That was perfectly timed, Mr. Obed. Thank you.

The next question is from David Yurdiga.

Mr. David Yurdiga (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. My first round of questions will go to Mr. Obed.

Resource development in the Arctic has brought many benefits, but with any development comes environmental concerns. Can you tell us what benefits resource development has brought to the Inuit along with some of the environmental challenges?

Mr. Natan Obed: The way that our land claims agreements are structured is that we have a very clear path towards the very beginning of the discussion about whether or not Inuit would like to see development on our lands, the environmental assessment process, the development of impact and benefits agreements, and overarching financial and other considerations for training and employment. Throughout the process, our land claim agreements and our overarching indigenous rights play a very central role in the way in which any development happens across Inuit Nunangat. There are examples of great successes for our people in co-management, the business development sector, and also individually for jobs and prosperity.

There are also huge challenges that have come with the boom and bust cycle of the natural resource economy, and the transition for communities that haven't had any experience with major projects to the reality of having a mine in their backyard.

I would say that the way forward must include natural resource extraction, because our land claims are structured so that we are partners in development and so that we benefit from it. It then benefits our self-determination. It builds our assets, which we're then able to use to run programs in our communities, to build our language, to do any number of things that we wish for our society, just as the funds from natural resource extraction projects help fund the government and the way in which the government can spend money on the priorities that it sets for its people.

We're partners in this with you. I think that is a good thing for Canada, but I also think there are a lot of challenges that come from natural resource extraction in the Canadian Arctic. It's such a fragile landscape, especially in the face of climate change, but we have the bodies in place to be able to work through all of those problems. It's just a question of ensuring that there's respect for the co-management process and for the Inuit processes that started with the land claims that, at the end of the day, should be the ones that are respected by all.

Mr. David Yurdiga: With development, there are always benefits as far as jobs go. What role does the ITK play, if any, in supporting Inuit businesses in our resource and service sectors?

● (1630)

Mr. Natan Obed: ITK is a representational organization. We also advocate for Inuit interests. In our advocacy efforts to the federal government, we play a role in ensuring that any economic development or business development programs or initiatives are conceptualized and implemented so that Inuit can benefit from them, and Inuit businesses or organizations can make the most of them.

That is the limited but essential role that we play, whether it's ensuring that there are funds for human resource development or within INAC so that some of our businesses can access different programs that allow for major projects to happen, or down to individual businesses. That is the role that ITK plays.

Mr. David Yurdiga: The Species at Risk Act came into effect in 2003. Can you give us some insight on who sits on the National Aboriginal Council on Species At Risk, how members are selected, and whether this is a term appointment?

Mr. Natan Obed: Sorry, I don't have that information for you. I can get that information for you.

Mr. David Yurdiga: That would be good, if you can.

Going back to the education component, we understand that we all want our children and grandchildren to do better. What is the major hurdle for getting further education? It's one thing to get high school education, but another to go further with post-secondary education to obtain the jobs that are better paying. It also encourages their children to do the same.

What is a major hurdle or stumbling block for the youth today?

Mr. Natan Obed: You can start in any number of places. I'll give the example of Nunavut, where many Inuit speak Inuktitut at home and will always identify Inuktitut as their first language. They go to school from K to 3 or K to 4 in their language, but then transition in grades 4 or 5 to English. There is no real structure of language instruction in their own language beyond language arts at that time.

We need to be able to create a system across Inuit Nunangat, across our 53 communities, where our language is respected in the same way that French and English are respected in southern Canada as languages of instruction, to reach the same outcome and the same goal.

We have an immense amount of other challenges, such as small communities with limited capacity for specific biology, chemistry, or math when they get to grades 10, 11, and 12. We hope we can overcome those through distance education and access to online or satellite-based learning.

We can overcome these challenges, but there are some fundamental problems with our education system that don't allow our children at the end of grade 12 to have the same level of credentials.

I don't think we can say that the way we've provided education is fair. We expect our children to learn through curriculum that wasn't designed for them. We expect them to learn in a southern-based environment without having that balance between learning about a new culture and a new way of learning, and having the foundation of their own language, their own culture, and their own community in the classroom with them from K to 12.

There are a number of things that I think we can improve to ensure that our children have a fair chance of getting a high-quality education that is transferrable anywhere in Canada.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thanks for that. Mr. Obed. I was just told by our wonderful research staff here that they'll find the answer for us about who sits on the species at risk committee, so you can cross that off your to-do list. We'll take care of that and let David know. Thank you.

The next question comes from Charlie Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, gentlemen, for this excellent presentation.

Mr. Chartier, I wanted to start with you. One of the volumes in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the treatment of the Métis in the residential schools. The Prime Minister has committed to meeting all of the recommendations. One of the recommendations was about those who are excluded; the day scholars and the Métis were excluded.

Can you just fill us in quickly, because this process is winding down? I could be wrong, but my understanding is that once it's wound down, there will be no further claims accepted. Has there been any discussion with the present government about resolving the exclusion of the Métis? What would we need to do to make sure that the Métis who suffered through the same situations are treated fairly?

● (1635)

Mr. Clément Chartier: Actually, if you look closely you will see a sliver of our presence in the final report. I think I read it differently. I don't read that the Métis are being dealt with in that report other than stating they should sign on to whatever everybody else signs on to, which does not address the matter.

We did have a meeting with Minister Bennett up in northwest Saskatchewan when she was there to visit La Loche and particularly the Île-à-la-Crosse boarding school, which is unique in itself.

It's not just day scholars. People, I shouldn't say “like you”, but most people when they talk about Métis and Métis residential schools just talk about day schools.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Sorry, just to be correct, I said the Métis and the day scholars. I didn't say they were the same.

Mr. Clément Chartier: Okay, but most people when they talk about it talk about day schools, not residential schools.

There aren't that many Métis residential schools, and I don't think you can deal with them both at the same time. You have to deal with residential schools and look at day schools as well, the same way you do for first nations people. I know there are schools in the Northwest Territories, and I believe in Labrador, that were left out. There are quite a few.

I don't think we can now expect to get in at the tail end of this process. I think that work is over. There will have be a new agreement with the people who have been left out, at least in terms of the Métis residential schools. Of course, day schools should be addressed as well, but Métis residential schools definitely need to be addressed.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Have there been any steps to deal with this, or is this part of the desire of the Métis to have action from the new government?

Mr. Clément Chartier: Nothing concrete has come out of it yet, except that there was meeting where that issue was discussed and there's a willingness on the part of Minister Bennett to have a real look at it. I spoke on the Île-à-la-Crosse boarding school with Premier Wall last week, again, revisiting that whole issue. There seems to be a hesitancy to look at it, as if they're not wanting to set any kind of precedent.

I think we're a long way from resolving this. Certainly I don't think the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports will have any benefit for the Métis nation.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Obed, we've heard about the issue of food insecurity in the north, and we have seen across the north problems with the nutrition north program. Certainly in my region it's a huge issue. The main estimates for this year say there will be a $14.5-million cut to nutrition north. The new government has promised a $10-million top-up to nutrition north, but if that cut stays in place we're still looking at a $4-million shortfall.

Has there been any discussion with the new government about whether or not that shortfall is going to continue or what do we need to do to make sure that we end the terrible food insecurity in the northern communities?

Mr. Natan Obed: I have been in conversations with Minister Bennett about the nutrition north program, but not specifically about the dollar amounts, because I think that's a secondary issue.

The primary issue is the purpose of the program. If the purpose of the program is that it's a social program with 100% of the money going to the people who need it in Inuit Nunangat and other northern remote communities, then we need the program to be completely transparent and accountable. I don't think we're there with the current program.

A point-of-sale rebate is a marketing tool, but it is not an accountability mechanism in the way that it is being used. Until we fix these systemic problems that make the nutrition north program open to interpretation, I think people will continue to say that it isn't working for them and that they demand a better nutrition north program.

We are very thankful that such a large social program exists to combat the 70% food insecurity that Inuit face in Inuit Nunangat. I would never want to give the impression that we are not thankful for the subsidy. I would say that the animosity and anger towards the program is rooted in the fact that indigenous people are being asked to sign on to something that they don't necessarily know the structure of, to its core.

Fix the accountability and transparency of the program and I'm sure you will have more buy-in no matter what the amount.

● (1640)

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much for that.

The Chair: You have 50 seconds left.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I would have gone on to the suicide issue, which I think would be much more than 50 seconds, so I guess I'll just have to leave it.

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll move on to Mike Bossio.

As we mentioned, Mike will have a shortened four minutes.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Thank you.

I have so many questions I want to ask.

To start with, Mr. Obed, I have what I hope is a short question. You spoke about self-determination, and I couldn't really get my head around how it's working. Maybe that's part of the problem.

As far as education, health care, resource extraction, and the environment go, how much self-determination is there for the Inuit community to actually have control over their territory, and to have control over these programs to determine that they are going to define the curriculum, determine what resource extraction happens, determine the environmental policies as to how that extraction will occur, and determine the delivery of health care?

Mr. Natan Obed: This gives me an opportunity to talk about our vision statement, “Canadian Inuit are prospering through unity and self-determination”.

The ITK is a vehicle for self-determination for Inuit. The expression of self-determination at this table, say, is that Inuit have a chance to speak to you clearly without any limitation about the priorities we have and the way in which we would like to interact and work with you.

On the other side, the federal side, there sometimes is an assumption that the federal government, or any number of government levels, can decide for Inuit what is best for Inuit, or can interpret, based on statistics or other measures, what things will or will not work, such as the nutrition north program. The fact that Inuit are not participating in defining what the eligible items are for the program shows that we have a lack of self-determination in the way in which that program runs. Canada is deciding what healthy foods will be subsidized and will be on our store shelves.

In this era and this time, we expect to have participation in the way in which those major decisions are made, decisions that affect our lives. In just about any different way, whether it's the implementation of land claim agreements, or the ability to represent ourselves and have the government respect the way Inuit represent ourselves, these are things that are works in progress. We're always driving towards higher goals and aspirations.

We have limitations to self-determination now, especially in the way that our colonial history and all the hurts of the past still affect our people today. We talk about it through historical trauma and intergenerational trauma, where the dysfunction we see in our society is often linked to the times when Inuit were brought off the land and coerced into communities, or our children were sent away to residential schools, or our dogs were killed, or our loved ones were sent away for tuberculosis treatment and never came back, and we weren't told what happened to them.

People still have to overcome all of these things. I think a big challenge to our self-determination is our ability to get over that colonial process. That's why we're here talking about how programs can be improved and about the priorities we have as a people that we know will get us towards the path that we need to be on.

● (1645)

Mr. Mike Bossio: I guess I don't have time for my question for the Métis council.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bossio and Mr. Obed.

Mr. Obed, Mr. Chartier, and Mr. Weinstein, on behalf of all of the committee members, thank you very much for joining us today and allowing us to learn from you.

I apologize for the shortened time. It was out of our control, I'm afraid. However, I would like to invite you to leave behind your notes, if you'd like to. Or if you'd like to submit something to us after the fact, we would very much welcome that. I encourage individual committee members to continue a dialogue outside of these walls, too, if that's helpful to anyone.

A warm thank you to all.

We'll suspend for a couple of minutes while we say farewell and welcome our next guests.

● (1645)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1645)

The Chair: Welcome to the committee today, and thanks very much for making time for us. We're very grateful that you could be here.

We're going to dive right in here. I think you heard the explanation in the first half of the meeting about how the timing works. We have an established order so that our committee can ask you some questions. Given that we lost some time today, I'm in the unenviable position of having to be a little bit firm with timing. You'll see me getting your attention with our yellow card when you have one minute left for answering, and when we're right out of time, with a red card. I apologize for the formality of that.

We're going to hear now from the National Association of Friendship Centres, in particular, Christopher Sheppard, vice-president, and Jeffrey Cyr, executive director.

You have the floor.

Mr. Christopher Sheppard (Vice-President, National Association of Friendship Centres): *AteliKai*. Distinguished members of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, it's an honour and a privilege to appear before you, and I thank you for this opportunity to share with you the work of the friendship centre movement, and the National Association of Friendship Centres.

Before I begin, I wish to acknowledge the Algonquin nation, upon whose traditional territory we are meeting today.

My name is Christopher Sheppard. I'm Inuit. I'm originally from Postville, Nunatsiavut, but I now live and work in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. I grew up in the friendship centre movement having been involved in their aboriginal youth council, and I'm currently in my first term as vice-president of the National Association of Friendship Centres, also known as the NAFC.

Accompanying me today is Mr. Jeffrey Cyr, a proud Métis from Manitoba and the NAFC's executive director, as well as Pamela Ouart, NAFC's director of research and special projects.

With our time together I would like to give you a brief overview of the friendship centre movement, the NAFC, and the urban indigenous population in Canada. I would also like to share with you some of the NAFC's strategic priorities and provide you with some examples of the critical work that the NAFC, our provincial and territorial affiliates, and key partners are doing to support indigenous people in urban settings.

Lastly, I would like to highlight the NAFC's priorities for the 42nd Parliament and share my perspectives as to how each of you can support the friendship centre movement to advance our goals of reconciliation, improving Canada's social infrastructure, and advancing social finance opportunities for aboriginal people living in urban environments in Canada. Of course, time permitting, I will do my best to respond to any questions you may have.

I would like to begin by stating some facts to set the context for the work of the friendship centre movement. As you may know, 75% of Canada's indigenous people live off reserve. Nearly 60% live in urban areas. Further, the indigenous population is growing at a faster rate than the Canadian average. This means that there are approximately 840,000 indigenous people living in Canadian cities.

The Canadian indigenous population is also young, with approximately 50% being under the age of 24. This presents a tremendous opportunity for Canada's future social, cultural, and economic development. However, as you have heard from previous presentations, some indigenous youth live in challenging social and economic circumstances.

Since the 1950s friendship centres have become professional service-delivery experts with extensive experience, continual innovation, and deep partnerships with provinces and territories, civil society, and the private sector. The friendship centre movement is the country's most significant off-reserve indigenous service-delivery infrastructure. For over half a century, friendship centres have helped urban indigenous people access the vital services they need to succeed in urban settings across Canada. Friendship centres understand the challenges facing our communities, and their unique wraparound service delivery model ensures we are equipped to tackle them. Across the country, friendship centres provide culturally appropriate programs and services for indigenous people living in urban centres and have become a place for indigenous and non-indigenous people to come together to share traditions and learn from one another.

Friendship centres are a significant part of Canada's social infrastructure backbone, with more than two million client contacts annually, serving Canada's most vulnerable urban indigenous populations. By creating a space for indigenous people in urban settings, friendship centres provide culturally adept wraparound services and have been catalysts for reconciliation in Canada since their earliest days.

The NAFC is a national association created by friendship centres in Canada in 1972 to be the voice of its members nationally and internationally. The NAFC's membership now comprises seven provincial or territorial associations and 118 friendship centres across Canada, including many in your ridings. The NAFC has a long and unique relationship with the Government of Canada. For the past 30 years the NAFC has been the administrator of national programs delivered to friendship centres and other indigenous organizations on behalf of the Government of Canada. While a not-for-profit network rather than a politically representative organization, the NAFC enjoys a productive relationship with many other indigenous organizations.

● (1655)

In partnership with the Government of Canada, the National Association of Friendship Centres is now administering the delivery of $43 million in programs and services under a realigned urban aboriginal strategy.

This funding has assisted friendship centres and other urban aboriginal service delivery organizations to not only increase services, but also to build and expand partnerships with a range of partners including all levels of government, non-profit organizations, the private sector, and the charitable and philanthropic sectors to support indigenous people living in urban centres to achieve their goals. Through these partnerships, friendship centres have been successful in leveraging funds. In fiscal year 2014-15, friendship centres leveraged, for every federal dollar invested, at a ratio of 7:1.

I would now like to walk you through some of the NAFC's priorities and highlight some of the initiatives that are being implemented to advance these priorities and address the challenges that are experienced by some indigenous people in Canada's urban centres.

In June 2015 the NAFC launched Action for Indigenous Women, a comprehensive initiative to end violence against indigenous women and girls. Action for Indigenous Women builds on proven culturally relevant friendship centre movement initiatives to provide support and change the conditions that lead to violence. This was done through the creation of A4iW Live, a digital community for indigenous youth and the expansion and promotion of NewJourneys.ca, an online resource created by the NAFC supporting indigenous people who have or are planning to relocate to the city.

The NAFC hosts the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network secretariat, which is a research network of urban indigenous communities, policy-makers, and academics engaging in community-driven research with the goal of contributing to a better quality of life for urban indigenous people in urban centres. Social innovation and social finance present tremendous tools with which to build on those strategic relationships to develop new, and just as important, skill-up and skill-out existing initiatives so that they can have broader impact.

In British Columbia, the B.C. Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres has undertaken a number of initiatives to move social innovation and social finance forward. My colleague Paul Lacerte, the executive director of the B.C. Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres, has spoken extensively about these opportunities.

In Quebec, the Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtone du Québec has a history of bringing together stakeholders, civil society, and the provincial and federal governments to address social and economic development issues. The Val-d'Or Native Friendship Centre has developed co-op housing for first nations families.

Here in Ontario, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres has also been working with key stakeholders to develop concrete social enterprise and social financing initiatives, including a program that provided training and development to support friendship centres to build capacity and assist in developing local social enterprise ventures.

As we collectively look ahead two weeks from today to the first budget of the new government and beyond, I would like to share with you the priorities of the friendship centre movement for this 42nd Parliament. The friendship centre movement will support communities and grieving families as the work of the national public inquiry on murdered and missing indigenous women is formally established and carries out its critical work.

The NAFC will continue to work with all partners to achieve reconciliation in Canada by implementing the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The friendship centre movement looks forward to working with the government and opposition parties to improve the lives of urban indigenous people in Canada. This will be achieved through core funding investments in friendship centres so that they continue to have the capacity to operate and to meet the needs of these communities. It will also be achieved by committing infrastructure funding and investing in friendship centres. Retrofitting, fixing, expanding, and reinvigorating these pillars of the community not only provide employment while increasing sustainability and accessibility, it also provides safe community spaces for some of the most vulnerable members of Canadian society.

In closing I would like to reaffirm that there are community-based solutions to complex problems, and friendship centres are harnessing the creativity, energy, and knowledge that can unlock new ideas and new thinking, which will lead to enduring social change and contribute to the full inclusion of indigenous people in Canada's economic, cultural, and social fabric.

Thank you.

● (1700)

The Chair: Thanks very much, Mr. Sheppard.

We'll go right into the presentation from the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and then follow that with questions.

Please, you have 10 minutes. Thank you.

Chief Dwight Dorey (National Chief, Congress of Aboriginal Peoples): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee. I thank you for inviting me here today.

I also would first like to acknowledge the Algonquin people on whose traditional ancestral homelands we are assembled today.

I have appeared before this committee and other standing committees in the past. This will be my first under this Liberal government. By way of introducing myself I am a treaty Mi'kmaq from the Millbrook First Nation in Nova Scotia. Throughout my life I have been involved in advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples and I intend to continue doing so for many years to come.

In 2000, I served as national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples for six years, up to 2006. I returned to the congress in 2011 when I was elected as vice-chief. I remained in that position for a year. In September 2015, I was re-elected for the fourth time as national chief of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. I am pleased to say that I am back.

For those of you who may not know us let me tell you a little about the organization. The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is one of five national indigenous organizations that are recognized by the Government of Canada, and it is recognized by provincial and territorial governments and by the international community as well. For 45 years, since 1971, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, formerly known as the Native Council of Canada, has been a national indigenous representative organization that has represented the interests of the Métis, off-reserve status Indians, and non-status indigenous peoples living in rural, remote, urban, and isolated areas throughout Canada, including the Inuit of southern Labrador.

CAP has been at the forefront of issues that matter most to indigenous peoples for many years. Here are some examples.

CAP fought to ensure that the word “Métis” was included in the Constitution during the constitutional talks of 1982. In fact, it was our former leader, Mr. Harry Daniels, who was widely accredited for getting Métis in the Constitution.

We were also successful in 1999 when the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on the Corbiere case declaring that all bands holding elections under the Indian Act would be required to extend voting rights to their band members living off reserve.

In January 2013, the Federal Court of Canada affirmed the position that CAP had fought for since 1971, that the Métis and non-status aboriginal people are Indians under section 91, class 24, of the Constitution Act of 1867. This historic ruling granted long overdue recognition and equality to over 600,000 of Canada's forgotten indigenous peoples. We now await a final decision from the Supreme Court.

Fundamentally, CAP seeks to ensure that all indigenous people have equal access to programs and services across the country and that our indigenous and treaty rights, as recognized under section 35 in Canada's Constitution Act of 1982, are given equal protection regardless of residence or Indian Act status.

I would also like to provide you with a quick overview of how the congress operates and what we do.

CAP works closely with its provincial-territorial organizations, referred to PTOs, and advocates on their behalf on the national level. Each of our PTOs is a provincially or territorially incorporated organization that provides research and advocacy support to their members and carries out a range of programs and services for their constituents.

In terms of our youth council, with the ever-growing indigenous youth population, CAP is committed to ensuring that the necessary tools and supports are in place to enable our youth to live successful and productive lives.

On the aboriginal skills and employment training strategy, ASETS, indigenous peoples face a number of challenges when entering the labour market, including constitutional, jurisdictional, and geographical gaps. The ASETS program, which started in 1999, fills those gaps by providing skills training, employment counselling, wage subsidies, and self-employment assistance.

● (1705)

Regarding our third annual national grassroots engagement tour, the grassroots engagement tour is an opportunity for indigenous peoples living off reserve in rural and urban areas to engage in town hall-style events and discuss the issues that matter most to them. This year's tour began in Victoria, B.C., and to date we have made nine stops in communities across Canada. Another 13 town halls are scheduled or in the planning stages in the coming weeks. From these sessions we have identified themes that best represent the concerns of our constituents including housing, education, and the Harry Daniels court challenge that is before the Supreme Court.

Now I would like to turn our attention to the promises made in the Liberal platform during this recent election. We are hopeful that this government wants a renewed relationship that includes all indigenous peoples, regardless of where they choose to live. The congress is also committed to working in close partnership with the government and all national, regional, and community indigenous organizations to bring about the much-needed change in recognition for our indigenous peoples.

This is what real partnership must look like. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised real change. The Prime Minister also committed to a new nation-to-nation process that will renew the relations between Canada and all indigenous peoples. In fact, the mandate letters that went out to all cabinet ministers contained specific priorities and directives for each portfolio, and also wording on the Prime Minister's overall expectations.

Let me read one excerpt:

> I made a personal commitment to bring new leadership and a new tone to Ottawa.... No relationship is more important to me and to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples. It is time for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership.

I also want to reiterate what we have said in the past with respect to nationhood. Traditionally, the indigenous peoples in Canada identified with their own specific nations of peoples, such as mine which is Mi'kmaq. There are Maliseet, Mohawk, Ojibwa, Chipewyan, and there are many more. These are examples of some of the 60 or so nations of indigenous peoples in Canada. The reality is that indigenous nations of peoples have been systematically divided by the federal government through Indian policy, the disinheritance of indigenous peoples' birthright, identity, and the dispossessing of access to their lands and their resources.

Today we have countless classifications for Indian, far too many, and far too confusing. For example, we have status Indians, non-status Indians, off-reserve Indians, on-reserve Indians, registered Indians, treaty Indians, band members, non-band members, beneficiaries, non-beneficiaries, and so on. This list now includes distinct and non-distinct classifications of who is an Indian.

Who is an Indian, or an aboriginal or indigenous person? The definition is very clear under section 35 of the Constitution Act. It says, “'aboriginal peoples of Canada' includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada”.

The Constitution was meant to be inclusive, not exclusive. However, under this new government's commitment to a nation-to-nation relationship with indigenous peoples across Canada, the big question being asked by many of our people is where do urban and rural indigenous people fit into the government's concept of nation-to-nation relationships.

On December 13, 2015, Christine Martin, the executive director of the Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Services Society, said to a CBC Vancouver radio host:

● (1710)

> I'm not going to lie, I think we're a little concerned about how this is going to roll out in the urban aboriginal community. It leaves out a huge population of approximately 65 per cent of us who don't live on our reserves, and not many of us have connections to the bands that we come from. Some of our people who live here in Vancouver have never been to the band that they come from, let alone be active participants in it.

The Chair: Mr. Dorey, I'm afraid we're out of time. If you want to give us your concluding remarks, in the interest of fairness we need to move on to the questions.

My apologies for rushing you.

Chief Dwight Dorey: Okay, thank you.

I expect to be meeting soon with the Honourable Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, to talk about our own nation-building strategy. The congress is in political accord with the government and the road map for renewal and reconciliation. This is how we see our government-to-government relationship or process being developed.

We propose a road map that sets out seven topics for action. They include economic development; education and lifelong learning; governance and accountability for and within indigenous communities; family security, including child and family support systems on reserve and off reserve; indigenous and treaty rights, including access to those rights by the indigenous people regardless of their status or residency; implementation of international standards for the rights of indigenous people, which includes mainly the declaration of the UN on the rights of indigenous peoples and the ILO's convention number 169 on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples; and an assessment of, preparation for, and response to the court's decision in relation to the inclusion of both Métis and non-status Indians within section 91, class 24, of the Constitution Act, 1987, the Daniels decision.

The Chair: Mr. Dorey, I would welcome you to leave behind your notes. They would become a formal part of the record, but I'm afraid we must move into the questions now.

Chief Dwight Dorey: All right, I'll make one final point for your information. As of today—

Mr. Charlie Angus: On a point of order, Chair, if that happens, then we have to discuss time.

The Chair: Yes, we do, and I plan to do that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Chair, if that's how you're going to run the meetings, we're going to have to move to other means of dividing up the time afterwards if there isn't the time.

The Chair: Yes.

Please go ahead, Mr. Dorey, with your final remark.

Chief Dwight Dorey: My final remark is that as of today the congress has gone through a rebranding process. We will now be the Indigenous Peoples' Assembly of Canada.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Before we go to committee questions, I have a question for the committee itself. We're doing our best to make up a half an hour of lost time here. I have from one or two members a willingness to shorten the next seven-minute question rounds to five minutes so the committee can still turn to the business of two motions after we say goodbye to our guests. Can I test the willingness of the committee to switch to five-minute questions coming up?

I see consent for that. Thanks so much.

The next question goes to Gary, please.

● (1715)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I had the opportunity last Friday to visit the Native Child and Family Services in Scarborough, and was quite impressed with the amount of work they do.

As you know the Prime Minister said we're looking to build a nation-to-nation relationship with our indigenous, Inuit, and Métis peoples, so what role do you think the people living in urban settings can play in setting that relationship?

Mr. Christopher Sheppard: For us friendship centres have always been places for people to go regardless of what background they come from. If you're an aboriginal individual, and you need support for something in your community, you could go there and you would be respected for who you were as an aboriginal person. We've treated every person who's come through our doors with respect. I think for friendship centres it's about always recognizing those things, and we're glad to support anyone who wants to build relationships.

We're not a politically representative organization. We are an organization that is literally based on supporting the communities we're in no matter what they need. We've had indigenous people walk through the doors, and we've had non-indigenous people walk through the doors. When we talk about reconciliation, we've been doing this work for so long because for a lot of communities this is a safe place where a non-aboriginal person or a non-indigenous person could go to learn about that culture and people in a place of respect. We're not politically representative. The nation-to-nation piece, we look at it differently because of the way we treat everyone who walks through the doors of our friendship centre. Maybe we have something to share in that regard as to how we work with all the different people who walk through our doors, but we do it every day.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: To both the national chief and the friendship centres, what concrete measures can the federal government take in protecting indigenous languages and cultures, and in particular, promoting them within the overall Canadian framework?

Chief Dwight Dorey: For one thing, there has to be a real, closer working relationship with provincial governments, if you are talking about the people that we advocate for and represent, because of the jurisdiction of education within the provinces. However, having said that, one of the big issues relative to the Daniels case, and the reason why we took this to court, is fiduciary responsibility. It has already been declared by the courts. We have been fighting and arguing for this for 45 years, that the fiduciary duty and responsibility for all aboriginal or indigenous people should rest with the federal government under section 91, class 24, of the British North America Act. Once that is resolved, if in fact we get that declaration and there is a fiduciary duty, there is a right for us to be consulted and negotiated with. Those are the primary kinds of questions that we will get at and will expect to be addressed by the federal government.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr (Executive Director, National Association of Friendship Centres): Mr. Chair, may I add a few comments?

One of the ways to get at indigenous language and cultural transmission is to provide the space and the programming, and to facilitate the take-up in communities. Friendship centres have looked forward to this government, both in an infrastructure context and a programming context, to facilitate that. Let's provide the safe spaces where cultural transmission occurs, where we engage elders and youth in the transmission of that knowledge, which includes, very importantly, languages and indigenous spirituality within that frame. Being a little more open under the indigenous languages program formerly or currently with the Department of Canadian Heritage, and expanding that capacity, is also critical.

The Chair: The next question will go to Arnold Viersen, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question is for.... Is it IPAC now? Is that how we are going to refer to it?

You touched upon your work off reserve, as the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and how you represent a whole host of people. What is the role of elders in your community? How does that connect you to consultations, and how do the elders influence the community altogether?

I am slowly learning all of this. I have 14 first nations in my riding of Peace River—Westlock. They all tell me that the elders are the people who really hold onto the culture and propel it forward. I am just wondering how the role of elders plays out in with your organization.

● (1720)

Chief Dwight Dorey: That's a very good question. Two of the main priorities, as we progress in our work within the congress, are our elders and our youth. We have a youth council. We counsel with elders just about every time we meet. Whenever there is a major meeting or an annual assembly, we invite the elders. We provide rooms for them to meet and discuss our relative issues and give advice.

That is taking place within all of our affiliated organizations at the provincial and territorial level as well. It is very important. We believe strongly in the things of our culture, you know, seven generations, and respect for our people who are the keepers of the knowledge. Oral tradition among our peoples, our communities, is extremely important.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Does that work quite well off reserve as well as on reserve?

Chief Dwight Dorey: Yes, it does, with the exception that, for us, it is always a resource issue because our people are scattered about. To show respect for our elders, we have to provide for them. The resources that are available are often a big issue.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

As you may know, at the beginning of this year there was a special committee on physician-assisted suicide, and it held meetings with stakeholders from around the country. There were only two indigenous witnesses who appeared, and both expressed concern with the lack of consultation with national indigenous organizations. Was CAP or IPAC invited to take part in these committee consultations?

Chief Dwight Dorey: No, we weren't.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

I know that end-of-life care and palliative care and suicide are critical issues for aboriginal people, indigenous people. Have you had consultations with your membership on these particular issues?

Chief Dwight Dorey: Not to any great length. Again, it goes back to the issue of resources.

You hit on a point. It's a known problem, the high rate of suicides within the indigenous populations of the country. It's about time we were provided with the kinds of necessary resources to effectively address those concerns and deal with our communities.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I guess this is a fairly broad question. How can the government ensure that a national indigenous organization such as yours has a stronger voice in nation-to-nation consultations?

Chief Dwight Dorey: Unfortunately, because of time I couldn't get into that, but in the last few pages of my presentation, I talk about the political accord that the congress has with the federal government. It's been in place for over 20 years now. It lists a lot of the key agenda items: health, housing, education, training, and all these.

We're looking forward and have met with Minister Bennett to start that process to get it fuelled again. This is the way we want to address these things, with support for the political accord. What we call a road map is a three-year plan to set out how we'll implement these things and address these kinds of concerns.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Where can I find that three-year plan?

Chief Dwight Dorey: You can get it through our office.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes. Thank you. That's my time.

The Chair: Thanks a lot.

Yes, and perhaps you wouldn't mind, also, if you're comfortable, to leave your notes, or by whatever conveyance, any other briefing you'd like us to have.

Chief Dwight Dorey: Yes, for sure.

The Chair: The next questioner, for five minutes, is Charlie Angus, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you.

I want to thank both presenters. I certainly want to say that the Native Friendship Centre in Timmins is an extraordinary tool for the good of the entire community.

Unfortunately, I'm not going to be able to ask questions as time has run out on us. We have a motion that, because of the health crisis in Treaty 9, I have to bring to the agenda today. I apologize that I'm not able to ask questions. We can follow up later.

Mr. Chair, while I have the floor, I apologize for bringing it up today as opposed to our planning meeting. I have a family emergency on Thursday. I cannot be here. The emergency we're dealing with right now in Treaty 9 started with the wife of Norman Shewaybick, who died because there was no oxygen in their medical centre. The chiefs of Mushkegowuk have called for a state of emergency. We lost another young person Saturday night. That's two in the last week.

I'm asking the committee, given the seriousness of this.... When a state of emergency is declared anywhere else in the country, things happen. When it happens in Indian country, it seems that there's no response, and that's what I'm hearing from the leadership. They're very frustrated. I think it would be a positive message to invite them.

I had mentioned bringing Chief Isadore Day and the leadership of Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which would be Alvin Fiddler. I would suggest having a special meeting, a one-day meeting with a two-hour period. I would suggest April 12, because we're going to be leaving, and then we have the budget. I would suggest it would be good to invite Jonathan Solomon, the chief of Mushkegowuk; the board chair of the Sioux Lookout health authority, who could probably provide some technical advice; and Chief Moonias from Neskantaga, which is also dealing with the heart of the crisis.

I put it to my colleagues. Perhaps we could bring that forward and get that so that when we come back we have something to show that we're actually taking these issues on as they happen, and that we can use our committee to be responsive and provide, hopefully, some solutions.

● (1725)

The Chair: For the benefit of our guests, we've gone slightly off script, but it's within Charlie Angus's prerogative to do that in such a meeting. It's an important motion, as you've heard.

Is there any debate or comment on the motion?

Cathy McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Can you continue with the questioning? I have questions.

The Chair: What's happened now is that the committee is seized of this motion, and before we can conduct any further business we have to deal with the motion, ultimately with a vote, or with a vote to defer debate.

An hon. member: If there's no debate, we can move to—

The Chair: We have a speaking order. I'll add you, but Cathy McLeod is on.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I do appreciate Mr. Angus bringing this to the table. I think it is a very important issue. I also want to reflect, though, he's brought some other motions to the table...and we heard earlier, in terms of the incredible rate of suicide, which I would suggest is also critically important.

I'd like to go back to my original comments around the planning of committee business and the purpose of the subcommittee. I really believe that is the place for these conversations to happen and the priorities to be set. I'm not saying we should not do this, but I think we should do this within the framework of those other important things that need to be decided on. We should put some process around it.

For that reason only, I think the subcommittee, which I believe is meeting soon, needs to have that conversation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Don Rusnak.

Mr. Don Rusnak (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): We know there's a suicide epidemic in first nation communities all across this country. There are suicide issues in communities that I represent in the Grand Council Treaty No. 3 area. There are suicide problems in Alberta communities. I knew that when I was a prosecutor there.

I am well familiar with the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, because a lot of their people come to Thunder Bay, and I am familiar with their leadership, who have an issue and have declared a state of emergency. Over the last 10 years they've declared a lot of states of emergency over the suicide crisis.

I'm not saying this isn't an issue that we shouldn't immediately discuss, but I don't think there's harm in putting it off a little bit to make sure we're inclusive of all the communities that are facing this crisis in Canada. That's just my addition. I would look at the people we should invite here, because the issues they face are similar right across this country. A lot of it has to do with the relationship between the federal government and first nation communities.

I'm just saying I wouldn't want to restrict it to just these communities.

● (1730)

Mr. Charlie Angus: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: I didn't hear you, Charlie, sorry.

Mike, please.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Actually, I'd like to hear what Charlie has to say before I comment, if that's okay.

Are you all right with that, Charlie?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Certainly.

Don's right, there have been a lot of states of emergency—I can't count how many states of emergency I've seen—and nobody's done diddly-squat. That's the reality.

Yes, so they declare states of emergency and they just wait until people give up. I brought a motion about the suicide crisis and I was told we could do that later, because we're doing lesson 101. That's good, but people are dying. So a state of emergency is declared and we could say, well, there are emergencies everywhere. That could be the vote of this committee.

I didn't bring it to the planning and priorities committee. As I said, I can't be there Thursday, as I have a family emergency that I have to be at.

When you have a state of emergency declared and nothing's done, it sends a real message across the country. I think this next meeting will open the door to the bigger discussion that's affecting the death rates. We've had 600-plus kids in one part of my riding attempt to kill themselves since 2009. If that doesn't mean we should be meeting on this, I don't know what it would be. This isn't to exclude anything else, but a state of emergency was declared and they're asking for national leadership. This is an opportunity.

I would put it to a vote.

The Chair: Mike.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I completely agree with where Charlie is coming from on this. This is a state of emergency. There's no reason we can't take this specific state of emergency, deal with it in and of itself, and still, at the same time, deal with the suicide crisis that exists in all first nations. We could deal with the state of emergency first and then go to the suicide crisis that exists in all first nations. I can't see why we can't do both.

I think there's been a good amount of discussion. I'd like to put an end to the debate and have a vote, but I'd like Michael to have a chance to ask one final question—unless we've already run out of time.

I am in support of where Charlie is coming from, and I think we should put it to a vote.

The Chair: Michael.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Mr. Chairman, I don't think it's appropriate to invite people to travel all this way to come and present to us, then hijack the meeting and say we're not going to listen to them. I've waited a long time to have a discussion with the friendship centre. I have a real interest in the work they do. If this is the way we're going to do business....

We need to be able to enforce a process so that we don't bring people in and just leave them hanging.

The Chair: Mr. Angus.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I want to be clear here. The meeting ends at 5:30 p.m. You might have lots of questions. You can take that up with the chair about how the meeting was decided. I had five minutes.

I respectfully asked to use my five minutes to raise this because people are dying back home. If you have other questions, that has nothing to do with my five minutes. You can call that hijacking all you want. You might want to take that up with the chair about the timing.

If you want to stay and talk to him afterwards, you have to get unanimous consent, and it doesn't happen at committees. We had five minutes and I used it for this. I put it to a vote. You can vote whatever way you want.

The Chair: The choices before the committee now are to continue debate, to vote, or to defer debate.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I move that we defer debate and go to the vote.

The Chair: There's a motion to defer debate.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: On a point of order, Chair, deferring debate...?

The Chair: We would adjourn the debate until the next meeting.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: So we're not going to a vote.

The Chair: No, but we would go to a vote to adjourn debate.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I apologize. I wanted to go to a vote on the motion. I want to end debate and go to a vote on the motion.

The Chair: There are two motions on the floor now. We have a motion to adjourn debate, so let's just hear the will of the committee on that.

Mr. McLeod.

● (1735)

Mr. Michael McLeod: I have a question. If we're done with the presenters, we should let them know.

The Chair: I'm afraid we're bound to the protocol and procedures of the committee, which means that until this motion is dealt with, our hands are tied and we have to dispense with this motion.

However, Michael, when we meet to do our housekeeping, we'll talk about this at that time to get a better process.

Mr. Charlie Angus: On a point of order, Chair. Mike Bossio can withdraw his motion. Mike, you have the power to withdraw your motion.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Yes, I withdraw my motion.

The Chair: We're back to the vote on the motion itself.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: On a point of order, Chair, can he withdraw the motion after you have called for the vote?

The Chair: That's a good question. Unanimous consent is required to withdraw the motion.

Is there unanimous consent for Michael to withdraw his motion?

Mr. Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: The original motion was a mistake on my part, to be perfectly honest. It was through inexperience that I thought I was moving for a vote on Charlie's motion. Instead, I asked for a deferral on the motion, thinking I was asking to end debate so we could vote on Charlie's motion. I apologize for the inexperience in doing that. If you want to hold that against me, go ahead.

The Chair: I would propose to the committee that we honour the intent of Mike's motion, not the way that we heard it. Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Yes.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Yes.

(Motion withdrawn)

The Chair: The motion is withdrawn. We can now vote on the motion itself.

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

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Can we extend the discussion by maybe five minutes and allow Mr. McLeod to ask a question?

The Chair: Yes. I would like to ask the committee's support in extending our debate by five minutes, so that the last questioner in our rotation, Michael McLeod, can hear from our guests who are visiting us today.

Is there consent for that?

Mr. Charlie Angus: I have to leave for another meeting, but if you want to stay, it doesn't bother me.

The Chair: Thank you.

Please go ahead, Michael.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, and thank you all for coming here to present to us.

I have been involved with the friendship centres for a lot of years. I see the importance of having a friendship centre in the communities and the work that they've done. I appreciate the fact that they work independently of all other political organizations. In a lot of cases we're seeing the friendship centre as an organization that's moving forward on many things in the communities on the social end of things: setting up community gardens, promoting languages, delivering programs that deal with suicide, doing things on the homelessness front, and addressing alcohol programs.

I worked in the NWT friendship centre program. I wanted to ask about adequacy of funding. I saw what we were getting about 20 years ago, and in talking to members recently, I was surprised at how little things have changed since then. Maybe you could tell me a little about that.

Mr. Jeffrey Cyr: I'd love to tell you about at. Frankly, friendship centre programming funding levels haven't changed in roughly 30 years, or since at least the mid to late 1980s. There has been some adjustment and realignment of what the funding was meant to do under different governments over time, but the basic level hasn't changed.

We are having discussions with the current government about streamlining the programming so that it makes a little more sense. We've had some experience over the last number of years with it. What we need to see is effectively a doubling of core funding. We have a tonne of analysis of friendship centre core funding needs and requests on an operational level. Across the country it averages about $383,700. Some are on the lower end of the scale; some are on the higher end. Some friendship centres have 200 employees; some have seven. You have to put it in perspective.

We are asking for a significant commitment to that programming base on core funding, which makes all the difference in the world. It leverages the partnerships and all that other provincial funding. It represents a significant investment in infrastructure in some 238 buildings owned by 119 friendship centres across this country.

We've had some positive conversations and we're looking forward to continuing them. We're a little concerned about time, as everyone is. We'd like to move a little quicker than we're moving. We understand that it's a new government. We're working with officials and trying to do as much homework as we can to put everything in people's hands to make it effective. We're having a huge impact on the lives of indigenous people every single day: food, prenatal, postnatal, elder care, cultural transmission, high school programming, suicide prevention, you name it. It's across the board. We want to continue to do that good work and stay out of the political fray.

Thanks very much.

● (1740)

Mr. Michael McLeod: I have one quick question for the Indigenous Peoples' Assembly of Canada. The new title, I didn't know it was in the works so I'm a bit surprised. Congratulations.

I hear you talking about a protocol. I've heard aboriginal governments talk about the nation-to-nation concept, including the Kelowna Accord. Is your expectation to sign an actual agreement with the government? Is your expectation to see the Kelowna Accord as a separate agreement, or is it to see elements of the accord brought forward and just a better working relationship?

Chief Dwight Dorey: I can't give you a definitive answer, because I don't know what is being discussed or put out there. I've heard about a Kelowna-like agreement. I can tell you that I was the national head of the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples at the Kelowna meeting, and I could not sign on to support that agreement. In particular the reason was that the distinction-based process in section 35—Indians, Inuit, and Métis—leaves so many people out, hundreds of thousands. That's the reason I refer to the word “includes” in my presentation, because that was put in there to make sure nobody would be left out. Here we are with that situation. That's the problem with it.

In terms of any further information that members of this committee would like to see, I will make myself available one on one. All you have to do is get in touch with me and I'll come talk to you. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thanks to all of you for making time today and for bearing with us in our unexpectedly shortened meeting. I very much appreciate your forbearance.

Thank you to the committee members for agreeing to stay a few minutes late.

The meeting is adjourned.