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Chair: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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• (1200)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

[*English*]

Welcome to the third meeting of the House of Commons Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to the order of reference of Monday, April 20, the committee is meeting for the purposes of considering ministerial announcements, allowing members to present petitions, and questioning ministers of the crown, including the Prime Minister, in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[*English*]

I understand there's an agreement to observe a moment of silence in memory of the six members of the Canadian Armed Forces who lost their lives last Wednesday in a helicopter crash off the coast of Greece.

[*A moment of silence observed*]

We'll return to order.

Colleagues, we meet today to continue our discussion about how our country is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. As we do, Canadians, like everyone around the world, are doing their best to live their lives until things improve.

[*Translation*]

Meanwhile, as we look towards the future, I believe that it is also important to remember our past and to continue to mark the important moments in our shared history.

[*English*]

At this very moment, the Dominion Carillonneur, Dr. Andrea McCrady, is performing a special recital to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands by the Canadian Forces. In May 1945, Canadian Forces played a major role in liberating the Dutch people from Nazi occupation. May 5 is now a national holiday in the Netherlands that commemorates the event and the great friendship that now exists between our two countries.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Please be aware that the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

[*Translation*]

Let me remind you that, as in the House or in committee, members may not take photographs of their colleagues or film the proceedings.

[*English*]

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure orderly meetings, I will outline a few rules.

[*Translation*]

Interpretation of this video conference will be done as it is at normal committee meetings and in the House. At the bottom of your screen, you can choose floor, English or French. As you have seen, I change as I am speaking.

[*English*]

I have now switched over to English in order to speak English. If you look at the bottom, you have a little flag that indicates whether it's English or French, and that's how we will be speaking. It makes it easier. That was where we had a little bit of a glitch in the last session.

I understand that there are no statements by ministers.

We can now proceed to presenting petitions for a period not exceeding 15 minutes.

• (1205)

[*Translation*]

I would like to remind members that petitions presented during a meeting of the special committee must already have been certified by the clerk of petitions.

[*English*]

In addition, to ensure that the petition is considered to have been properly presented, the certificate of the petition and each page of the petition for petitions certified in a previous Parliament should be emailed to the committee no later than 6 p.m. on the day before the committee.

I thank all the members for their usual co-operation.

[*Translation*]

Thank you all.

[*English*]

Now we'll proceed to presenting petitions.

Our first petition comes from the honourable member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to be presenting two petitions today.

The first petition is with respect to government Bill C-7. Petitioners raised concerns that this bill removes safeguards from the current euthanasia regime. It includes removing the mandatory 10-day reflection period and the number of required witnesses who will witness a person's consent. The petitioners urge the House of Commons to immediately discontinue the removal of safeguards for people requesting euthanasia, and to put in place additional measures to protect vulnerable people. This would require that bill to be amended or not passed.

The second petition is with respect to Senate public bill S-204. This is on organ harvesting and trafficking. Petitioners call on members of the House, and hopefully the Senate as well, to support Bill S-204, which would make it a criminal offence for a person to go abroad and receive an organ for which there has not been consent. It would also create provisions under which a person could be made inadmissible to Canada if they had been involved in organ harvesting or trafficking. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to remind all the members that there are specific headsets that have been mandated to all of us. If you don't have one, please talk to your IT ambassador and they will get one to you as quickly as possible. The reason for them is not so much for what you hear, but that our interpreters are working and there are work conditions that really make it difficult. Part of that is not having the appropriate boom on your headset, which will make it very difficult for them to hear and interpret for our members.

Now we go to the member for Beaches—East York, Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I had to learn how to tie my tie all over again. It's been so long.

I want to thank Jenna Robar, who's led this petition e-2453. The petitioners have noted that there are approximately 60 indigenous languages in Canada and that 2019, last year, was declared by the UN to be the year of indigenous languages. They draw attention to article 13 of the UNDRIP and to the TRC's calls to action numbers 13 to 16. Fundamentally, they call upon the Government of Canada to recognize indigenous languages as being official languages of Canada and to have each language recognized nationally, with implementations on regional and provincial levels, acknowledging that many regions have different languages.

Mr. Eric Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Mr. Chair, I am proud to present a petition on behalf of one of my constituents, Myles Lynch of St. Andrews West in my riding. Myles made history as the first Canadian ever to survive three double-lung transplants. Myles lives with cystic fibrosis and has had three lung transplants in the last five years, and he's only 22 years old.

Myles created a documentary called *8 Thousand Myles*, which had a few showings in my riding. It documented his journey across

Canada. One thing Myles has been advocating for is the creation of a national opt-out program for organ donation. Myles asked me how he could help raise awareness of that issue. I mentioned to him e-petitions online and getting people across the country to sign them. I am proud to have this certified today, with 1,318 signatures, asking the Standing Committee on Health to launch a study into the feasibility of the creation of a national opt-out program.

I give kudos to Myles not only for his strength personally but also for his advocacy for others and for saving lives in our country by advocating for a better and an improved organ donation system. Kudos to Myles.

I'm proud to present this petition today.

● (1210)

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Mr. Chair, I'm very pleased to present this certified petition on behalf of several dozen residents of Toronto, Mississauga and Brampton, Ontario, who add their voices to those of the thousands upon thousands of Canadians who have signed similar petitions. Given that Canadians are living through unprecedented, catastrophic climate events, and at the same time our society, as you know, is suffering from worsening social and economic inequalities—half of Canadian families are only \$200 away from insolvency in any given month—and particularly given the pandemic that we are currently experiencing, these petitioners are calling on the Government of Canada to support motion M-1, a made-in-Canada green new deal that I am presenting in front of the House of Commons. It calls on Canada to take bold and rapid action to tackle the climate emergency, and to put in place a shift to a clean and renewable energy economy.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Mr. Chair, it's an honour to table a petition on behalf of constituents from Courtenay—Alberni. They are concerned, obviously, about fentanyl-related deaths. Over 12,000 Canadians have died over the last four years due to fentanyl-poisoned sources.

They cite that the current war on drugs has been costly and grossly ineffective; that it has resulted in widespread stigma towards addiction and against those who use illicit drugs; and that criminalization of particular substances has resulted in the establishment of a drug trade that now trafficks dangerous and lethal products such as fentanyl.

They are citing that regulating to ensure safe sources, with proper measures and bylaws, will reduce the criminal element associated with street drugs. Problematic substance use is a health issue and is not resolved through criminalization of personal possession and consumption.

They are calling on the Government of Canada to declare the current opioid overdose and fentanyl poisoning crisis a national public health emergency under the Emergencies Act. They are calling for the government to reform current drug policy to decriminalize personal possession, as has been done in Portugal and other countries, and to create with urgency and immediacy a system to provide safe and unadulterated access to substances so that people who use substances experimentally, recreationally or chronically are not at imminent risk of overdose due to a contaminated source.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Chair, I'm presenting a petition today that contains the concerns of Canadians in my riding with the government's approach to firearms legislation and regulation.

The petition highlights that the Liberal government's December 5, 2019, Speech from the Throne contains numerous inaccuracies about current firearms legislation and regulation; that the term "military-style assault rifles" is a political phrase undefined in Canadian law; that municipalities are constitutionally unable to enact criminal law to ban handguns in their jurisdictions; that the experts, including chiefs of police, agree that banning firearms and requiring law-abiding gun owners to follow more unnecessary red tape will not increase public safety; that the majority of guns used in violent crimes are smuggled into Canada from the United States; and that the Liberal government continues to target law-abiding firearms owners instead of the gangs, drug traffickers and illegal gun traffickers responsible for violence in our communities.

The petitioners in Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon are calling on the government to stop targeting law-abiding firearms owners; to cancel all plans to confiscate firearms legally owned by federally licensed, RCMP-vetted Canadians; and to focus our limited resources on anti-gang enforcement, on reducing the involvement of at-risk youth and gangs, on mental health and on providing the Canada Border Services Agency with the tools they need to do their job effectively.

The Chair: Very good. That's all for petitions today.

We will now proceed to the questioning of ministers. I would like to remind honourable members that no member shall be recognized for more than five minutes at a time and that members may split their time with one or more members by so indicating to the chair.

Ministers responding to the question should do so by simply turning on their mike and speaking. I want to again remind honourable members to use the boom on the official headsets so that everything runs smoothly, not only for ourselves but also for the interpreters.

• (1215)

[*Translation*]

We start the question period with Mr. Paul-Hus.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Although we are right in the middle of a pandemic and the government has agreed to set aside all parliamentary business in order to concentrate solely on eliminating the virus in Canada and its im-

pacts, the Prime Minister is deceiving Canadians by introducing measures to punish law-abiding firearm owners.

Why?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister): Mr. Chair, I feel that all Canadians were affected by the massacre in Nova Scotia. Once again, too many families are facing tragedy and tremendous grief.

During the last election campaign, we promised to ban military-style assault weapons, and that is exactly what we have done. We will be working with members from all parties in order to continue strengthening gun control.

It is a shame that, once more, the Conservatives do not want to strengthen gun control in the country.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Mr. Chair, I understand the Prime Minister's reply. However, I would like to know whether he considers that, with this order in council, organized crime, street gangs and other criminals are simply going to turn in their weapons.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: This is indeed only a first step, but it is an important one. We are doing other things to eliminate or restrict handguns in our municipalities, to strengthen the control at our borders, and to implement other measures.

I am pleased to hear the hon. member speak of those measures, because we are going to work together in the House to strengthen gun control. I hope that the Conservative Party will be part of that discussion in a positive way, in order to keep Canadians safe.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Mr. Chair, I can simply say to the Prime Minister that the Conservative Party has always been committed to battling criminals, not law-abiding citizens.

Speaking of criminals, we know that, even before the pandemic, the Prime Minister had asked the Parole Board of Canada to release prisoners more easily and more quickly. Now we are learning that, because of the pandemic, some releases are happening very quickly. The Minister of Public Safety told us that the people were approaching the end of their sentences or were older, but we are learning in the media that some dangerous criminals are being released.

Can the Prime Minister give us an explanation?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: The protection, the safety and the health of all Canadians are important for the government. This is why we have taken additional measures in our correctional services to ensure that guards and inmates are protected.

We have indeed opened the doors to some more speedy releases, but only in very specific cases that present little or no danger for Canadians. We have managed to find the right balance. We must protect Canadians and we must also ensure that they are safe. Those two things go hand-in-hand.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: So is the Prime Minister confirming to us that no dangerous criminals have been precipitously released so that they do not have to experience COVID-19 within the walls?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: There are very strict rules and principles to ensure that people posing a threat to society are not released.

The Chair: Mr. Paul-Hus, you have one minute left.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chinese government has not been transparent with the rest of the world about the coronavirus. Australia asked for an in-depth investigation, but has received threats from the communist regime.

Is Canada going to stand by its allies in the Five Eyes and demand that the Chinese government be completely transparent?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We continue to stand in solidarity with our allies, including the Five Eyes, as they have stood in solidarity with Canada in terms of the two Canadians who have been unjustly detained for a long time in China. In the coming months and years, we expect to obtain answers to all our questions about the origin of this pandemic, including questions that are important for China. At the same time, we are going to work hard to ensure that all Canadians have the equipment and the protection they need to get through this pandemic.

• (1220)

The Chair: We now move to Mr. Blanchet.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet (Beloeil—Chambly, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am sorry that I do not have my official headset. I was elsewhere, and I did not bring it with me. I hope that you can still hear me properly.

For some days, discussions have been going on between people from the Bloc Québécois and people from the government with a view to collaboratively coming up with a proposal for seniors in Quebec and Canada. The gist of our proposal is to temporarily increase the old age security by about \$25 per week, or \$110 per month. By the way, I hate the term "old age security". I prefer "senior security". The discussion has been going on for some time and it's a proposal that we made in the election campaign. We are asking for it to be done at this point, at least temporarily.

Parliament stopped sitting in the middle of March. We are now in May, and seniors still have nothing. They are impatient themselves, and we spend a good part of our days answering them. Given that impatience, I realized I should not be the one answering them, it should be the Prime Minister.

So here is my question for the Prime Minister: what are you doing to seek a solution that will increase the purchasing power of seniors in Quebec and Canada in the very short term?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Clearly, seniors need support and significant services from us because of COVID-19. Our priority was to implement income replacement benefits for workers who

have lost their jobs because of COVID-19. Then we announced different measures, including measures for seniors.

The most vulnerable seniors are going to receive reimbursement of the GST, which will help them very quickly. We have also reduced by 25% the minimum amount that must be withdrawn from registered retirement income funds. We have also channelled \$9 million through the United Way, to help the most vulnerable seniors.

Absolutely, I recognize that more must be done. I am very pleased that we have been able to work with other parliamentarians, including those in the Bloc Québécois, to hear these concerns and to find the best way to help seniors in the short term. In terms of the pandemic, they have concerns about their physical security, but also about their financial security.

We will have more to say about this soon.

Mr. Yves-François Blanchet: In the last few hours, the Prime Minister has indicated that he could need the cooperation of other parties, including the Bloc Québécois, on a completely different matter. We are very open to that discussion, but we want the same openness when we are asking for something to serve the people of Quebec.

The cost of a basket of groceries has increased for seniors, as it has for everyone else. It's true for all seniors over 65 years old, of course. The current old age pension represents less than half of the Canada emergency student benefit. It represents less than one third of the basic Canada emergency response benefit.

Seniors in my constituency, as in any other of the 338 constituencies, are asking what we are doing. They are asking how there can be nothing for them.

When will there be something for them? I want to be able to give them an answer of some kind.

What is the Prime Minister's answer? I will repeat it to them.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: There will be announcements in the coming days on the way in which we will be able to help seniors, particularly the most vulnerable seniors. We recognize that the cost of a basket of groceries is increasing for everyone. That is why we have to do better for our seniors.

There are horror stories, whether about the CHSLDs, or about our most vulnerable seniors across the country. Far too many families are experiencing tremendous grief. There are seniors who are alone, seniors who are afraid of falling ill without ever seeing their grandchildren or their children again. We have to be there for those who belong to that great generation that fought for us during the second world war. Now we have to fight for them in their homes. That is exactly what we are going to do.

• (1225)

[English]

The Chair: We'll go to the next question.

Ms. Collins.

Ms. Laurel Collins (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Chair, every day I hear from people who are struggling to pay their bills and to keep a roof over their head. Instead of making sure that Canadians get the help they need, the government has created complicated programs that are still letting people fall through the cracks.

If the Prime Minister won't commit to a universal benefit, will he at least commit to removing the restrictive eligibility criteria that are leaving the most vulnerable people behind?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we knew, when this pandemic hit, that we needed to help Canadians who were suffering from coast to coast to coast, particularly the most vulnerable. That is why we moved forward rapidly with the Canada emergency response benefit, which has helped over seven million individual Canadians and has made a huge difference. We had to move very quickly to get this money out to people, and that is exactly what we did.

We also recognized that there would be a need to do more. That is why since that moment, we have continually worked on reaching out to the most vulnerable and supporting them as well. We have more to do, but we knew that targeted approaches were what was most needed.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Mr. Chair, the government continues to leave people behind. I spoke to a woman in my riding who was homeless last year. She recently found a job and a place to live. However, because she didn't make \$5,000 last year, when the pandemic hit she didn't qualify for any benefits. She didn't qualify, but she is one of the people who need it the most.

I'm wondering why the Prime Minister doesn't think she deserves our support.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, our focus throughout this crisis has been on helping the most vulnerable with targeted measures that will lift Canadians out of poverty and will support them. Over the past five years, we've lifted over a million people out of poverty in this country, and we've continued to put the most vulnerable at the heart of everything we're doing. We will continue to. We've put significant investments forward to charitable organizations and foundations that are helping the most vulnerable.

At the same time, we will continue to look for more ways to help even more than the seven million Canadians who successfully receive the CERB. We recognize there's more to do, and we will continue trying to do everything we can in this unprecedented situation.

Ms. Laurel Collins: Mr. Chair, the government is weirdly committed to eligibility criteria that result in regular people not getting the support they need, but not so committed to criteria for corporations and billionaires who get our help. If a company is cheating the public, using offshore tax havens not to pay its fair share, it should not be eligible for government bailouts or benefits. Other countries, like Poland, Denmark and France, have made this commitment, and if they can do it, so can we.

The Prime Minister said one thing one day and another the next. Will he commit now that if a company has money in offshore tax havens, it will not receive public funds?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, the measures we've put forward are focused on helping workers who lose their jobs, regardless of the companies they work for. It is a shame to hear the NDP, which used to be the party of workers, choosing to judge workers by which multinational they work for. We have moved forward with a wage subsidy such that the employers are obliged to pass every single penny on to the workers. That is not help for the companies. That is help for the workers, and that has been our focus all the way through: ordinary Canadians who need support because they are unable to work because of COVID-19. That has been our priority, and that is what Canadians need right now.

Of course, we continue to have very strong measures to fight against tax avoidance and tax evasion. We spent a billion dollars to strengthen our—

Ms. Laurel Collins: Mr. Chair, can I ask my last question?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We will continue to do that.

The Chair: I'm just going to pause the time for a moment. I want to remind honourable members that we're trying to stay within committee rules, which state that the length of a question and the length of an answer should be approximately the same amount of time. I just want to remind our members of that.

I'll go back to Ms. Collins. She has about 45 seconds left, and hopefully that's about half and half for the question and the answer.

Ms. Collins.

• (1230)

Ms. Laurel Collins: Thanks so much, Mr. Chair.

My last question is about housing and homelessness. My community was facing a crisis long before the pandemic hit, and now people who are living on the streets or in parks don't have the luxury of following public health advice and just staying home. In Victoria, the province and the municipality have stepped up with solutions to house people, at least for the short term, in local hotels.

Will the federal government respond to this immediate crisis and provide the needed investments in long-term, stable housing?

The Chair: The right honourable Prime Minister, in 25 seconds or less, please.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Yes, Mr. Chair, we have moved forward with a historic national housing strategy that puts \$40 billion toward housing. Working with partners, we have reduced poverty by over a million people in this country, but there is more to do. We are reducing homelessness by half with historic investments.

We recognize that during this pandemic there's even more to do for vulnerable Canadians, and we are partnering with orders of government to make sure that happens.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Order. Mr. Godin has a point of order.

Mr. Joël Godin: Mr. Chair, I cannot hear the French interpretation. Could we please check so that I can hear in French what the Prime Minister is saying?

The Chair: Okay. Can we check that?

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you.

[*English*]

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I can try speaking English. I believe I was on the English tab, as is important. Are you hearing the translation now?

The Chair: That is exactly what the issue was.

I just want to point that out to all the members. I'm speaking English right now and I'm on the English toggle at the bottom of the screen. It does create a bit of a disjoint when we're speaking, but it's the way to get around that so we have interpretation that works for everyone.

The next question will go to the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Leader of the Opposition): Mr. Chair, as this is our first opportunity to meet in any forum, I want to take this opportunity to express my condolences to the families of the brave men and women who lost their lives in the helicopter crash. I know that I speak for all parliamentarians when I extend our sympathy to their families and loved ones.

Mr. Chair, I want to raise with the Prime Minister an issue that I've raised several times before, and that is a gap in the wage subsidy program.

There is a company in my riding that employs thousands of people across the country. Last year, they acquired another company. Those companies separately would qualify for the wage subsidy, but because of rules that the government designed, together they do not. Even though collectively they have experienced a massive drop in revenue and would otherwise be eligible, so far they've been unable to get confirmation that they will be able to access the program. As a result, thousands of jobs are threatened.

Will the Prime Minister be able to deliver some good news to people who work for Brandt Tractor all across the country?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I thank the honourable member for his question and for his advocacy for his community and businesses in his riding.

As I told him when we spoke directly, Finance officials have been directly in contact with the company in his riding. We recognize that there are particular elements in regard to this company that are challenging around application for the wage subsidy, but I know that Finance officials are working very hard to try to make

sure that everyone who needs the subsidy gets it, so that the workers in his community can get the support they need.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: The Prime Minister knows that there are many companies across the country that fall into this category as well, so we're hoping for some good news. Just flagging the time and date, it is well into May now and important decisions have to be made in very short order.

There are other aspects of the government's plans to help get people through this crisis that are also causing people to fall through the cracks. The plan to help businesses with rent applies only after a business has lost 70% of their revenue. As provinces start to open up, many companies are going to be faced with a very difficult decision of operating at perhaps 35% or 45% of regular revenues. They will not be able to access these programs and, in many cases, there is going to be a disincentive to reopen and put people back to work.

Will the Prime Minister amend these programs to provide for more flexibility so that more and more Canadians can start to return to work in the weeks ahead?

• (1235)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we are in an unprecedented crisis and we had to move quickly to support workers and to support families across the country, and that's exactly what we did. We're going to continue to work to try to respond to the reality that people and businesses are facing right across the country.

I am eager to be faced with the challenge of how to ease off in these measures so that people can get back to work. We are getting closer to that point, but we are not there yet. We are still focused very much on giving the supports to workers and families that are so necessary in this time of crisis.

As different provinces move forward towards reopening, as we look at different paths forward, I know that I will be able to count on all members in the House and, indeed, on Canadians from coast to coast to figure out together what the best way will be to move forward on keeping us safe and restoring economic activity in the right way. That will be good to work on together once we get there.

The Chair: We have about a minute left for maybe a 30-second question and a 30-second answer.

Mr. Scheer.

Hon. Andrew Scheer: Mr. Chair, no one is disputing the need to move quickly. We are now in May, though, and these programs have been announced for weeks. Canadians have been accessing them. The problems with them have been flagged for the government for weeks as well, but we're also going to see an additional challenge, where people who are receiving the emergency response benefit, who may have the option to go back to work and work some hours, are faced with a hard cap of \$1,000 a month before they lose the CERB.

Conservatives are proposing a progressive system, a more flexible system, where people will be able to earn more without losing their benefits as businesses ramp up but before normal working hours are restored.

Again, will the Prime Minister build in some flexibility to lift the restrictive ceiling on what people can earn before losing benefits so that it always pays more to work?

The Chair: I believe the timer is telling all of us that the time is up, but I'll give the right honourable Prime Minister about 30 seconds to answer that, please.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Our priority was getting support for Canadians right across the country with the CERB, with the wage subsidy and with other measures for students, for seniors, for farmers and for agricultural producers. That has been our priority, and that's what we have worked on.

I hear the concerns that the Conservative Party has around disincentives. We are going to work with communities and with industry as we look to reopen, to make sure that people have opportunities to work and are not penalized for it. However, our overarching priority was allowing Canadians to be confident in their ability to stay home, care for their loved ones, buy groceries and pay their rent so that we could keep safe during this pandemic. That's exactly what we did.

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Gladu now.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Chair, seniors in my riding are struggling. We've heard the Prime Minister admit that fixed incomes for some of them are down, rent is increasing and the price of groceries is increasing. He's been saying for weeks that in the coming days, something would be announced for seniors.

The fact is that the Liberals ran on an election promise to increase the old age security. Which of the days in the coming weeks will they keep their promise to seniors?

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors): Mr. Chair, after a lifetime of hard work, of course Canadians deserve peace of mind when it comes to their retirement security. COVID-19 is definitely having a disproportionate impact on seniors. They have a greater need for services and supports. Happily, their pensions and their benefits are still flowing, unlike for so many of those who have lost their jobs, but it's still tough.

We introduced measures—

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Which day?

Hon. Deb Schulte: —at the beginning of April. People received a GST credit, a supplementary payment that was \$400 on average for single seniors and \$600 for couples. That was of significant help to low- and moderate-income seniors.

• (1240)

The Chair: We have a point of order from Ms. Gladu.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Yes, Mr. Chair. I think you had reminded us as members that the amount of time for the answer should be similar to the amount of time for the question. I would just ask the minister to keep to that.

I would like to go to my second question.

The Chair: I want to remind all honourable members to keep their answers as well as their questions as concise as possible.

Ms. Gladu.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Very good, Mr. Chair.

My riding is on the border of Canada and the U.S. We see a number of inconsistencies in what is considered essential travel with regard to the U.S. and actually in the interpretation of different CBSA agents. While we have Americans coming over to buy cheaper prescription medications and to fish, individuals in my riding who are trying to get auditors over so that they can be approved for export businesses are being declined. We have people who have purchased masts from Canadian producers for their boats, and who want to come and pick them up, who are not being allowed to do that. People trying to sell plasma into the U.S. are being denied.

When will they clarify the rules to the CBSA agents so that essential travel and trade and commerce, including individual commerce, is understood?

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Mr. Chair, we have implemented very rigorous rules that have been well documented and understood by CBSA to stop all non-essential travel. Those measures have been very successful. We've seen a 99% reduction in international travel coming into Canada. At the same time, we recognize the importance of maintaining essential supply routes so that goods and services could reach Canada and we could put groceries on our shelves. We also recognize the important work that essential workers do on both sides of the border.

We have provided CBSA with clarification. Their interpretation of those rules has been broadly consistent. I've heard from a number of our colleagues in caucus with concerns about individual cases. When we receive those inquiries, we follow up immediately. I want to assure the member that we'll continue to do that.

The work we are doing to stop non-essential travel has been important for the health and safety of Canadians, and we will continue with that work.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Mr. Chair, my next question has to do with sole proprietor businesses. We see that many of them are not eligible for any of the benefit packages that have been rolled out—EI, CERB, the wage subsidy, etc. What is the government going to do to address sole proprietors who are currently falling through the cracks?

Hon. Bill Morneau (Minister of Finance): Mr. Chair, first, let me say that we absolutely recognize there are businesses across the country of all sizes that are finding this to be extremely difficult. The intent of the measures we put forward is obviously not only to give individuals a bridge but to give businesses a bridge.

We are looking at ways that we can ensure that the Canada emergency business account has the broadest possible application. More than 500,000 businesses have already been approved for these loans, representing over \$20 billion. We are looking at ways we can consider that eligibility process, recognizing that we need to make sure that the program continues to have its desired impact, and we will have more to say on that.

The Chair: The next question will go to Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Chair, this is my first appearance, so I hope you can hear me okay.

The Chair: We can hear you fine. Please proceed.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's good to see everyone's faces.

On April 3, the fisheries minister said opening dates would be determined by harvesters. Since then the minister has overruled the will of harvesters in Prince Edward Island and in the gulf who voted to start their seasons on time, but she has allowed harvesters from her own riding to proceed with their seasons as scheduled, giving them access to markets weeks before their competitors. This double standard is severely unfair and Atlantic harvesters are furious, as demonstrated during the protests on the Canso Causeway yesterday.

When will the minister stop abusing her position and start respecting fish harvesters by opening up lobster fishing areas 23, 24 and 26?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): Mr. Chair, when making decisions with regard to when seasons open, a number of factors are taken into account. They are complex decisions that take into account what is necessary for processors to be ready for the season, what is necessary for harvesters to be ready for the season, as well socio-economic impacts on the area. We're looking at all of those measures when we make these decisions. We do not make them lightly. They are difficult decisions to make.

In the decisions we've made around the gulf, one of the main things we heard from all of those areas is that it was very important for them to start on the same date. That is why the decision was made to start on the 15th of May. We're looking forward to seeing the harvesters out on the water. We're looking forward to the product that they bring in. We'll continue to do everything we can to support the industry.

• (1245)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Minister. I believe the time—

The Chair: Excuse me. No, the hon. minister had another 15 seconds coming to her.

I'd like to remind hon. members not to interrupt a person while they are speaking. I'll do my best to try to keep it about level. Maybe I'll start muting if it's necessary, but interrupting is not going to solve anything.

Mr. Arnold, I'll let you continue. You have three minutes and nine seconds left.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

West coast fishing tourism is a key economic driver in British Columbia, especially in coastal communities, and yet the public fishery gets no respect from the government. Last year, the public fishery was weakened by restrictions based on ideology and not science. A year later, the fisheries minister refuses even to discuss viable, science-based solutions to conserve B.C.'s public fisheries.

Does the minister and her government have a will and a plan to support Canada's west coast fisheries and the communities they sustain?

The Chair: The hon. minister in 30 seconds, please.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Chair, the fishery is important in every coastal community. I recognize its value for our economy, as well as what it means to our coastal communities. That's why we continue to work with those communities and with the fisheries to make sure that we're doing everything we possibly can to support them. During these extremely difficult times, we're working on measures with the fishery in B.C., as well as on the Atlantic coast and eastern Quebec, to make sure that we're delivering for them and that all of the issues they're having are being addressed.

The Chair: Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Mr. Chair, Canada's seniors, especially those on basic incomes, are being hard hit by the COVID-19 crisis as they face new rising costs and scarcity of services. Seniors require adequate caregiver supports, physical safety and freedom to access their savings to reinforce their financial security.

Why has the government failed to recognize the increasing challenges that seniors are facing? Will the government support Canada's senior citizens?

The Chair: The hon. minister in 30 seconds or less, please.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Chair, I want to assure my hon. colleague that the government has been focused on seniors during this challenging time. We have provided a GST credit supplement of \$400 for single seniors and \$600 for couples, for low- and modest-income seniors. We have also ensured that the Canada emergency response benefit is there for seniors who have lost income due to COVID-19. We've made them eligible.

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Arnold, you have a minute—hopefully a 30-second question and a 30-second answer.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On April 23, my colleagues and I called on the government to create a program that would match students seeking employment with employers in Canada's essential food supply chains. What has the government done to match students and other Canadians seeking employment with employers in the agriculture and agri-food sectors, including those in the fish and seafood sector?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Mr. Chair, we're doing all we can to make sure, using our existing employment programs, that we create opportunities for students to work and get work experience this summer. We know that this is going to be really tough, especially in areas like agriculture, so we have dedicated streams for agriculture sector employers to access students with help from the government, and a number of different initiatives including Canada summer jobs, which I'm really excited to see the results of in the coming days.

The Chair: Now we'll go on to the next question from Ms. Harder.

Ms. Rempel, do you have a point of order?

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With my colleague, Mr. Arnold, it's the second time that I note you've threatened to cut off a Conservative microphone. I'm just wondering, given that this isn't the House of Commons and it's structured as a committee, what standing order would give you the right to cut off a member of Parliament using a mute button. It seems a little dictatorial, and I was just wondering whether you could clarify that, based on the Standing Orders.

The Chair: I don't think I threatened to use mute, but thank you for bringing that up. I am trying to keep the rules where the questions and the answers are equal, so that there are no interruptions on either side. That's how we're going to continue. I didn't use the mute. I did it verbally and I think that's a little more civil way of doing it. I hope you approve. I'm not asking you to comment on that.

We'll go over to Ms. Harder. Thank you.

• (1250)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: But, on the point of order, Mr. Chair, you actually, to me, last week, and to Mr. Arnold, did suggest that you were going to use the mute button.

The Chair: I believe that if we take everything out and go over it.... Bring the papers with the actual verbiage on it where I threatened, and we'll go over it, but I don't think this is the venue to do that.

If you want to bring forward a point of order, I'm all in favour of it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Well, I am bringing forward a point of order. I've asked you to clarify—

The Chair: Very good. We'll look into it and get back to you.

Thank you.

We'll go on to Ms. Harder.

Ms. Rachael Harder (Lethbridge, CPC): Canadians have outrightly expressed outrage and disappointment with the government's initiative to put a gun ban in place. Does the minister stand by his comment that these changes would have prevented the tragedy in Nova Scotia?

The Chair: The honourable minister in 15 seconds or less, please.

Hon. Bill Blair: We have heard from health professionals, women's rights organizations, victims groups and the police and our unions. They're all very supportive of the government's measure to ban weapons that have no place in a civil society and were designed to kill people.

Ms. Rachael Harder: It's interesting that the minister is misleading Canadians in that comment because the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police has actually said that a gun ban will do nothing of the sort, that it actually will not protect Canadians.

So I'd be curious. How many criminals will see guns seized because of the changes that have been implemented by the Liberal government?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, let's actually quote what the police have said.

The Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police said that they “support a prohibition on all military-designed assault rifles.” The chief in Toronto said that taking those [*Inaudible—Editor*] assault rifles “off the streets contributes to public safety”, and the Canadian Association of Police Chiefs has declared that “military assault rifles” are produced for the “sole purpose of killing people in large numbers” and they urged successive governments to enact legislation to ban all military assault rifles.

Ms. Rachael Harder: The answer to that question is zero. Absolutely no criminals will see their guns seized based on the Liberals' legislation that's coming forward because it actually goes after those who legally own and use their firearms.

Can the Prime Minister please tell us why he decided to go after law-abiding citizens instead of actually going after criminals who have gotten their firearms in an illegal manner and then used them to commit crimes?

The Chair: The honourable minister in 25 seconds or less, please.

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, to be very clear, the order in council actually is targeted at weapons, weapons that were designed for military use, and in their design and in their intent, to kill people, they've actually been used in this country, at École Polytechnique; in Moncton; at a Quebec City mosque; in Fredericton; at Mayerthorpe and most recently in Nova Scotia.

These are weapons that really have no place... They are being used and have been used in Canada and around the world to commit mass murder, and in the interest of public safety and at the urging—

The Chair: We'll go on to Ms. Harder.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Thank you.

Now I understand the Prime Minister has his food prepared for him at 24 Sussex Drive and then it's delivered to him at the cottage where he lives. Contrary to his privileged understanding, food actually originates with farmers. Now, they're in a crisis right now, which means that regular Canadians are actually at risk of not having food available for them at the grocery stores where they purchase theirs.

The Canadian Federation of Agriculture requested \$2.6 billion to help them out. Today, the government announced one-tenth of this amount.

Why doesn't the Prime Minister care about the women and the men who work incredibly hard to keep Canada fed?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): Mr. Chair, let me assure the hon. member that our government cares very, very much about the women and men who work so hard to feed our country. Let me just say I am grateful to all the farmers, like my dad, who are out in their fields right now getting ready for seeding. We, as Canadians, are lucky to be citizens of an agricultural superpower, and our government believes in supporting our farmers and ranchers.

Ms. Rachael Harder: I'm confused as to why the Prime Minister didn't take my question, and at a bare minimum as to why the agriculture minister doesn't feel it's important enough for her to be a part of this discussion today. When we have farmers who produce for Canadians on a daily basis and they're asking some serious and some very important questions, and we don't even have a minister who's willing to come to the table and engage in this conversation, that's shameful.

Several meat-packing plants have been forced to shut down because of COVID-19 and, as a result, farmers are forced to hold stock longer than expected. Cattle producers in my region are

spending more than \$60,000 a day to keep their livestock fed while they wait for processing plants to reopen. The amount that was announced today by the federal government is a drop in the bucket. It's a crumb.

When will the government take this seriously and at least implement a set-aside program for those who are beef producers in Canada?

• (1255)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me just say that I feel there is nothing shameful at all in having me, the Deputy Prime Minister, answer questions about agriculture. I am actually very proud to speak up for Canada's amazing farmers, for our country's amazing ranchers, for our amazing pork producers and our poultry producers. I feel so close to our farmers. I love them and our government supports them.

Today, we announced \$252 million of support for our producers. They need it. They deserve it. We're here for them.

The Chair: Now we'll go on to Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I too would like to express my sincere condolences to the families and friends of the six military heroes who lost their lives at sea last week. I'm sure that all members of the House stand shoulder to shoulder with the families, with the crew of the HMCS *Fredericton* and, indeed, with the entire Canadian Armed Forces community during this time of grief.

Can the Minister of National Defence give us an update as to the Cyclone helicopter crash off the coast of Greece last week?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence): Mr. Chair, the deaths of the Canadian Armed Forces members are felt by all, and especially the families. Our condolences go out to them. Our number one priority is to make sure that we look after them, and that's exactly what we are doing.

Currently, the investigation is ongoing. Our investigative team is currently on the ground. I actually spoke with the Italian minister of defence and he promised full support for this investigation and any support that's required.

The Chair: I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut you off there, if we're going by the rules that were pointed out by the House.

Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Through you to Minister Sajjan again, I'm going to change gears a bit. I know that back in early January, military intelligence through CF Intelligence Command was reporting, through the chain of command, the novel coronavirus and the outbreak in Wuhan.

On what date was he, as Minister of National Defence, given his first intelligence briefing on the outbreak and the pandemic in China?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Mr. Chair, we have been following this crisis from day one. We work with our Five Eyes intelligence sources and this has been a whole-of-government effort, right from the beginning. I can assure you that our response to this pandemic has been with all the necessary information. Obviously, I can't discuss the intelligence in this forum, but I can assure you that our response has been well informed with the correct information.

Mr. James Bezan: Minister Sajjan, we know that intelligence was going up the chain of command in National Defence. It was reported in the media that in early January the hierarchy within the Canadian Armed Forces was being made aware of the coronavirus outbreak.

I asked you, Minister, when you became aware of it and what you did with that intelligence.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Mr. Chair, I get regular briefings on intelligence. Yes, I was made aware of this in January. As with all our intelligence, we work together from a whole-of-government perspective with all of our intelligence agencies. One thing I can assure you is that our response has been well informed with all the correct information that is provided to me and other members of cabinet.

Mr. James Bezan: What was that timeline?

From the time you were first told, Minister Sajjan, about the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, what did you do with that intelligence? When did you give it to the Prime Minister or to Minister Hajdu as the Minister of Health?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, let me say that our government's response to this global pandemic has of course been informed by the excellent work of Canadian intelligence agencies throughout. We have been working on this from very early on. On January 2, PHAC first spoke with provincial health authorities to alert them to the situation. On January 14, it convened a meeting of all provincial health authorities. In January, the Prime Minister convened a meeting of the incident response group, and in January we increased screening at all major airports.

All of these actions were informed by the work of our excellent intelligence community, and of course our work with our Five Eyes, NATO and NORAD allies.

• (1300)

Mr. James Bezan: I want to come back—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We now move to Mr. Ste-Marie.

[*English*]

Mr. James Bezan: I still have 30 seconds left.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Can I go ahead, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In an interview with Gérald Fillion, tax expert André Lareau, who specializes in tax havens, pointed out that \$350 billion Canadian is parked in just 12 tax havens. Companies are using tax havens

for financing, operations and intellectual property activities. Mr. Lareau also notes that the government is aware that all of this Canadian money is stashed in tax havens but is doing nothing about it. He said that it's time for Canada to tackle the problem given that it has a \$250-billion deficit, and that if it doesn't act now to change things, it never will.

Is the government going to seize this opportunity to outlaw the corporate use of tax havens?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier (Minister of National Revenue):

Mr. Chair, as soon as we took office, in 2015, our government made cracking down on tax evaders in Canada and abroad a priority. That's precisely why we put nearly a billion dollars towards that effort. I realize that my fellow member is impatient, but he has to understand that this is a very complex issue.

Under our leadership, in three years, the Canada Revenue Agency has undertaken twice as many audits related to offshore tax evasion as it did in the 10 years the Conservatives were in power.

As we speak, the agency is conducting more than 50 criminal investigations tied to international tax evasion. I repeat, this is a top priority for our government.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: You're right, I am very impatient, because whenever I bring up the fact that companies are using tax havens legally, the minister misses the point and tells me that she is going after fraudsters. I am talking about the legal use of tax havens by companies.

Since Parliament began sitting virtually, it's been mentioned a few times that Denmark and Poland have decided to deal with the issue. Even France's finance minister, Bruno Le Maire, said that companies with subsidiaries in tax havens would not be eligible for public assistance.

We hear the Prime Minister and other government officials say all the time that the wage subsidies are going to workers, so I'd like to cite another example—banks. The government is injecting huge amounts of cash into the financial system and repurchasing troubled assets in massive quantities, and yet, the five major banks in Toronto, alone, are continuing to save billions of dollars every year by artificially redirecting their profits to tax havens.

This is unacceptable. This has nothing to do with wages for workers, and everything to do with the repurchase of troubled assets, cash flow and billions of dollars that the government could be going after.

Is the government going to seize this opportunity to make the corporate use of tax havens illegal?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Mr. Chair, our government is taking unprecedented steps through the Canada emergency wage subsidy measure to support businesses and workers affected by COVID-19. This is largely a trust-based program, and we will not tolerate abuse. Anyone who tries to bypass the rules will face serious consequences.

Applicants have to designate an individual to attest to the truth of their claim. What's more, any employer receiving the subsidy who is deemed ineligible will have to repay the full amount. Anyone who abuses the program could face a fine of up to 225% of the wage subsidy amount and up to five years in prison. The Canada Revenue Agency also has a myriad of tools at its disposal to detect a fraudulent claim.

As I mentioned, cracking down on tax evasion is a priority for our government.

The Chair: Mr. Ste-Marie, you have about 30 seconds to ask your question, and about the same for the answer.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

That's an excellent answer, but it has nothing to do with my question.

The Minister of Finance has the power to fix the problem now. Although completely immoral, the use of tax havens by companies is legal under section 5907 of the Income Tax Regulations. Through simple regulatory amendments, the finance minister could put an end to this kind of abuse.

We are going to have a \$250-billion deficit to pay off, and everyone is going to have to chip in, including the rich who are currently taking advantage of the system.

• (1305)

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Mr. Chair, thanks to a historic billion-dollar investment, our government has given the agency the resources it needs to do the job, and we are starting to see results.

I set up an expert advisory committee to provide us with guidance and recommendations. We tightened the rules for the voluntary disclosures program. We signed tax information exchange agreements with a number of countries. We audit four jurisdictions a year. We also work closely with the OECD.

The Chair: We now move on to another member.

[*English*]

The next questioner is Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I'm sharing my time slot with the member for Surrey—Newton.

In the wake of COVID-19, so many Canadians have been affected in so many ways. Financial loss and other burdens are having a huge impact on families across our country. I'm proud of how the Government of Canada has been beside Canadians through every step of this pandemic and has supported Canadians when they needed it most.

In Bonavista—Burin—Trinity and across our country, our commercial fishery has seen many challenges and impacts. Last week, my colleague, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, announced an investment that will ensure resilience of the food system by allowing Canada's fish and seafood processing sector to safely and efficiently process, store, package and distribute healthy, high-quality products on to the plates of Canadians.

The fish harvesters in my riding are fearful of what will happen within this industry and their immediate futures. They are facing a reduction in available markets and market prices. They are asking what our government is putting in place to assist in these extremely challenging times.

When can we expect to hear an answer to our harvesters' requests for assistance?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Chair, I want to thank my colleague from Bonavista—Burin—Trinity for keeping us well aware of what's happening in his riding with harvesters and with processors. We know how important the fish and seafood sector is to our rural communities, our coastal communities. It's the backbone and the lifeblood of our communities and that's why we want to be there to support them.

We've already taken steps by making sure that the CERB is now able to be accessed by people who are seasonal workers. As well, we are making sure that people who are running out of fishers EI are also able to qualify for it. We also have made an investment of \$62.5 million to support our processors to make sure they are able to be ready for the challenges that they are going to face because of COVID-19.

We know there is more to do. We know that the harvesters need support. We are working with our partners across industry to make sure we're hearing what their major concerns are. We know they are going to have some very challenging times this season. We will have more to say about that and what we will be able to do in the coming days.

The Chair: The next questioner is Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Mr. Chair, in my riding of Surrey—Newton, I'm in close contact with businesses that represent all—

The Chair: We have a point of order.

Mr. Kurek.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): Sorry, but there seems to be an issue with the audio. I'm unable to hear the honourable member.

The Chair: It is very faint. Mr. Dhaliwal, can you check your audio to make sure everything's working well?

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: It was—

The Chair: There we go. It's fine now. I think what happened was the boom had fallen down and it wasn't being picked up. There you go. Very good.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Mr. Chair, in my riding of Surrey—Newton, I'm in close contact with businesses that represent all vantage points in the supply chain—from manufacturers to retailers, transport companies to warehousing. With provinces and territories moving at different speeds and implementing different protocols for reopening the economy, there is a lot of confusion in my local business community on the timing and logistics of how this will happen. With so many different parts of the supply chain operating in different jurisdictions, and with each business serving unique roles on this spectrum, how can the federal government serve to best coordinate with the provinces and territories so that the supply chain can be implemented smoothly as we embark on our economic recovery?

• (1310)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank my colleague for his question and for his hard work.

One of the most important things the federal government can do when it comes to the reopening of the Canadian economy is to work in close collaboration with the premiers of the provinces and territories. That's why I was so pleased that last week the Prime Minister, together with all the first ministers of the country, was able to issue a statement around the principles that will be guiding our entire country as we move towards a restart.

This is so important because, as my colleague has pointed out, all of our business, our economic activity, happens across the country. It happens across provincial and territorial boundaries.

I would really also like to take this opportunity to thank the first ministers across the country. They belong to different parties, but everyone has really been able to put partisanship aside. We have been able to work together in fighting coronavirus, and we are going to work together in the future to keep on fighting coronavirus and to reopen Canada.

Thank you.

The Chair: The next question goes to Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to represent my constituents virtually during this challenging period of physical distancing.

I'd like to start by asking about supports for workers. In Alberta, meat-packing plants are directly responsible for nearly a quarter of all COVID-19 cases. The government and management ignored the pleas of workers and did not put effective safety protocols in place to deal with COVID-19. Now, two workers are dead, at least six more are in intensive care and COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire through these communities. There are over 1,400 cases.

Yesterday, employees were forced back to work even though their concerns had not been addressed. On March 27, regarding the CERB, the Minister of Finance said that if workers don't feel comfortable in their work, if they decide to stay home, they can apply for the benefit, yet the website says differently.

Will the minister guarantee that every Canadian receiving CERB, EI or the CESB will not lose their benefits if they refuse to return to work or to accept work that is unsafe due to COVID-19?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me thank the member, first of all, for her really very important question. I think all of us share the concern for Canada's essential workers who are keeping us safe, putting food on our tables and often working in difficult conditions.

When it comes to the Cargill plant, this is an issue that our government has been very closely engaged in. My colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, has spoken with her provincial counterpart and the head of the plant. The decisions about suspending and reopening are taken by local and provincial health authorities.

To the question my colleague asked about workers, it is absolutely the case that no Canadian should feel they need to work in an environment that is unsafe, and it is also very much the case that any Canadian who is feeling unwell should stay at home. This is the way that collectively we take care of ourselves and we take care—

The Chair: We will go on to Ms. McPherson for the next question.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I just want to be clear, because I'm not a hundred per cent sure that I got an answer in that response, so I'll try one more time. Knowing that workers have a fundamental right to refuse unsafe work, can the minister confirm one hundred per cent that if workers refuse unsafe work, they will be able to access the CERB, or was the Minister of Finance incorrect when he spoke on March 27?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I'm sorry, but I was struggling with my mute button. I apologize.

Let me just be very clear. No Canadian worker at any time should feel obliged to go to work in unsafe conditions.

Ms. Heather McPherson: But then could they access the CERB?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: In a time of coronavirus that is even more the case, and the government of course should not penalize workers for doing the right thing and declining to go to work in unsafe conditions.

The Chair: I want to remind the honourable members to place their questions through the Chair to avoid back and forth, just to try to keep some order in the meeting.

Ms. McPherson, please continue.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm sorry, Chair.

I have another question on the protection for workers. At the meat-packing plant, workers are calling for the plant to be shut down. In fact, we know that 85% of workers are afraid for their safety.

If the provincial government won't shut down the plant, will the federal government shut down unsafe plants through the Canadian Food Inspection Agency?

• (1315)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, let me be very clear that my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, has been in touch with provincial authorities. She has been in touch with the plant.

The duties of the food inspection agency, of course, are to ensure that the food produced at the plant is safe. That is what inspectors are trained to do and what they are focused on.

We are working closely with provincial authorities and with health authorities to ensure that—

The Chair: We will go back to Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Chair, this will be one of my final questions on the meat-packing plant in Alberta.

Can the finance minister please let us know if Cargill, a company that is owned by billionaires, with business in Luxembourg, a known tax haven, has received any federal funding this year for COVID-related support?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: This is a tough time for Canadians, and our government is doing everything it can to support them. More than 7 million Canadians have applied for the Canada emergency response benefit, which the Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada administer.

I want to say how proud I am of the work the agency is doing; staff worked tirelessly to get the program up and running in record time. Minister Qualtrough is responsible for developing the eligibility criteria and processing the claims.

The Chair: We are moving on to the next question.

[*English*]

We'll continue now with Mr. Bragdon.

Mr. Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question today is for the Prime Minister.

Potato farmers in New Brunswick and across Canada are sitting on massive stores of potatoes that were destined for the restaurant industry, but due to the pandemic, they now have no customers. It's estimated that there is \$300 million worth of potatoes still sitting in storage.

What is the Prime Minister's plan for the helping farmers offload these potatoes so that they are ready for the 2020 season?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I think all of us as Canadians are proud of the great potato farmers across the country. We are aware that the coronavirus, by keeping us away from restaurants where we eat french fries, has had a profound effect on the market for potatoes.

The program announced today by the Prime Minister and my colleague, the Minister of Agriculture, will be very helpful for potato farmers, including with the surplus food program that starts with a \$50 million fund, and that—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Bragdon now.

Mr. Richard Bragdon: Mr. Chair, thank you.

With an estimated \$300 million worth of potatoes in storage, the announced funding from the government today simply doesn't go far enough.

In 2018 the New Brunswick potato industry lost over \$20 million. It is estimated this year that the financial loss will exceed \$40 million. For many producers still recovering from the hit they took in 2018, another major loss is totally unacceptable.

How does the Prime Minister plan to mitigate these shortfalls and allow farmers to continue to grow the food we so desperately need?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, the honourable member spoke about farmers generally. The program today is \$252 million, which comes on top of the broad range of other programs that farmers, of course, have access to.

On potato farmers, in particular, I agree with the honourable member that this is a specific area of concern. I think all Canadians would like to see those potatoes not be wasted but be used, and that's why the \$50 million for surplus food purchase is going to be so helpful.

Mr. Richard Bragdon: Mr. Chair, farmers across all agricultural sectors are hurting during this pandemic. The \$16-billion beef industry is expected to take a massive hit due to the closures and reduced production of the meat-packing plants.

Does the government truly believe that the announced \$125 million that is shared between beef, poultry and pork producers will be enough to support these multi-billion dollar industries so they can put food on the tables of Canadians?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I absolutely agree with the honourable member that our beef, pork and poultry producers are absolutely essential for our country.

I am very pleased as a Canadian that we have security that comes from being a country that produces not only enough food for ourselves, but also enough food to feed the world. That is why the \$125 million specifically to support our beef, pork and poultry producers is going to be so helpful.

• (1320)

Mr. Richard Bragdon: Mr. Chair, the government's announcement of \$252 million for the agriculture sector falls well short of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture's request for immediate government relief for farmers. The president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, Mary Robinson, put it today something like this: that if the farmhouse is on fire, the government has offered the equivalent of a bucket of water. This will not go nearly far enough to help those in a desperate situation.

Does the government have a plan to offer more than just crumbs to keep the vital agriculture sector operating and providing the food we so desperately need? When will the government finally make those who literally keep our land and grow our food a priority in this time of crisis?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I don't know about the honourable member, but where I come from, \$252 million is not just crumbs. I know that Canadian farmers don't feel that \$252 million is nothing, either.

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight two other aspects of the essential support for farmers that we announced today: the \$77 million to support food processors, which will not only be important for the processors, but helpful for the farmers who produce products that go to them; and the \$250 million that we would like to add to the Canadian Dairy Commission's line of credit to raise it to half a billion dollars, which will be very helpful to our essential dairy farmers.

The Chair: Now we'll go to the next question. Go ahead, Mrs. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Mr. Chair, a couple in my riding has had to shut down their business, and they are on CERB. They were shocked when their 16-year-old son also qualified, and he is receiving \$8,000 on the basis of part-time work throughout the school year. Why is the government handing out a windfall to teenagers who are living at home while denying university students and ignoring seniors on fixed incomes?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, any individual who has lost work for COVID reasons is eligible for the CERB, regardless of their personal circumstances. If you made \$5,000 in the past year and are a resident of Canada, you qualify for the CERB. This is not a matter of differentiating between the personal circumstances of individuals but of acknowledging that many workers in different situations have lost their work or have had their work significantly reduced because of COVID.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Clearly, high school students would not have the same needs as university students and our seniors who are suffering at this time.

The government's own findings on banning handguns and assault firearms state, "In all cases the data does not conclusively demonstrate that these handgun or assault weapon bans have led to reductions in gun violence". Why is the Prime Minister so bent on penalizing law-abiding firearms owners when he should be focusing on funding our CBSA officers first, giving them the resources they need to seize smuggled firearms at our borders?

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, I note with some interest that when we brought forward legislation in a budget in the last two years to increase the number of officers at the border, the member opposite voted against it. I'm very pleased to hear that she now supports it.

Let us be very clear. The evidence is overwhelming that these weapons are designed to be used, and have been used, to kill innocent people. Countries that adopt sensible gun policies—places like New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom—have all recognized that there's no place for these weapons in a civil society. We promised Canadians that we would act on that concern. There have been far too many people killed with these weapons, and even most recently, to honour and respect the terrible tragedy in Nova Scotia, the time to act is now, and we've acted.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Last week the Minister of Agriculture said, "Step by step we are giving our farmers...the tools they need to continue their...work."

On April 30, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture called on the minister to create a \$2.6-billion fund "to maintain food security in Canada". This morning, the Prime Minister announced \$252 million, hit-and-miss, across the agriculture sector. With all due respect, this is a slap in the face to our farmers and the agri-food sector. Instead of being here to speak to this announcement, the minister has chosen to do a press conference. This certainly reveals how seriously the minister takes this virtual sitting and parliamentary accountability.

If the deputy minister is going to answer the question in her place, how does she see it is right to be providing \$9 billion to students and only crumbs to our agriculture sector?

● (1325)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, first of all, let me say I do not, as has now been suggested by two members opposite, consider it in any way shameful that I should be answering questions about our support for the agricultural sector. Our government strongly supports our farmers. I have to say I personally very strongly support our farmers and have a strong personal connection to them.

The \$252 million of support is real and meaningful, and it is directed exactly where it is needed. It is directed at food processors, beef and pork producers and the dairy sector.

As to the question about students, let me just point out that farm kids are students too, and farm kids will be benefiting from the support for students. I know they, their parents and grandparents are very—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Time is up.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Lehoux, the next question goes to you.

Mr. Richard Lehoux (Beauce, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Meat packing plants like Quebec-based Olymel are extremely worried that they won't be able to stay open throughout the pandemic. In the summer, these plants rely on students to do overtime and fill in for full-time employees on vacation. However, the Canada emergency student benefit makes it possible for these much-needed workers to stay home while still collecting the same amount of money. That's why the government must adjust its current summer job program for students in the agriculture and agri-food sectors.

When is the government going to make these critical changes?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I can assure you that we are doing our best efforts to not disincentivize work. We know we need to support students with income support, but we also need to create jobs. We are looking at ways we can create additional jobs through Canada summer jobs, through the—

[Translation]

The Chair: There is a point of order.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Mr. Chair, what the minister is saying is not being interpreted.

[English]

The Chair: We'll just check to see how the technology is going.

Is everything okay now?

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Yes, it's working.

[English]

The Chair: Let's try that again, Minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Last week, as part of the measures announced around supporting our students, we announced the creation of 76,000 additional jobs, including jobs in the agriculture and processing sectors. We know we need to work directly with employers to ensure they have the people they need. This is exactly what we're doing through our youth employment and skills strategy, and that's what we'll continue to do. We won't apologize for supporting students with income support in these difficult times.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: I'm not sure the minister understood my question about the Canada emergency student benefit.

I am very concerned about the agricultural sector, but the tourist and horticultural sectors are also on my mind. A number of business owners in my riding have reached out to me because the shortage of student workers is forcing them to shut down for the summer. This government has pulled the rug out from under them with the benefit it introduced for students.

Minister, what do you have to say to those business owners in the tourist and horticultural sectors whom you are not helping?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, with all due respect, I believe we are helping students. We've heard very clearly from the students that they want to work and want to serve in their communities in this time of crisis. That's why we're creating additional employment opportunities and an income support mechanism that allows them to work. We're going to continue to look at ways we can support them through additional opportunities this summer. We know they want to work and they want to serve.

• (1330)

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Lehoux: I hope that we'll see some concrete results.

Pork and beef producers are feeling the impact of the country's shutdown triggered by the pandemic. Processing plants are suspending operations and buyers are tearing up their contracts. For the past five years, the government has been saying that the programs to help producers will be improved. Now more than ever, producers need these programs. However, the programs haven't been reviewed yet.

When will the government make these changes, including the changes to agristability, and when can producers access them?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: We announced over \$77 million in assistance for food processors to help them protect their workers and deal with the costs associated with the coronavirus.

To help livestock and pork producers, we established agri-recovery, a national initiative that will provide \$125 million to help producers adapt to market changes.

We're launching—

The Chair: Mr. Lehoux has the floor.

Mr. Richard Lehoux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I understand some of what the minister is saying.

The measures announced at noon today received a very cold reception from the entire agriculture and agri-food sector, since the sector had asked for about \$2.6 billion. I think that it's important to support our agri-food industry and our farms, given the significant need for sovereignty. Many Canadians in the agriculture and agri-food sector have made this clear, as I was saying earlier. Something must be done quickly, before our country becomes completely dependent on its neighbours.

Has the government considered making significant changes to the various programs currently in place?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Our country, Canada, will never depend on its neighbours or any other country for food. Canada is a major beef, pork and grain producer. Canada is an agricultural superpower and we should all take pride in that.

I want to mention another significant part of our announcement today, which is the \$50 million surplus food purchase program. This is very significant. I think that all Canadians must support this initiative.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.)): We'll now move on to the next question. Mr. Calkins, the member for Red Deer—Lacombe, has the floor.

[English]

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Madam Chair, how will the government's forced confiscation of law-abiding firearms owners' property prevent criminals from illegally acquiring firearms from the United States?

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam Chair, in response to that, I would simply remind the member that we have made it very clear that these weapons have no place in civil society, so we have prohibited military-style assault weapons that have been designed to be used to kill people and have been used to kill people.

I would also advise the member we will bring forward legislation to deal more effectively at the border. We'll make significant new investments in border services officers and in police. We'll bring forward new authorities, new offences, new penalties to deal with people who smuggle weapons across the border.

We're also bringing in new regulations for the storage of weapons to make it more difficult for people to steal these guns. To deal with people who purchase them illegally and sell them illegally, there will be new offences and penalties to make ensure that they face the consequences.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The government previously has said that decisions like classifying firearms should be left to experts. The recent decision was purely political and it flies in the face of evidence-based policy.

A legal opinion that's already been obtained says that the bore of a 12-gauge shotgun with the choke removed is in excess of 20 millimetres. That means every 12-gauge shotgun with a choke in it with that choke removed is now prohibited. That is the same firearm that Olympic trap shooters, Olympic skeet shooters, duck hunters and geese hunters all across our country use on a very regular basis.

Why did the government abandon an evidence-based policy?

• (1335)

Hon. Bill Blair: Madam Chair, I'm pleased to have the opportunity to correct the member.

First of all, we have prohibited large-bore weapons, such as grenade launchers, but with reference to the 10-gauge shotgun and the 12-gauge shotgun, I would simply remind the member that the bore of a 10-gauge shotgun is 19.69 millimetres in width and the bore of a 12-gauge shotgun is 18.53 millimetres in width, both of them under the size for prohibition and therefore not covered in the new prohibitions that the government introduced on Friday. I'm afraid his expert opinion is wrong.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Madam Chair, the opinion is that of one of the foremost experts we have in Canada when it comes to firearms legislation.

If the entirety of the barrel length is considered, then the removal of the choke makes that barrel in excess of 20 millimetres. I would appreciate the minister clarifying that for law-abiding firearms owners. There is no plan for a buyback program in this policy, and law-abiding firearms owners are not able currently to surrender their firearms. Given this, and the fact that law-abiding firearms

owners aren't committing any gun violence, what was the government's immediate benefit of making this announcement on May 1?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to clarify.

Along with the prohibition that we have put in place, we have also, using the order in council, established an amnesty period, but the amnesty period is non-permissive grandfathering of those weapons. They cannot be used, they can't be taken to the range for shooting, they can't be used for hunting, they can't be sold and they can't be transferred, so we have put in strong measures to ensure that these weapons will not be available for use. We have also put in an amnesty period that will allow us to bring forward the legislation and a budget in order to effect a responsible, safe and effective buyback program to remove these weapons from society.

I look forward to the member's support for those measures as we go forward.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Madam Chair, since January 1, 2002, any law-abiding citizen who was issued with a firearms licence by the government would have been cross-referenced with a continuous eligibility check 6,695 times up until May 1 of this year. How many times was this most recent mass murderer here in Canada checked against a criminal database since January 2002?

Hon. Bill Blair: As the member is probably aware, there is a very extensive investigation currently being conducted into that individual and how he acquired his firearms, and it's not appropriate to discuss that.

However, I think what is appropriate is to recognize that the weapons that this individual had available to him are weapons that were not designed for target shooting or hunting purposes or any sporting purposes. They were designed for soldiers to kill soldiers. In the hands of someone who is intent on mass murder, they represent an unacceptable and deadly risk to Canadians, and that's why we have prohibited them.

I'd also remind the member that other countries that have adopted sensible gun control laws, such as New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom, have also implemented very similar bans.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Now we will go to the hon. member for Nanaimo—Ladysmith, Mr. Manly.

Mr. Paul Manly (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, GP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to start by giving my condolences for the crew from the HMCS *Fredericton* who died, and in particular to the family of Captain Kevin Hagen. He was originally a constituent from Nanaimo—Ladysmith.

Other countries are strongly recommending that all citizens wear masks wherever people gather indoors, including in schools, on public transit and in stores. Taiwan has effectively stopped the spread of the coronavirus by supplying people with masks and installing dispensers of hand sanitizer throughout public spaces. The Taiwanese do not do a lot of testing or contact tracing. They do not have a lockdown. Taiwan started in the top 10 countries affected by COVID-19, and today it is number 119.

Will Canada follow Taiwan's example so we can lift the lockdown safely and get Canadians back to work?

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and I thank the member for his question.

There's no doubt that masks can play a role in a layered approach to protecting Canadians' health and safety, but as the member has mentioned, there are many other aspects to ensuring that Canadians are safe no matter where they go. For example, it is of utmost importance that Canadians practise social distancing. Social distancing can provide the most protection, in fact, when you're out in public or you're in another place where there are other people. Wearing a non-medical mask can add a layer of protection, and certainly Dr. Tam has said that when physical distancing is not an option, Canadians should consider wearing a mask.

• (1340)

Mr. Paul Manly: Thank you.

I'd like to give a shout-out to Martha and her team, who are doing a fundraiser for the SPCA by making masks for citizens in my riding.

Madam Chair, many people are falling through the cracks in the pandemic relief plan, including seniors who face an increase in the cost of living and a loss of retirement investment income. Will the government make the CERB a universal benefit to ensure that all Canadians who need help get help? If not, will the government increase old age security and allow seniors to withdraw funds from their RRSP without penalties so that they can pay their bills?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much, and I really appreciate the question.

We do recognize that OAS and GIS are very important parts of the retirement income of Canadians, particularly lower-income seniors. We've already introduced measures like the GST credit supplement to help seniors. The CERB is there for working seniors who have lost income as a result of COVID-19. We've also reduced the mandatory retirement withdrawals by 25%, and we've also spent half a billion dollars to support organizations that assist vulnerable Canadians, including seniors—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): We are going back to Mr. Manly. Thank you.

Hon. Deb Schulte: I do recognize that there's more to be done. Thank you.

Mr. Paul Manly: Many small businesses do not meet the eligibility requirements for the various relief programs on offer, particularly sole proprietorships. I have a long list of businesses in my riding that are missing out. At the same time, we have large companies in this country that use tax havens and loopholes to avoid paying their fair share of public services.

Will the government ensure that the needs of small businesses are met and withhold relief from corporations that use tax havens to avoid paying taxes in Canada?

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade): I want to thank the hon. member for the question.

Small businesses are indeed incredibly important to all of our communities across the country. That is why we have implemented many measures to help them weather this difficult period in COVID-19. Whether it is a small business loan, a wage subsidy or commercial rent assistance, or just lowering the cost by deferring GST or HST or customs duties, many measures have been put forward to help our small businesses through this very difficult time.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Mr. Manly, you may have a very short question.

Mr. Paul Manly: Thank you, Madam Chair.

As we navigate this pandemic crisis, we are also in the middle of another major crisis: the climate emergency. Will this government develop its economic recovery plan for the pandemic with the climate emergency at the forefront of its planning?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. minister has 15 seconds.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (Minister of Environment and Climate Change): Thank you for the question.

The focus of the government at the present time is on combatting the virus and on steps to start to relax some of the measures that have been taken. As we look forward, we need to learn from the experiences of this crisis as well as look forward to some of the looming crises on the horizon. Climate change is one of those, and we certainly intend to reflect on resilience for the economy as we move forward.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Now we will go to Ms. Ashton.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is to the Minister of Indigenous Services.

First nations across northern Manitoba and many others across the country have been doing everything possible to keep COVID-19 out of their communities. Many here have implemented strict lockdowns or travel restrictions, but the federal government has done virtually nothing to deal with the chronic issues that have made them vulnerable in the first place, such as overcrowded housing and the lack of hospitals.

We have to be very concerned about a possible second deadly wave of COVID-19. What is your government doing to support communities in the face of that possibility? Why isn't the government supporting the call for a ventilation centre in Berens River, a hospital in Cross Lake, a hospital in the Island Lake region? If the government couldn't act in time for this first wave of the pandemic, can it at least act in time for a potential second wave?

• (1345)

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Indigenous Services): Indeed, Madam Chair, one of the reflections we have in coming out of this global pandemic is that we don't want to go into the next one with the same social determinants of health that have made indigenous communities more vulnerable and more susceptible to contracting and then spreading COVID-19. A lot of the historic housing funds that we have mobilized in order to address overcrowding in particular are cold comfort to those communities that are still finding themselves in overcrowded situations.

In the staged approach to the epidemic and the onset of COVID-19, there are many measures that Indigenous Services Canada and as a whole of government we will deploy, including surge capacity, increased PPE, and nurses and doctors.

Obviously, we are looking for a medical solution to a medical problem, and that is what we will spare no expense or resource to address as indigenous communities continue to face the looming threat of a second wave of COVID-19 as they start to relax some of their confinement procedures.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Again, Madam Chair, to the Minister of Indigenous Services, many of us across northern Canada are deeply concerned by the outbreak taking place in northern Saskatchewan, centred in La Loche. The outbreak started from a worker who came back from a work camp in Fort McMurray. These camps are making workers sick, and they are proving deadly for first nations and northern communities. These work camps put public health at risk during a pandemic. Your government says it's committed to doing everything it can to keep first nations safe, yet nothing has been done to support calls for pandemic shutdowns.

Will you support first nations in their call for shutdowns during this pandemic to save lives now?

Hon. Marc Miller: Madam Chair, the situation in La Loche is a very pressing concern. Members won't be surprised to know that that number will only increase as the days go on and as we implement aggressive testing and contact tracing.

We are working with surrounding first nations and communities and with the Métis and Dene communities in La Loche to ensure that medical precautions are being put into place and that strict social distancing is being put into effect. This is a situation that is very much evolving minute by minute, and it is something for which we have deployed additional resources, along with Meadow Lake and the Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority to ensure that there is a health response to a health problem.

Clearly, we need coordination with the provinces to ensure that we have a seamless approach—

Ms. Niki Ashton: My question referred to La Loche, but this is a broader issue. There are many work camps, including here in our north, that first nations are extremely concerned about.

Will your government step in to support their calls for temporary shutdowns at this time?

Hon. Marc Miller: One of the things we see as we see the evolving dynamic and the potential spreads, particularly the fear of clusters as communities, provinces, territories may choose to relax certain measures, is the need to have a more targeted approach as to

how the economy reacts and deals with it, particularly in northern and vulnerable communities. This is something for which we will need to have a serious approach, with both the Minister of Natural Resources and also our provincial counterparts, to make sure that we aren't taking hasty measures to reopen the economy while we're trying to protect—and this is our most important goal—indigenous communities from getting exposed and spreading COVID-19.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Madam Chair, my question is for the Minister of Fisheries.

Hundreds of fishers and their families here in Manitoba who work with the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation are desperately calling for emergency support. Many are calling on the federal government to also work with them and the FFMC to redirect their product to domestic markets and communities here at home to address the growing food insecurity people are facing.

When will your government announce support for inland fishers, including here in Manitoba, and will you work to ensure that their product, healthy fish, can be provided here at home for people who need it?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Madam Chair, we know that COVID-19 is having extreme impacts on northern first nations communities, especially with regard to fisheries in areas that rely on it for not only their livelihoods but also for the cultural importance.

Indigenous harvesters are able to access through the aboriginal financial institutions the \$306 million we've put in for support for indigenous small and medium-sized businesses. The funding allows for short-term interest-free loans as well as for non-repayable contributions. We also announced earlier that the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency has made available \$15 million in non-repayable support for businesses.

We know that there's more that needs to be done to support our first nations communities as well as our harvesters. We're doing everything we can and we will continue to make sure that we address those needs.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I need to interrupt you.

We'll now hear from Claude DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I don't want to talk about tax cheats. I don't want to talk about the \$1 billion that the government used to track down tax cheats. I want to ask the minister why she isn't taking this opportunity to learn from countries that are putting an end to tax avoidance in tax havens, a legal but immoral practice in this day and age.

Can she explain why she isn't showing leadership by convincing cabinet to change course and eliminate the legal measure known as tax avoidance, which enables companies to avoid paying taxes and put money in tax havens?

• (1350)

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Madam Chair, as soon as our government took office in 2015, we made it a priority to crack down on tax cheats. Our government's historic investments of almost \$1 billion have ensured that the agency can access the necessary resources for its work. We're already starting to see the results.

As I was saying, I established an expert advisory committee to advise us. We've also been working on tightening the rules of the voluntary disclosures program. We've entered into country-by-country agreements that make it possible to share information. We're auditing four countries a year. We're working with the OECD. Currently, over 50 criminal investigations are related to international tax evasion.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Ms. DeBellefeuille has the floor.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Chair, does the minister realize that she's being filmed and recorded and that she isn't answering my question? I don't want to talk about cheats. I want to talk about companies that use a legal mechanism to avoid paying taxes and to put their money in tax havens. I can see that she doesn't want to answer my question. I'll ask her another question.

Can she tell me how many companies legally take advantage of tax avoidance in tax havens? How much money escapes taxation through this legal mechanism? The government could invest this money in its economic recovery post-COVID-19.

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: Madam Chair, I completely understand my colleague's impatience. However, she must understand that this type of issue is very complex. Under the former Conservative government, the issue wasn't a priority at all. Regarding tax evasion abroad, our leadership made it possible for the agency to conduct twice as many audits in three years as it conducted in 10 years under the Conservatives. Over 50 criminal investigations related to international tax evasion are ongoing.

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Go ahead, Madame DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Chair, I'm not impatient. However, I don't understand the government's lack of willingness to eliminate this mechanism, which is legal but completely immoral. Our questions remain unanswered.

My next question is for the Minister of Finance. The Fédération de la relève agricole du Québec and the UPA approached the Minister of Finance two weeks ago and still haven't received a response regarding the following issue.

We know that many farms don't pay wages. As a result, these farms are being penalized because they aren't eligible for the \$40,000 in loans available through the Canada emergency busi-

ness account. To qualify for these loans, the farms needed a payroll of \$20,000 to \$1.5 million in 2019.

Does the Minister of Finance plan to respond to the farmers who want to access the \$40,000 in loans?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Thank you, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

We know that the Canada emergency response benefit must be made available to the people who need it.

[English]

Mr. Damien Kurek: On a point of order—

[Translation]

Hon. Bill Morneau: That's why we're considering our approach. Of course—

[English]

Mr. Damien Kurek: I have a point of order.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Minister Morneau, please wait a moment. A member is raising a point of order.

[English]

Mr. Kurek, do you have a point of order? You have to unmute yourself.

Mr. Damien Kurek: Yes. It's that the translation is at the same volume as the minister.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): You'll have to put yourself on English. Rather, the minister has to put himself on French.

[Translation]

Hon. Bill Morneau: Sorry. I was on the English channel.

We know that the people who need the Canada emergency response benefit must have access to it. That's why we're considering the challenges each time. If I receive a letter, I'll look at it. Once we have a response, we'll pass it directly on to the member.

• (1355)

[English]

The Chair: The next question will go to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): This question is for the tourism minister.

The tourism ministry was one of the first and hardest-hit industries during this crisis, yet despite the Prime Minister's announcement over three weeks ago now of a plan to bring forward a tourism-specific aid package to help the businesses who employ millions of unemployed Canadians who work in tourism, there's still been nothing from this government. When will the government finally act to provide help to this nearly crippled industry?

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages): Mr. Chair, obviously we know that the tourism sector has been deeply impacted. I had the chance to talk to many of the leaders in the sector, and clearly there's a lot of anxiety.

We also had the chance to work with all the G20 ministers of tourism all together, and we know we have to act—

The Chair: We'll now go back to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I didn't really get much of an answer there. I hear a lot about talking and not much on action. Tourism-based communities like the ones in Banff and Canmore, which I represent, are tourism-based economies and have unemployment rates of 85% or higher. They also don't qualify for a lot of the programs because they're seasonal businesses and make most or all of their revenues for the year from May to October, so they're at risk of losing their entire season.

I have a couple of very specific questions.

Will the government consider making changes to the programs to make sure that seasonal businesses can get help?

What does the government plan to do to help the tourism industry recover after the pandemic?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Thank you.

Obviously, the tourism sector has access to many measures, including the CEBA account, the \$40,000 account. They also have access to the wage subsidy. They have access to rent relief. They will be having access also to funding through the regional development agencies, and we'll be coming up with the details soon.

Of course, in my colleague's riding of Banff, which is a fantastic place and a tourism gem, they will have access to the support through WD, western economic diversification.

If there are particular cases you would like to raise with me, I would be more than happy to talk to you to see how, on the ground, we can help the tourism operators.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, clearly the tourism minister hasn't been listening. She says she's talking to the industry. She's not hearing their concerns. What she just said does not address many of the concerns they have about being seasonal industries. It doesn't address anything about their concerns about the hard economic recovery they'll have after the pandemic.

Let's try another minister and see if we can get some answers.

Another industry that's very hard hit in my province and my riding is the oil and gas industry. It's another industry the Prime Minister has promised to help, but there hasn't been anything. Clearly there's a pattern here. The only so-called assistance there's been to help hurting Albertans in the oil patch has been measures to speed up the death of the industry that they work in.

Will the Liberal government ever show any concern for Albertans? Will they bring forward a plan to preserve Canadian jobs?

Will they put forward a plan to ensure the use of Canadian oil before oil coming in from places like Saudi Arabia?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Natural Resources): In fact, Mr. Chair, the federal government has taken several steps in recent weeks that will meaningfully support workers and communities that depend on this industry. We have the Canada emergency wage subsidy, which covers 75% of an employee's wages for the employer. We have more liquidity for oil and gas companies through new loans of \$15 million to \$60 million from the Business Development Bank of Canada.

We continue to step forward in our response to the impacts of COVID-19 on my province here in Newfoundland and Labrador and on Alberta and Saskatchewan. These three provinces are being hit by two crises at the same time, a crisis of demand for oil and gas on the world markets and of course a crisis of public health with COVID-19.

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, a lot of these things we're hearing about aren't going to actually help the industry to recover. What we need to see is the government give the industry and the private sector the opportunity to succeed. Maybe what they could do is consider expediting the approval of billions of dollars of private sector projects that would put thousands and thousands of Canadians back to work.

Will the government consider looking at ways that we can expedite projects? Will they look at ways that we can encourage the use of Canadian oil before the use of oil coming in from places like Saudi Arabia?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Chair, we have been working with our provincial partners. We have been working with businesses of all sizes in the oil and gas industry. We have been working with labour, concentrating on workers and concentrating on the companies that support those jobs to make sure that they remain whole and those jobs will be there for those workers.

We're particularly proud of our orphan wells program, which was launched by the Alberta government in conjunction with us. It was launched last week. I am pleased to inform this House that the uptake on applications for that program is significantly higher than even we expected.

● (1400)

The Chair: That's all the time we have for questions today.

I want to thank all the members for taking part.

The committee stands adjourned until tomorrow at noon.

[Translation]

The committee stands adjourned until tomorrow at noon.

Thank you.

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