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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 this meeting to order.

Welcome to the sixth meeting of the House of Commons Special Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting is taking place by videoconference. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, please activate your mic. When you are not speaking, leave your mic on mute. Of course, change the language when you change the language on the screen.

[*English*]

I would remind hon. members that if you want to speak English, you should be on the English channel; if you want to speak French, you should be on the French channel; and should you wish to alternate between the two languages, as I just did, you should change the channel to the language that you are speaking, each time you switch languages. In addition, please direct your remarks through the chair and speak slowly and clearly at all times to help our interpreters.

Finally, for members who will be speaking, we strongly recommend that you use a headset. I recommend the headset for your fellow members, but also for the interpreters as it gets loud, up and down, and it squeaks. It really does make it difficult for them if you do not have the prescribed headsets.

We'll go on to ministerial announcements.

I understand that there are no ministerial announcements today, so we will proceed to presenting petitions, for a period not exceeding 15 minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

We will now proceed to presenting petitions.

[*English*]

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

World Maternal Mental Health Day took place last week, and today I'd like to take a moment to present a very important petition on behalf of the Canadian Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative.

Whereas perinatal mood and anxiety disorders are the most common obstetrical complication, whereas in Canada and worldwide 20% of women and 10% of men suffer from a perinatal mental illness, resulting in an annual economic cost to Canada of approximately \$11 billion, and whereas the U.K., Australia and parts of the U.S. have perinatal mental health strategies and screening guidelines in place and Canada does not, the Canadian Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative is calling upon the House of Commons in Parliament assembled to create a national perinatal mental health strategy that will provide direction, policy and funding to develop specialized, comprehensive perinatal mental health care services, which include universal screening and timely access to treatment for all women and men during pregnancy and the postpartum period.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My petition relates to cystic fibrosis. If we were in the House now, as May is Cystic Fibrosis Awareness Month, one of the days this month we would all be wearing yellow roses in sympathy and solidarity with those who suffer from what is the number one disease killer in Canada of young people.

The petitioners have asked us to look at the situation with the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board, which is scheduled to go through some important and potentially detrimental regulatory changes very soon.

They ask that the amendments to the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board be rescinded, as these will restrict Canadians from receiving life-saving medications for cystic fibrosis and other illnesses, but in particular, a medicine called Trikafta, which can have the effect of treating cystic fibrosis in the case of 90% of cystic fibrosis sufferers. They ask the government to work with the provinces to find a strategy to jointly allow for the delivery of this life-saving medicine to Canadians across the country and to take a leadership role in negotiating a price for gene modulators throughout all the provinces of Canada.

• (1205)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's an honour to take the mike today, with all colleagues here. It's good to see you all virtually and safe.

Petitioners in my community point out in this petition, which, of course, predates the pandemic, that the family doctor shortage is severe in this country. Nearly five million Canadians lack a regular family doctor. This problem is particularly profound in more rural areas, including, as the petitioners reference, the community in which I live, Sydney, British Columbia. We have a very significant crisis and a lack of family doctors.

The petitioners call on the government to work with provinces and territories to find a collaborative, holistic solution so that every Canadian has a family doctor and we address the family doctor shortage.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Good morning, Mr. Chair.

I'm presenting a timely petition today that emphasizes the concerns constituents in my riding of Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon have with the Liberal government's inherently flawed and undemocratic approach to firearms legislation and regulation.

The petitioners call upon the Government of Canada to stop targeting law-abiding firearms owners; to cancel all plans to confiscate firearms legally owned by federally licensed RCMP-vetted Canadians; to focus taxpayer dollars where they will actually increase public safety, which is on keeping at-risk youth from being involved in gangs and on anti-gang enforcement; and to provide our men and women in uniform at the Canada Border Services Agency with the resources they need to stop the flow of illegal guns into this country.

Through this petition, my constituents take issue with how the Liberal government continues to target law-abiding firearms owners instead of the gangs, drug traffickers and illegal weapons smugglers responsible for the violence in our communities. They note that the use of the phrase "military-style assault rifle" is purely political posturing, as the term is undefined in Canadian law.

They also draw attention to the numerous inaccuracies about current firearms legislation and regulation—

The Chair: I'd like to remind the honourable members that this is a concise précis of what a petition says, not a speech.

I'll let Mr. Vis continue. I'm sure he'll be very brief in wrapping up.

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's sufficient.

The Chair: Okay.

Now we'll go to Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a huge honour to table e-petition 2512, which was signed by 1,198 petitioners, primarily from the province of Nova Scotia.

The Province of Nova Scotia invited multinational companies to scope out and develop expansive open-net salmon farming operations. The petitioners cite that the expansion would increase environmental degradation, as seen in similar aquaculture operations in British Columbia, Newfoundland, Norway, Vietnam and elsewhere in the world. It also, they cite, would pose risks to native fish stocks, pollute coastal ecosystems, impair at-risk wild Atlantic

salmon, and threaten established fisheries and tourism operations. They also raise concerns that open-net fish farming would not create significant employment and would undermine existing lobster and other fisheries.

They are calling on the government to uphold Bill C-68 and species-at-risk legislation, protect our oceans, ban expansion of open-net finfish aquaculture in our oceans, work to phase out any existing open-net fish farming operations currently in place and, lastly, invest in land-based, closed-containment finfish aquaculture.

I want to thank these petitioners for fighting for clean oceans, for their local economy and for the well-being of Nova Scotia.

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

This petition was signed and sent in by constituents of my riding of Nanaimo—Ladysmith.

It calls upon the House of Commons to commit to upholding the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada by immediately halting all existing and planned construction of the Coastal GasLink project on Wet'suwet'en territory, ordering the RCMP to dismantle its exclusion zone and stand down, scheduling nation-to-nation talks between the Wet'suwet'en nation and the federal and provincial governments—something that has already happened, thankfully—and prioritizing the real implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

• (1210)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have the pleasure of presenting a petition on behalf of my constituents of Don Valley East.

The petitioners are asking that the Government of Canada not provide any financial assistance to Canadian airlines until they promptly provide full refunds for flights that were cancelled due to COVID-19. They are asking the same for any foreign airlines that fly to, within or from Canada. The petitioners feel that these Canadians are facing economic hardship and need a refund.

The Chair: We'll now proceed to questioning ministers.

The first question will go to Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today we've learned that federal workers have been told to ignore obvious signs of fraud when it comes to applying for government benefits. Can the Prime Minister confirm that 200,000 applications have been flagged as potentially fraudulent?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Our priority from the beginning has been to make sure that Canadians get the support they need. We moved very quickly to get the Canada emergency response benefit out, to get the wage subsidy out and to help Canadians in this unprecedented situation. We recognize there will be challenges, and we are going to work through those challenges. Our priority every step of the way was to make sure we helped as many Canadians as possible.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, can the Prime Minister confirm that the instruction has been given to federal employees to ignore these 200,000 applications being flagged as potentially fraudulent? This is important.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Our focus has been on helping as many people as we possible can. Our decision from the very beginning was to get the help out to people and figure out, with retroactive action if necessary, where and when there may have been fraudulent use. Our priority was getting that help out.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, this came from a memo issued by a deputy minister. Did the minister's office or the Prime Minister sign off on this memo?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Again, in this unprecedented situation, our focus has been on helping as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. Other parties might have made a different choice had they been in government, but our focus was getting help to people when they needed it as quickly as possible and cleaning it up afterwards.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, I asked a very simple question. Did the Prime Minister or his minister sign off on this memo that was issued by the deputy minister, yes or no?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we have been focused entirely on getting help to Canadians when they need it, and that has meant that yes, there will be things we will need to clean up after the fact and work to fix, but getting that help into Canadians' pockets during this pandemic was our priority.

Mr. Dan Albas: I'm asking the Prime Minister to show some accountability. Did he or his office sign off on this memo?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, my office and I have been absolutely focused on getting the necessary help to Canadians. Perhaps, as Mr. Albas points out, other parties would have been slower to get the money out. We were flowing money to people who needed it.

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, the question was quite simple. Obviously the Prime Minister doesn't seem comfortable with the answer. Will he at least then commit to investigating every individual case of fraud, or will he write them off, as the story said?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, in this unprecedented situation Canadians have lost their jobs; they've lost their paycheques; they don't know how they're going to be able to support their loved ones and pay for their groceries. We made a decision as

a country that we would be there for them and that has been and will continue to be our priority.

• (1215)

Mr. Dan Albas: Mr. Chair, the Prime Minister can leave the cottage talk for the cottage. We're asking a very simple question here. Will he commit as a government to enforce the rule of law and to enforce the attestation that says that if someone commits fraud, the fraud will be pursued?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: My commitment as Prime Minister and as a government is to support and protect Canadians. That is what we are doing by giving them the support they need through this unprecedented situation. Perhaps other parties don't think it's important to support Canadians. We will keep focused on supporting Canadians.

Mr. Dan Albas: That's not what I'm asking here, Mr. Chair. The Conservatives supported the legislation that allowed those supports to go through. What we are asking about is fraud. All along we've been told fraud would be detected through audits after the fact, and we expect that to happen. Can the Prime Minister at least confirm that this will happen?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: When we made the determination that we needed to move quickly to help Canadians, we knew there would be a need to clean up after the fact, to go after fraudulent cases. We will do that. Our priority now and in the coming months is to ensure Canadians get the support they need, and our economy comes roaring back. That's what we're focused on.

[Translation]

The Chair: We'll now continue with Mr. Ste-Marie.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Chair, yesterday, the Prime Minister announced the large employer emergency financing facility. That's good.

What's even better is that he announced that the loans would be tied to conditions. One of those conditions forces companies not to resort to tax evasion or tax avoidance through tax havens. Excellent!

Unfortunately, I quickly became disillusioned because it is more about abusive tax evasion and avoidance. Basically, we're talking about fraudsters. There are no conditions that would allow us to tighten the screws on profiteers.

Companies that legally take advantage of tax havens to avoid paying their taxes will have access to the large employer emergency financing facility.

Why does the Prime Minister continue to support the profiteers?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we will always be there to counter tax evasion and tax avoidance. It's a priority of our government. There is no tolerance for tax evasion and tax avoidance.

In the current situation, our priority is to help workers across the country who could lose their jobs or who have lost their jobs. That's why we are introducing measures that support workers, who will continue to be our priority.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Mr. Chair, I'm delighted to hear the Prime Minister say that there's no tolerance for tax avoidance. The problem is that his remarks don't reflect reality.

Tax avoidance is the legal use of tax havens. The five big Bay Street banks benefit from this, as do the big multinationals. It's time to tighten the screws on these companies. They have to pay their share.

Will the Prime Minister and his government outlaw what is immoral?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, when we announced the large employer emergency funding facility, we recognized that those who wanted to receive tax dollars had to have paid their fair share of taxes. That's why we're putting in place measures to carefully assess the tax structures of these businesses before we loan money to them.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Mr. Chair, sometimes a bank will relocate its most profitable activities carried out in Canada and register them in a subsidiary in the Bahamas, Barbados or another tax haven.

Does the Prime Minister consider this bank to be paying its fair share of taxes in Canada?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we will assess applications for the large employer emergency funding facility on a case-by-case basis. We don't expect the big banks to need these funds. Before we provide any money, we're going to make sure that whoever wants to access these funds is transparent about how the money is being managed, including internationally.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Mr. Chair, I'll change the subject now.

Consumers are paying more and more with their credit cards, which allows contactless payments in shops, not to mention online shopping. This benefits Visa and Mastercard, which charge appallingly high user fees, known as interchange fees. These are almost 10 times higher than in Europe and Australia, and it costs our merchants a fortune.

Can the Prime Minister follow the example of Europe and Australia by capping interchange fees at 0.3%?

● (1220)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we are always looking for ways to reduce costs for consumers. We have worked with the big banks and the financial industry to ensure that people who need it have access to the help they need. We're reassessing how we can lower costs for consumers. Right now, we're sending money to consumers across the country who need it to get through this crisis. That's what we'll continue to focus on.

Mr. Gabriel Ste-Marie: Mr. Chair, the question doesn't concern consumers, but merchants.

A credit card company, such as Visa and Mastercard, that charges a fee of 2.5% to 3% per transaction undermines the merchant's profit margin and gets richer at the expense of consumers.

I invite the Prime Minister to follow the example of Europe and Australia by capping these fees at 0.3%.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we continue to work with financial institutions and the big banks to help consumers during this exceptional and difficult situation. Of course, there are some things we can look at over the longer term as well.

[English]

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Instead of providing a universal direct payment for all, the government has decided to implement a complicated program that leaves many people behind. A single parent with four school-age children lost her spousal and child support due to COVID-19. She pays taxes on her spousal income, but she is not eligible for CERB.

The Minister of Employment said that she is looking into this gap. It has been weeks, and still no action.

Will the Prime Minister step in and fix this gap so that the single parents and their children can get the support they need during this pandemic?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I'm happy, Mr. Chair, to correct the honourable member by pointing out that we actually moved in the most rapid and simplest possible way in providing income replacement to millions upon millions of Canadians who needed it through the Canada emergency response benefit. However, as the member points out, when one moves quickly and efficiently, there will be gaps, and that's why we've been working diligently to try to fill those gaps. We want to make sure that Canadians who need help, get it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: While the Minister of Employment has been aware of this for three weeks and says she is looking into it, there's still been no action. The truth of the matter is that single parents and their children who depend on spousal support and child maintenance are not getting support. Will the Prime Minister fix this gap?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: We recognize the particular challenge faced by families, single parents and families with young children, which is why we increased the amount of the Canada child benefit to be able to support people in this particular moment.

On top of that, we have looked to fill further gaps that have existed with the Canada emergency response benefit. Well over seven million Canadians have access to CERB, and we will continue to work with them—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That does not replace spousal support and child maintenance, Prime Minister.

Across the country there is no national standard to address the homelessness crisis amidst this pandemic, leaving communities at heightened risk from COVID-19. Canadians who are homeless or living in substandard housing have no access to bathroom facilities for basic hygiene. Those living in crowded SROs and shelters cannot practise social distancing. The problem is particularly acute in my riding in the Downtown Eastside.

While the B.C. government has implemented an initiative to house some of the homeless population in empty hotels in the short term, support from the federal government is needed to secure permanent solutions post-COVID-19. Will the Prime Minister commit to providing matching funds and take the right to adequate housing seriously?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: I know that the honourable member wouldn't want to inadvertently mislead the House. The fact is, the federal government almost immediately sent significant resources, hundreds of millions of dollars, to shelters across the country to enable them to create facilities, including renting new spaces, to be able to house homeless people without increasing the danger of the spread of COVID-19.

I recognize there's always more to do, but as we demonstrated with our national housing strategy, we are serious about fighting homelessness and supporting vulnerable Canadians, and we will continue to do that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The Prime Minister must know that the money the federal government sent is deficient. Many people still remain homeless, and they are at risk. Cutting chronic homelessness by 50% over the next decade is not good enough, and that is this Prime Minister's national housing strategy.

Will the government stop just making empty promises and ensure that every Canadian has the right to housing? Will he top up the support for provinces to at least match their funds?

• (1225)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, cutting chronic homelessness by 50% is an ambitious goal that no one else has ever been able to do as a government, and we are well on track for it. I would suggest that the member opposite not dismiss that as an empty promise, because we have demonstrated actions on it.

I recognize there is more to do. There is always more to do. We will be there and continue to be there for vulnerable people, including homeless Canadians.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would remind the Prime Minister that it was the federal Liberals who eliminated the national affordable housing program in 1993, so we have this homeless crisis today as a result of the Liberals.

We in Vancouver East have the third-largest urban indigenous population in the country, yet we got less than 2% of the pandemic urban indigenous housing funding. They're overrepresented among the homeless population. Why?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, we recognize there is more to do in supporting urban indigenous people. We have moved forward, both through the Minister of Indigenous Services and the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, to address the challenges facing urban aboriginal populations. We will continue to work with

them, recognizing that they are among the most vulnerable people in Canada who deserve the right support from all orders of government, and we will be there to support them increasingly in the coming years.

The Chair: Ms. Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, I'm hearing in my riding of Portage—Lisgar that individuals who are dealing with Service Canada through the mail are experiencing delays. It seems that the mail that's going to Service Canada has not been opened. In fact, one of my constituents sent documents, including a doctor's note, two months ago on March 12 and is now being told that she must resend them because they've never been opened.

Can the government tell us whether this is a widespread problem, and how are they dealing with unopened mail at Service Canada?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Mr. Chair, I want to assure the honourable member that we are doing everything that we can in Service Canada to meet the expectations of Canadians. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had unprecedented volumes, but we have redeployed thousands of staff to front-line services by phone and by other means. We had to close a number of the centres because of COVID-19 concerns and the safety and well-being of Canadians.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Is the minister aware whether this is a widespread problem? Is this happening rarely, or frequently? I'm hearing about it. I know, from many MPs, we are at the front lines of dealing with and helping constituents who are not only wanting to get support but also are trying to get programs unrelated to COVID-19. Is unopened mail a widespread problem at Service Canada?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to look into the particular case that the honourable member brings up. I am not aware of unopened mail being a widespread issue. I'm happy to work with the honourable member to see what happened in this individual case.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Thanks very much.

Mr. Chair, the Iver Johnson single-shot rifle is a standard farm gun used by many farmers in my riding, in fact, passed down from generation to generation in some cases. Why are the Liberals making this gun illegal? What's the purpose of banning this particular farm rifle?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just wish to advise the member that we worked very closely with the Canadian firearms program, with law enforcement and with their firearms verification to identify the makes, models and variants of nine rifles, all of which had in their earliest provenance a design for military use, for soldiers to use in combat. Those are the weapons that have been—

The Chair: We'll now go back to Ms. Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen: I would challenge the minister on that. I do not believe that he has been consulting with front-line officers. We're hearing from front-line officers that they are concerned about gangs, drug dealers and illegal weapons being smuggled across the border. They are not concerned with these types of farm rifles that are being used by our farmers and, in some cases, hunters. These are specifically used for hunting.

So, Mr. Chair, we'd like to see the evidence on why the Liberals are once again targeting law-abiding Canadians, ignoring gangsters and drug dealers. Why are they banning the Iver Johnson?

• (1230)

Hon. Bill Blair: It's a great opportunity, I think, when the member opposite says what the police are saying.

Let's hear what the police are saying.

The Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police declared that military assault rifles were produced for the sole purpose of killing people in large numbers and urged the government to enact legislation to ban all military assault rifles, except for law enforcement and military purposes.

The Ontario police leaders said that they support a prohibition on all military-designed rifles. They said, "In our view, these weapons have no place in our communities and should be reserved for use by Canada's military and law enforcement."

The Chair: Ms. Bergen, we have about 50 seconds left.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Mr. Chair, we've seen this before, where the Liberals introduced a long-gun registry that cost billions of dollars and did absolutely nothing to stop violent crimes. This is a repeat of what the Liberals have done before.

Is the minister saying that the Iver Johnson that farmers use is an assault rifle?

Hon. Bill Blair: Actually, what I'm saying, and what our regulations say very clearly, is that weapons that were designed not for hunting and not for sport purposes but for soldiers to use in combat to kill other soldiers have no place in Canadian society.

I would also advise the member that any Canadian killed by gun violence is one too many. We have far too many tragedies where these types of weapons have been used to kill Canadians.

[Translation]

The Chair: We'll now continue with Mr. Rayes.

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for the Prime Minister.

Is it true that Canada Revenue Agency employees who process applications for the Canada emergency response benefit, or CERB, have been asked to send the payment even if fraud had been detected, as was pointed out in a national media report today?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier (Minister of National Revenue): Mr. Chair, our government considers these to be very difficult times for Canadians. We're going to do everything we can to support them by helping them pay for their housing and their groceries.

I'm very proud of the public servants who work at the Canada Revenue Agency. Nearly seven million—

Mr. Alain Rayes: I repeat my question, which is extremely simple: Is it true that the Canada Revenue Agency sent a memo to its employees asking them to ignore the fraudsters and still send the CERB payments??

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: I'll finish my response, which was interrupted: Nearly 7.8 million Canadians have applied for the Canada emergency response benefit. The priority is for Canadians to be able to pay for their groceries and their housing.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Yes or no: Did the Canada Revenue Agency send a memo to its employees—who are doing an exceptional job, I'd like to point out—so that they would ignore the 200,000 potential cases of fraud that they detected?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: The answer is no.

Mr. Alain Rayes: The CERB has been distributed since March 25, so for seven weeks now. The federal government website clearly states that if an employee returns to work, the employee must pay back the CERB. Can the Prime Minister tell us whether employees who decide to return to work have to pay back the full \$2,000 per month, or only \$500 for week of the month?

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: As I mentioned, we believe that Canadians are going through a very difficult time, and we need to support them. We need to help people pay for their groceries and their housing. That's what our government is committed to, and that's what we'll continue to do.

Mr. Alain Rayes: Mr. Chair, the extremely simple question I am asking the Minister comes from companies and workers. None of the officials dares to answer it when we call on technical matters, even though they are supposed to give us information that we can pass on to the public with complete transparency.

So let me repeat my question; I don't think there can be a simpler one. The answer will benefit the workers and the companies that want access to the Canada emergency wage subsidy.

If an employee is called back to work—which is perfectly fine—agrees to do so and wants to reimburse the CERB, must he reimburse \$500 for each week he works during the month, or the entire \$2,000?

• (1235)

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Mr. Chair, I can clarify that Service Canada will work closely with anybody who transitions either from the CERB to the wage subsidy or from the CERB back to employment to ensure that there's no overpayment, but of course that there's no undue hardship on the individual.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Rayes: That announcement was made seven weeks ago. The workers want to know how much they have to reimburse. The companies want to know the situation so that they can make decisions on salary assistance. It seems to me that my question is not complicated: do people have to reimburse \$500 for each week they work in a month, or the full monthly amount of \$2,000?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, that will depend on the individual circumstances of the particular worker. That's why Service Canada is reaching out to individuals to make it as seamless as possible for them.

I can assure the member that nobody will be put in a difficult situation. I recognize that there is some uncertainty, but we're trying to address that.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Rayes, you have 35 seconds left.

Mr. Alain Rayes: The answers that we are getting today are incredible. This is unacceptable, in my view.

If an employer complies with the hygiene conditions, can employees still refuse to return to work, and therefore continue to receive the CERB?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, I can assure all Canadians that at the same time as employees have a right to refuse work and employers have an obligation to ensure healthy and safe workplaces, we want all people to be able to go back to work and feel safe.

There are established processes and federal and provincial labour processes for refusal to work, and at the end of the day the CERB is there for workers who aren't working due to COVID-19.

The Chair: We're going to have to go on from here.

The next question will come from Mr. Schmale.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

The Wet'suwet'en elected chiefs and community members have been excluded from negotiations on a memorandum of understanding affecting land rights and titles. Only a few hereditary chiefs have been part of these secret negotiations.

The elected chiefs have issued a press release asking for the government to halt the joint announcement scheduled for May 14 on

the MOU until the community has had a chance to look at and understand how the MOU will affect them.

Will the minister agree with the democratically elected chiefs and the Wet'suwet'en people they represent and delay any announcement until proper consultation can be completed?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): I want to reassure the member that communication is ongoing with and between our partners on how to go forward on implementing the Wet'suwet'en rights and title with a Wet'suwet'en-led solution. We encourage the leaders to continue their ongoing, necessary and important conversations with their community on how they want to proceed on a path toward implementing their rights and title.

As we work to rebuild Canada's relationship with the Wet'suwet'en, we need to give them space for these important discussions.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, is that a "yes" that the signing will be delayed until the elected chiefs have a chance to look at the agreement?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I believe the elected chiefs have had a look at the agreement. These are very difficult conversations on complex issues around rights and title. This has been outstanding for a long time—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: The current health crisis should not be used as an opportunity to sideline the Wet'suwet'en people and their elected chiefs. The federal government should be bringing the community together rather than actively excluding Wet'suwet'en members. The chiefs are so concerned that they are now calling for the resignation of the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations for failure to engage in proper consultations, which has stoked divisions within the community.

Will the minister reconsider and put in place a consultation process that honours both their traditional house system and the governance responsibilities of elected chiefs and councils?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yet again, it's very important the member understand the engagement must take place and be led by the Wet'suwet'en nation. That means the elected chiefs and the hereditary chiefs need to work with all clan members as they determine how they wish to work with Canada and the Province of British Columbia to implement the rights and title of the Wet'suwet'en people.

• (1240)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I agree that the Wet'suwet'en should have the opportunity to look at the proposed agreement, but we are still seeing news coming out of the elected chiefs and the people they represent that they have not had a thorough chance to look at this proposed agreement.

Will the minister delay the signing?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think the member will agree that there's a lot more work to do with all the parties. I believe, in terms of the kind of engagement that has taken place in the feast houses and the notification that took place even before COVID-19, that the work is under way and it will have to be Wet'suwet'en-led in terms of what eventually will be their choice as to how they implement their rights and title.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Mr. Chair, for two weeks now the Liberals on the indigenous affairs committee have shut down Conservatives and witnesses every time we mention the word Wet'suwet'en. They don't want to talk about the issue, an issue that is very much aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis.

The Liberals profess to be the advocates for indigenous communities and the champions of reconciliation. Can the minister tell us why the Liberals are determined to shut down discussion and public debate?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I would have to disagree with the member. I don't believe that there's, at any time, an interest in shutting down discussion or debate. I think, though, that at the COVID committee the issues facing indigenous communities, first nations, Inuit and Métis around COVID-19 are very important to them. We need to work with them to make sure they can keep their communities safe.

The Chair: Mr. Schmale, you have 30 seconds.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I would argue with the minister and challenge her to talk to her committee members. Each time Conservatives have brought up the topic of the Wet'suwet'en and the situation happening with the elected chiefs and the people they represent, we have been shut down every single time.

When will the minister allow the public debate to happen?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, in a committee, it is the work of the committee and the decision of the committee. I believe the chair and all members want first nations, Inuit and Métis to be able to keep their communities safe during COVID-19.

The Chair: The next question goes to Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It has been three months since this pandemic started and the Liberals just got around to announcing help for seniors. Seniors are a priority and should be treated as such.

Why do the Liberals treat seniors as an afterthought?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors): Thank you very much.

There is definitely an interest in and support for our seniors. We've been working to support seniors since the very beginning of this pandemic.

I've just had the opportunity to introduce additional measures today wherein we are introducing a one-time special payment for those who receive OAS.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Nearly two months into living in some form of isolation, watching their retirement savings take a hit and having to take additional health precautions due to the COVID-19

pandemic, eligible seniors are set to receive a one-time payment of up to \$500.

Why does this government consistently undervalue seniors compared with everyone else?

Hon. Deb Schulte: I just want to make sure that my honourable colleague remembers that we have already given a GST top-up of almost \$375 for single seniors and over \$500 for couples. This is in addition to what we've just done today where, as you said, it's \$500.

[Translation]

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: According to Abacus Data, 69% of Canadians feel that there will be a second wave in the pandemic, and 52% of Canadians believe that there is a shortage of medical equipment, including personal protective equipment.

Given these surprising figures, what is the government's plan to bring in enough personal protective equipment, should there be a second wave of the pandemic?

[English]

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of Public Services and Procurement): Our government is aggressively buying life-saving equipment and supplies that Canada needs, from a diverse range of suppliers around the world and here at home. We're working directly with businesses across the country to rapidly scale up domestic production capacity to meet current and future needs.

At this point, our primary focus is on front-line health care professionals, but we are also exploring federal government assistance in areas of essential services so that PPE exists where workers need it. We are following public health guidance on this issue in looking to see where we can best assist.

● (1245)

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: According to Public Services and Procurement Canada, despite 1.8 billion units of PPE being procured, less than 6% of N95 respirator orders have been filled, less than 8% of surgical mask orders have been filled, and just 1.4% of face shield orders have been filled. We know that orders are not delivered, so what's the delay?

Hon. Anita Anand: Let me start by saying that we are working in an incredibly difficult and competitive global environment and are procuring millions of items: face shields, gowns, hand sanitizer, and N95 surgical masks, and ventilators every single day. There is a delay in the production of these goods, but we have had many deliveries coming into Canada, including over two million face shields—

The Chair: We'll have to go back to Mrs. Kusie.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: A national security expert from the University of Ottawa has said that the national emergency strategic stockpile has failed in the current crisis, resulting in some provinces such as Saskatchewan using expired PPE, and provinces such as Alberta using faulty PPE that cause rashes and headaches.

What is the government doing to expedite procurement and to counter the risk of faulty PPE, given that 34 of the suppliers are from China, which has already supplied significant faulty PPE?

Hon. Anita Anand: I will start by saying that we have multiple supply chains operating at the same time, from China, and domestically, and from the United States and other countries around the world.

Our first priority is to make sure that we get safe, effective equipment and supplies into the hands of our front-line health care workers. Given the global supply chains and their competitive nature, this is an ongoing project and we are having success for our front-line health care workers.

The Chair: We'll now go on to the next question from Mr. d'Entremont.

Mr. Chris d'Entremont (West Nova, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ten weeks ago the Minister of Fisheries, in responding to my question in question period, acknowledged that the lobster fishery was being negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and was facing losses of up to 95% of its Asian markets.

Mr. Chair, on April 28 I asked the minister what she was doing to support harvesters who were left out of the \$62.5 million aid package. She mentioned that she was looking at sector-specific areas to make sure that the issues were addressed.

Can the minister tell us what the government's plan is to directly support seafood harvesters?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Bernadette Jordan (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank my colleague for that very good question.

We know that the fish and seafood sector has been extremely adversely affected because of COVID-19. We've started to put measures in place to address the issue with the \$62.5 million for processors, as well as to make sure that the CERB is available for seasonal workers as well as people who have run out of their fishery EI, but we know that more needs to be done. The fishery enterprises are uniquely structured, which is why we're looking at measures to address the concerns they have. I'm working with my provincial colleagues, as well as my caucus colleagues.

Mr. Chris d'Entremont: Mr. Chair, most fishermen are not eligible for the wage subsidy program due to the stipulation that it cannot be used for employees who are related to their employer. Most fishing enterprises, like farm enterprises, are family oriented. Many fishermen have their wives, their sons, their uncles or their fathers working for them, and sometimes it's the whole family on the boat.

Can the minister explain what the government's plan is to support fishermen who do not fit into any actual program and who desperately need direct financial help from the federal government to survive?

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Chair, we know that, because of the unique structure of fishing enterprises, they are not eligible for many of the supports we have put in place. We have made changes to the CERB to make sure that people who run out of the fishers EI are eligible as well as seasonable workers. We know that more needs to be done for the harvesters directly. We are working on direct supports. We have put in place measures to address processors' concerns so that harvesters continue to have a place to sell their product. We know that more has to be done. I am working with my cabinet colleagues to find solutions, and I hope I will have more to say about that very soon.

Mr. Chris d'Entremont: In recent weeks, lobster fishermen in the gulf region of the Maritimes were shocked to read an additional subsection of regulations that was added to their fishing conditions for the 2021 fishing season. This addition was for a catch limitation or quota to which none of the harvesters or advisory members were privy. This created quite a chill within the lobster fishery, for sure.

Can the minister tell us how these detailed regulations managed to get added without her authorization, and can licence-holders expect to see these same regulations in their conditions when their season gets going in the future?

• (1250)

Hon. Bernadette Jordan: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the people who brought to my attention the conditions that were put on licences in the gulf. Those were not done under my authorization. They were removed right away from the condition of licence, and they will not happen.

Mr. Chris d'Entremont: My next question is for the Minister of Health.

Mr. Chair, on Wednesday, February 26, after the death of 23-year-old Chantelle Lindsay from Nova Scotia due to complications from cystic fibrosis, I asked the Prime Minister whether the government was going to make Trikafta, which might have saved Chantelle's life, available to Canadians. Now that almost 12 weeks have passed, we understand that Vertex Pharmaceuticals has not yet applied to Health Canada for study. Many of my Conservative colleagues and I have recently sent a letter to the minister asking for an update on how we support those negotiations with Vertex.

Can the Minister of Health tell us when this drug will be available to CF patients in Canada?

The Chair: Honourable minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My heart goes out to the family of Chantelle, who are obviously suffering an unbearable loss. I agree with the member that we want to make sure that effective drugs are available in Canada. As the member has pointed out, Vertex has not applied to sell Trikafta in Canada. However, there is the special access program that makes drugs like Trikafta available. In fact, the majority of people who have applied through the special access program to get access to the drug have received access. I would encourage the member to continue his correspondence with the manufacturer, as will we.

The Chair: Mr. d'Entremont, you have 36 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Chris d'Entremont: Mr. Chair, the tourism season is already deeply affected by COVID-19. A number of industries, businesses and festivals are having to deal with considerable losses of income.

In my constituency, tens of thousands of tourists use the ferry between Bar Harbor, Maine, and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.

What is the government planning to do to help the ferry to survive and to resume service next season, if the borders remain closed this summer?

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages): I have had the opportunity to speak to my colleague Mr. d'Entremont about solutions to assist people in the tourism sector all over the country, and particularly in the Atlantic region. In light of the new funding for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, ACOA, I will be happy to work with him and with the leaders of the tourism sector.

The Chair: Mr. Savard-Tremblay, the floor is now yours.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Despite all the upheaval it causes, the crisis we are experiencing, considerable in scope though it is, can also be an opportunity to begin a transition. What is essential in normal times may, during a crisis, become crucial. What is unjust may, in times of crisis, become frankly scandalous. In Quebec, we are generally allergic to blatant injustice and inequality.

Yesterday, Ottawa announced new support for large companies. Many of us in Quebec feel that, when a company knocks on the state's door to ask for assistance, it is totally legitimate for the state to impose conditions before providing its support. We in the Bloc Québécois feel that there should be a limit, a ceiling, on the assistance provided to large companies, in order to avoid abuses in executive compensation. That is also the prevalent position in Quebec.

A few years ago, after the “Bombardier affair” in Quebec—I will not dwell on that because Quebecers are all too familiar with it—three of the four political parties that sat in the National Assembly and that still sit there took a position of that kind. A number of civil society groups in Quebec share it also. The United States, which, you will agree, is no bastion of socialism, has already implemented similar policies for periods of crisis. The idea is to offer support, but with conditions.

According to a report published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives on January 2, the 100 highest-paid CEOs in Canada

earned 227 times more in 2018 than the average worker. The average salary for workers increased by 2.6% between 2017 and 2018. Given that inflation was then at 2.3%, it can be said that there was practically no increase. By contrast, the salary increase for CEOs in the same period was 18%, even in cases where the companies suffered losses.

Let us be clear that we were not in a crisis when that study was conducted. We cannot even imagine what the figures are today. At this point, we are no longer talking about a gap but an abyss. Wealth is concentrated at the top of the pyramid, but clearly does not flow down to the base.

Does the government intend to put a ceiling on executive compensation to ensure that they are not the only ones to profits from the support at this time of crisis? The question is clear and I am asking you to give me a clear answer. If I don't get one, I am going to have to demand a new version of the Clarity Act.

• (1255)

The Chair: The honourable Minister has the floor.

I would also like to remind members to ask their questions through the Chair

Hon. Bill Morneau (Minister of Finance): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We know that our approach has to help small and medium-size companies, but also large companies in order to provide a bridge to the end of the crisis. In our opinion, that is very important. It will protect the jobs of Canadians and the future of our economy. That's why the Large Employer Emergency Financing Facility is very important. That said, we know that it is necessary and important to impose conditions. Yes, we do want to make sure that the facility is available for companies that are going to continue to support our economy, to protect their employees, and to make a significant contribution to our communities. That is why we have attached a number of major conditions to our approach. We will have more details on the subject in the coming days.

We established from the outset that we had to impose conditions on executive compensation. That is very important. We are going to consider the rules and conditions that are needed in order for the facility to be available to the companies, the operations and the employees. Of course, conditions are required to ensure that the facility is available for operations, not for dividends or share buybacks, for example. We will impose conditions of that kind. We also want to make sure that we are aware of the situation the companies are in. For example, we want to be sure that they are not engaged in tax evasion.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now go on to Ms. Sgro.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity.

I will be sharing my time with the member for Kings—Hants.

Canadian seniors are worried about COVID-19. In my own riding of Humber River—Black Creek, 30% of the population are 65 or older. We know they are one of the highest risk populations. During this time, their costs have gone up. They have had to spend extra on medication and grocery delivery, as many cannot leave their homes. I have also heard of many seniors who are facing extra dispensing fees. These costs all add up, and many seniors were already carefully budgeting before the pandemic.

It is so important that our government be there to support them. Can the minister please tell us what our government is doing to ensure that vulnerable seniors get the support they need during this very difficult time?

The Chair: The honourable minister.

Hon. Deb Schulte: My colleague is right. Seniors have faced increased costs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and our government today has responded to that with additional action. We announced a one-time, tax-free payment of \$300 for seniors eligible for OAS and an additional \$200 for seniors eligible for GIS. This means there will be up to \$500 for the most vulnerable seniors to help them with their financial security to get through this challenging time.

Beyond this, we announced \$20 million to expand the new horizons for seniors program to kick-start initiatives and services that will help seniors—for example, to get grocery deliveries right to their door and to stay connected. We've worked tirelessly on this as well as on other recent measures like the GST credit to help the most vulnerable seniors.

Thank you to my colleague for her advocacy.

• (1300)

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC)): You have 30 seconds left, Ms. Sgro.

Go ahead with a short question and a response.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to applaud the minister for that work. I know she's been working extremely hard to make sure that we get some additional announcements over and above all of the ones we have already made, so congratulations. Keep up the work. You know there is lots more we want to do.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Please give a short response.

Go ahead.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much to my honourable colleague for her advocacy. Thanks for everyone's advocacy.

Seniors across the country have been communicating with us and letting us know their needs, and we have been responding.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Now I'll go over to Mr. Blois.

Go ahead.

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's always a privilege to have a chance to speak on issues that matter to Canadians, whether it's from the floor of the House of Commons or, indeed, from my house here in Nova Scotia. It's great to see everyone across the country.

Like my colleagues, I'd like to thank the staff of the House of Commons for their continued work to make sure that we have this forum to be able to continue the democratic process. I would also quickly like to thank my staff both here locally in Kings—Hants and in Ottawa for their continued work for my constituents.

Mr. Chair, my question through you is to the minister of agriculture.

In Kings—Hants, agriculture is an important economic driver for our economy. We have the greatest concentration of agriculture producers east of Montreal. From our beef industry to our wine industry and everything in-between, it is extremely important. We have the Kentville Research and Development Centre and the Hants County agricultural exhibition, the longest-standing exhibition in North America.

We know that COVID-19 has had impacts on the agriculture industry to differing degrees. In particular, Kings—Hants is home to an important dairy sector. We also have a growing and important horticulture sector.

Can the minister specifically provide an update to the House on the measures our government has taken on those two particular commodity groups that are so important in my riding?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are targeting support to some of the most critical challenges facing the food supply chain. Last Tuesday I was proud to announce our emergency processing fund for a total of \$77.5 million, \$50 million for the surplus food program and \$125 million through AgriRecovery to support our beef and pork producers.

Concerning the dairy sector in particular, I'm hopeful that tomorrow we will get the support of all of the parties to be able to respond to their request for an increase in their loan capacity from \$300 million to \$500 million.

I would like to encourage all farmers to apply to the business risk management programs, including AgriStability, for which we have improved some of the mechanisms.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll go on with questions, but I'll also just ask Mr. Blois to excuse me for mispronouncing his name.

Let's go now to Mr. Masse for Windsor West.

Go ahead, Mr. Masse.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): During the COVID-19 pandemic, the State of Michigan has become an epicentre of the outbreak. The city of Detroit alone has more deaths than the entire province of Ontario. The border communities of Sarnia and Windsor have higher per capita infection rates than the rest of the province.

Next week, the border restrictions between the U.S. and Canada expire. With the premiers of B.C., Quebec and Ontario opposing the opening of the border at this time, will the restrictions be extended, or is the Prime Minister discussing changing the restrictions?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): Let me assure the honourable member that, first and foremost, all decisions about Canada's border are taken by Canadians and with the health and safety of Canadians first and foremost in mind. When it comes to the current agreement's coming up next week, we are in very close conversations with Americans about next steps.

• (1305)

Mr. Brian Masse: What changes are on the table?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me just be clear that I didn't speak about any changes; I spoke about a very collaborative conversation with our American neighbours about next steps.

Mr. Brian Masse: Are you discussing any changes to the current status right now?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I found during the NAFTA negotiations that negotiations are best not conducted in public, but let me just assure Canadians that the health and safety of Canadians is first and foremost. Our government is taking a cautious approach, and we're working effectively.

Mr. Brian Masse: This is not negotiation. This is whether there are changes on the table. What are they?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me just say that I think the honourable member was actually seeking to know what exactly is being discussed with our American partners. Let me just say that we are taking a very cautious approach to the health and safety of Canadians. A very collaborative discussion is happening.

Mr. Brian Masse: Will more information be shared between your government and the American government on Canadians and Americans crossing the border on both sides?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: I'm not sure what the member is alluding to, but let me just say that the current arrangements are working

extremely well. Non-essential travel is down very sharply. Essential travel, particularly for trade, continues, and that's a good thing, too.

Mr. Brian Masse: With border communities having more rates of infection, will they receive additional PPE and financial assistance to deal with the loosening of current border restrictions that is being discussed?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Let me just emphasize to the honourable member that on a couple of occasions he has implied that a loosening of the current restrictions is being discussed. Let me be very clear that this is his assertion; I have not said that.

Mr. Brian Masse: Apparently, we're meeting for nothing.

I'll move to the large commercial banks who are profiteering off or squeezing Canadians during this public crisis. Credit card interest rates are still high from previous price-gouging levels. Despite numerous favours from the Liberals, there have not been significant changes.

Vancity Savings Credit Union demonstrated leadership when it set credit card rates at zero. Will the government use its statutory powers and force the banks to offer the credit card relief that Vancity has already done?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Morneau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to say that we recognize the challenges that Canadians face, especially with issues like credit card rates. That's exactly why we've been working on this issue since we came into office. We came to an agreement on interchange fees that was important for consumers. Most recently, during the COVID-19 crisis, we've negotiated with the banks and encouraged them, and they have come out with reductions in their credit card fees that are significant, and deferrals for customers—

Mr. Brian Masse: Will you use your statutory powers, yes or no, to do what Vancity has done to help Canadian consumers?

Hon. Bill Morneau: As I've said, Mr. Chair, we're continuing to support consumers. We're continuing to work together with banks to make sure that they are giving the kind of support necessary to their customers, and we've seen actions in this regard, supporting customers.

Mr. Brian Masse: Why do banks have to profit at higher interest rates on Canadian consumer and retailer exchange rates during COVID-19?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, I think it's important to clarify that banks have come forward and given deferrals to customers in trouble and cut their interest by half—

Mr. Brian Masse: Not on credit cards.

Hon. Bill Morneau: —and that's been important on credit cards.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There's time for one more short question.

Go ahead, Mr. Masse.

Mr. Brian Masse: Will the minister use his powers if the banks continue to charge Canadian consumers interest rates that are higher than Vancity's?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, again, we will continue to work with banks to ensure that they're supporting their customers. What banks have done on credit cards by cutting their fees in half is an important nod in that direction.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Next, we have Jacques Gourde.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Quebec is Canada's biggest producer of hydroelectricity, a renewable energy that is the pride of the Quebec nation. The only problem is that it seems to be a tough sell west of Quebec, in Ontario, for instance. This competitively priced power could help us reduce our environmental footprint and further cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Will the government show leadership and allow Canada's provinces to share renewable energy through an energy corridor, as we proposed?

• (1310)

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we are continuing to work towards that end. It is always very important to protect Canadians, and we are going to stick to that approach.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, Canada's dairy processors have been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis and the new Canada–U.S.–Mexico Agreement, or CUSMA. Some of them have incurred losses ranging from 10% to 50%, depending on the processed product.

Will the government commit to granting import permits under CUSMA to Canada's dairy processors, not retailers directly?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I can assure you that dairy producers will receive fair compensation.

I should also point out that we preserved supply management when negotiating the new NAFTA. That is important to Canada and Quebec, and I'm very pleased that we were able to do that.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, the minister seems to be missing the issue in hand. Canada's dairy processors invest hundreds of millions of dollars a year to bring high-quality products to consumers, while contributing \$19 billion to GDP. Now those very pro-

cessors are being asked to try to export Canadian value-added products.

Will the minister commit to giving Canada's dairy processors import permits, instead of encouraging American multinationals?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the member for his question.

I fully understand, as we all do, the important role processors play in our system and our country. I can assure the members of the House that we will continue to work with Canadian processors as the agreement comes into force.

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, when it comes to the COVID-19 crisis, what Canadians will remember is that those with access to reliable high-speed Internet will have fared better, feeling less financial strain, than those who are cut off from the rest of the world.

Is the government ready to invest in making high-speed Internet available to all Canadians, no matter where they live in the country?

[*English*]

Hon. Maryam Monsef: Yes, we are, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Chair, the current economic situation could lead to the disappearance of Canada's tourism industry. The pain will be felt by thousands of Canadians, who will have to find new jobs in order to survive.

Is the government going to protect the tourism-based economy by investing in tourism infrastructure and upgrades to ensure Canada's tourist regions are ready when the economy reopens?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Ms. Joly, you have to switch to the French channel and turn on your microphone.

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Yes, I look forward to working with my fellow member on this issue. I know the tourism sector is important to him and, especially, his constituents. Let's work together to find ways to get this hard-hit sector moving again. Many people have lost their jobs and need assistance from the government. That is why we're here, providing a helping hand at this difficult time so they can come out the other side.

[*English*]

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Continuing with questions, we'll go to the honourable member for Saskatoon—University, Mr. Tochor.

• (1315)

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Good afternoon, everybody.

With respect to entering Canada, does the government consider spousal reunification as essential travel, yes or no?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: The CBSA has exercised the appropriate discretion in determining when a non-Canadian citizen, who has no status in Canada, attempts to enter the country for any consideration considered non-essential. They are turned back because we have restrictions in place for non-essential travel.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Respectfully to the minister, you're letting down Canadians. People are being stranded, and you need to do better as a government.

Changing gears a little, all Canadians would agree, or can agree, that the Prime Minister requires suitable accommodation. Why did the government simply not tell Canadians that the Harrington cottage needed to be rebuilt and massively expanded?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I would ask the honourable members to direct their questions through the chair.

The honourable minister.

Hon. Anita Anand: The NCC is an independent Crown corporation. It recognizes the importance of the official residences it has jurisdiction over. The work at Harrington Lake is part of a broader program to preserve and maintain and restore all official residences under NCC management, and we will support the NCC in its important work.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Was there something in particular that this government did not want Canadians to know about the cottage, or is secrecy all this government knows how to do?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, this information was and has been public since 2018. There is no effort to hide any information from the public in this regard.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Respectfully, Canadians feel misled on this, and we're not clear on what the expenses were, how large an expansion it was—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Go ahead, the honourable government House leader.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I believe this has absolutely nothing to do with the pandemic, so the questions are out of order, in my opinion.

Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I thank the honourable government House leader for his comment.

Certainly the scope of the special committee on the COVID-19 pandemic does expect and anticipate that the subject matter will be related to the matter at hand, so I would ask honourable members to continue to keep within those bounds.

Of course, members will also know that we're unable to gauge that until members have spoken, so I would ask members to keep on subject.

Let's go back to Mr. Tochor to finish his question, and we have about two minutes remaining in this spot.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Yes, thank you, Chair.

The point I was making was about transparency or lack of transparency that is hurting our efforts with COVID-19.

Changing gears onto CERB, who came up with the number for CERB? Why is it \$2,000? A senior gets \$1,200, people with disabilities get \$1,600, and now we've added another ad hoc program on top of those.

I'd like to know a little more about how and who came up with those unique numbers.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Working collaboratively between ES-DC and the Department of Finance, we determined that that would be an appropriate amount, based on what workers were earning and what we anticipated they would need to live on, and what we anticipated they would be losing by way of employment income.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Your last question, Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Corey Tochor: I have a really quick question, which I've heard in my office, on charities and non-profits that do not have their own payroll number and are ineligible for the wage subsidy.

Does the Prime Minister have a program fix coming so that charities and non-profits can receive the wage subsidy?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, we understand the important role that charities and non-profits are playing to help vulnerable Canadians at this difficult time. We have announced supports in the amount of \$350 million to ensure that not only do they continue that great work, but also expand it to serve the most vulnerable to get through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Okay. We will move to the next questioner, Mr. Aboultaif from Edmonton Manning.

Mr. Aboultaif, go ahead with your question.

• (1320)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, last week markets were shocked when leaks regarding the state of our economy came to light before the market even opened. This caused worry to investors at home and abroad about the integrity of our markets and the nature of the leak, which is, in itself, unprecedented.

Section 34 of the Statistics Act indicates the following:

Every person who, after taking the oath set out in subsection 6(1), is guilty of an offence and liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding five thousand dollars or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or both:

(a) wilfully discloses or divulges directly or indirectly to any person not entitled under this Act to receive the same any information obtained by him in the course of his employment that might exert an influence on or affect the market value of any stocks, bonds or other security or any product or article, or

(b) uses any information described in paragraph (a) for the purpose of speculating in any stocks, bonds or other security or any product or article

My question for the minister is this: Does the government consider this case to be subject to paragraph 34(a) or 34(b) and a criminal offence, yes or no?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The honourable minister.

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry): Mr. Chair, my hon. colleague is absolutely right that the current situation with regard to the COVID crisis is deeply problematic, and we want to make sure that any information we share with the Canadian public with regard to economic measures or labour market numbers follows the appropriate process. The breach that occurred is completely unacceptable. Our government has denounced this breach. That breach was not the way to deal with such sensitive information.

The member has alluded to several paragraphs within the Statistics Act. I can assure him that we are looking into this matter and that Statistics Canada is looking into this issue as well. Going forward, we will ensure that such a breach does not occur again, because it's important that we continue to have the confidence of Canadians during this current health care crisis.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Okay, I will take that as a yes.

So this matter should be investigated, yes or no?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: As I have indicated very clearly, what has happened is completely unacceptable. This breach should not have occurred. This matter is being looked into, and we want to assure Canadians going forward that—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Back to Mr. Aboultaif.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: In that case, the minister said the matter will be looked into. Basically, my understanding of this case is that Statistics Canada is going to investigate itself, or does the minister think that the government should refer this to the RCMP?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Sorry, could you repeat that question? I had a bit of an issue and could not hear the question.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Will Statistics Canada investigate itself or will the government refer this to the RCMP?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, there are appropriate protocols in place to look into such breaches. Those protocols will be followed, and the appropriate actions will be taken to ensure that such breaches do not occur going forward.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Mr. Aboultaif, you have about a minute left. Go ahead.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: The minister indicated that this will be investigated, but during the investigation into the SNC-Lavalin scandal, the Liberal staff refused to co-operate. Will the minister commit today that all Liberal staff will co-operate with this investigation?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Again, we've been clear that it's important that any such breach be taken seriously. What has happened is unacceptable, and we will ensure that the appropriate steps are taken to make sure that such breaches do not occur going forward.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): You have time for one short question, Mr. Aboultaif. Go ahead.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: There's no doubt about the general terms, but I need to make sure that the government will commit that its staff will co-operate. Yes or no?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: The process is very clear. The protocols are very clear. The law is very clear, and we will make sure that the process is followed and the law is upheld.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We'll continue. The next question will go to Mr. Yurdiga.

• (1325)

Mr. David Yurdiga (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I start my questions, I would like to thank the various ministers, parliamentary secretaries and the Speaker of the House for reaching out to me during the severe flooding in Fort McMurray. Your support during these trying times is much appreciated.

The oil and gas industry is under severe strain. Over the past number of years, we have seen tremendous pressure on the federal government from anti-oil and gas lobby groups demanding that the oil sands be shut down.

The federal Liberal government's response to the anti-oil lobby was the introduction of the "no more pipelines" bill, Bill C-69, which will prevent any major oil and gas projects from being developed in Canada; and the oil shipping ban, Bill C-48, for the northern coast of British Columbia, which also had a negative effect on the oil industry. These two bills alone pushed over \$200 billion of investment out of Canada, causing the Alberta economy to retract to recession levels. To compound Alberta's economic problems, we have an international oil price war and the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a huge drop in demand for oil.

Mr. Chair, 48 days after the finance minister promised liquidity loans to oil producers and service companies, there are still no applications open for these loans. Can the honourable Minister of Natural Resources tell us when the Liberals will act on their promise?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Natural Resources): Mr. Chair, I'm happy that we were able to announce today some liquidity measures for large cap corporations in the oil and gas sector. These measures will provide them with the liquidity that they needed, and this is also the liquidity that they asked for. It was on April 17 that we started liquidity measures for small and medium-sized businesses in the oil and gas industry, and those are the ones in which 85% of workers are affected.

Today's measures will complete that. I'm very happy that we've had such people as the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers come out and say that this is what they asked for and this is what they need, and we have produced what they need in order to ensure the future competitiveness of Canada's oil and gas sector.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Mr. Chair, we have seen junior oil companies close their doors. The larger companies have sent contractors home and laid off employees. Many of these contractors are indigenous companies, and they are having a difficult time qualifying for programs to save their businesses.

Can the honourable Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations inform us of the measures the government is taking to ensure there are no gaps in the current programs, and commit to review the eligibility criteria for owners of aboriginal businesses struggling to qualify for financial help?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Chair, Canada's oil sector provides jobs for more than 576,000 people, including 11,000 indigenous people, in every part of Canada. It is essential that we support those businesses. It is essential that we support the many indigenous people who work in our oil and gas sector, particularly in Alberta and Saskatchewan. We have provided supports for those businesses, and we will continue to do so, also keeping in mind that in many of these communities the importance of public health and safety is foremost in our minds.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Mr. Chair, western Canada oil storage is under extreme pressure. If thermal projects such as SAGD are shut down, those facilities could be lost forever. If the global oil markets remain oversupplied into the summer and industry must shut down production, what is the government's plan to ensure Canada's energy security and the economic future of the oil sands with the potential shutdown of oil production?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Chair, we have worked with industry and with provinces on every front to ensure the stability of the oil and gas sector of our country. We have concentrated on workers. We need the workers in our oil and gas sector in order to lower emissions and achieve a greener economy. We need their determination and their ingenuity. We need to make sure that their jobs are held whole. Therefore, we are looking after workers and we are looking out for companies that hold onto those jobs for those workers.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Mr. Chair, the government's assistance package for the Canadian oil and gas industry provides some hope to the industry. The lack of detail and action has led to some chal-

lenges. Can the minister clarify? On a medium-sized energy company's eligibility, if the company is in default to financial institutions, does it still qualify for the business credit availability program?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Chair, we know that our oil and gas sector is suffering through two crises. We have the impacts of COVID and the effects of a global price war, and we have been tackling both of these on each front. On April 17, we announced liquidity measures to support the small and medium-sized players. That made up 85% of the jobs in this sector. We have announced liquidity will be further made available to larger players. As well, through the BCAP, we are making sure that more companies are eligible so that they can remain whole and so they can hold onto the jobs that we need.

● (1330)

The Chair: The next question will go to Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, colleagues. It's lovely to see all of you.

My first question is directed to the Prime Minister. It's a higher-level abstraction.

As we all know, we're being told we need a vaccine, and the quest for a vaccine is all-consuming globally. However, people who think about this issue and the question of the power structure and profit motive, particularly Dr. Matthew Herder of the Health Law Institute at Dalhousie University, are questioning this model.

We know that Jonas Salk never sought a patent on his polio vaccine. Can we ensure that public dollars for finding a vaccine will result in a product that is shared globally, openly, and is not for profit?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the member for her question.

Our approach has been very clear when it comes to science. We have an open science model, and we're working with different partners and different jurisdictions to help develop vaccines and look at countermeasures and other therapeutics. Our goal is to make sure that we do so in a collaborative fashion, because this is a global pandemic, but make no mistake: If it's Canadian ingenuity and Canadian IP that's driving it, we want to support them as well.

Ms. Elizabeth May: As a follow-up to the minister's comment, I note it was interesting to see the claim made by this public health institute at Dalhousie about the wonderful research that was being done in Winnipeg on an Ebola vaccine. Because of the for-profit motive and the interests that big pharma had in seeing their market before they developed the product, it is alleged that the Ebola vaccine was actually delayed by the for-profit model.

I wonder if we might consider examining this profit motive around the development of life-saving vaccines and other drugs. Is that a conversation the minister is having with others?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: I'd like to thank the member for her question.

I'm working very closely with Minister Hajdu and the chief science advisor to look at all options.

I'm glad the member highlighted the Ebola virus vaccine, which was developed here in Canada. I'm proud of the fact that the DNA sequencing for SARS was also done in Canada.

We have incredible scientists and researchers. We are engaging with them and empowering them, and we will continue to share details of this with the public.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Changing gears, we know that the new regulations limiting what are described as military-style assault rifles and guns have been very controversial. It's very clear to me as an opposition member why we haven't seen legislation on any fast track. It's obviously not the sort of legislation that would gain unanimous consent.

Wouldn't it be wise to table for first reading the entire legislative framework so that we know what we're talking about in the long term with regard to the buyback program and other aspects of this issue?

Hon. Bill Blair: I want to thank the member for the question.

I want to assure her that at the first opportunity, we will bring forward legislation dealing with a number of aspects of our commitment to strengthen gun control in Canada, including legislation to deal with a buyback program, which we've indicated we will put in place.

There are a number of other significant measures as well that we intend to bring forward to strengthen gun control legislation. We understand that it's a priority.

The pandemic does not diminish our responsibility to do what is necessary to keep Canadians safe, and we will bring that legislation forward at the first opportunity.

Ms. Elizabeth May: I confess that I was disappointed by this morning's announcement on support for seniors. I had been hoping for much more, because I hear from many seniors.

I'm going to focus my question for the minister on the issue of seniors homes. Some that are being run by not-for-profit societies are actually running very well, certainly in my community, but they are facing increased costs that could bankrupt them. As yet, there's no program to help a well-run seniors home that is not experiencing a loss of revenue and has lots of staff working hard. These homes

have increased costs for wages and increased costs for PPE and nowhere to look for help.

Is there help coming?

• (1335)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I offer my gratitude to the many people who are working in these long-term care facilities day and night to keep seniors safe.

The member certainly highlighted that there are not only additional expenses for some of the not-for-profit seniors homes, but also additional new measures that will increase all kinds of things, including costs.

We continue to work with the provinces and territories and support them through, for example, generous transfers of money to boost their health care systems in ways that they think are most appropriate. We continue to have conversations at the health ministers' table on how we can support them.

The Chair: I'm afraid we're out of time on that one.

The next question will go to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Chair, Canadians are appalled by the disgraceful treatment of seniors in care homes across this country. Old folks are being left in soiled clothing and are going without baths for weeks. They are packed four to a room in dangerously unhealthy conditions. The situation is so bad that the armed forces had to be called in to intervene.

To the Minister of Health, is her government prepared to take strong action to address this crisis in seniors health care?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, the member has illustrated some of the horror stories that have appalled us all as Canadians and certainly as parliamentarians. We know that seniors deserve to live in dignity and safety with the utmost care, and that just hasn't been happening in this time of COVID and certainly, in some cases, in previous times as well.

As the member knows, I've said publicly that I believe we need to hold long-term care homes to stronger standards. I have begun those preliminary conversations with my counterparts. I am working with many ministers across our government to think about how we do that, how we—

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

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chair, if we treated children the way we do seniors in this country, social services would seize them. Over 80% of the deaths in Canada from COVID-19 have occurred in long-term care homes. Canada has the highest proportion of deaths in long-term care home settings among 14 comparable countries, including France, Germany, Denmark and Ireland.

Canadians want action. What specifically is the minister going to do about the crisis in long-term care?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, the member opposite knows that long-term care homes have rested largely in the jurisdiction of provincial governments and, in fact, municipal governments, which often run them and fund them partially as well. That's why it's important that we have those conversations with our provincial and territorial partners, but the member can rest assured that it is on the top of my priority list to engage with my colleagues all across the country, including many experts who have studied this issue multiple times, to come up with stronger standards so all seniors have quality of life, safety and dignity in their elder years.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chair, Canadians don't want politicians pointing fingers at each other; they want our seniors taken care of. COVID-19 didn't cause the problems; it exposed them. Decades of neglect by governments at all levels have resulted in this calamity. Not a single province or territory in Canada is meeting the minimum standards of hands-on care for seniors, and death rates from COVID-19 in private, for-profit facilities are two to three times that of public or non-profit homes.

Will the minister agree with New Democrats that we need strong national standards, federal funding tied to enforcement and public delivery of care to effectively improve care for seniors?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, certainly the member of Parliament has made an assertion that there is finger pointing. I don't think that's the case at all. As a matter of fact, what I hear from my colleagues at the provincial and territorial level is the willingness to collaborate on how, first of all, we get through this crisis together and strengthen safety for seniors in homes right now and then how we look to the future to build a stronger network of long-term care or care alternatives that will ensure that seniors have the right and the ability to live with dignity and safety in their homes.

Mr. Don Davies: Mr. Chair, what I'm not hearing is a single concrete proposal or measure that this minister is suggesting her government can take, but let me move to another subject.

Like long-term care, COVID-19 has exposed other major gaps in our health care system. Millions of Canadians lost their prescription benefits when they lost their jobs, revealing the fundamental weakness of medical coverage tied to employment status.

Will this government finally move to ensure all Canadians get the medicine they need by bringing in universal pharmacare at the earliest opportunity?

• (1340)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, as you know, in the mandate that the Prime Minister gave to me, working on a national pharmacare plan is still there. I know it feels like a lifetime ago, but the member has very aptly illustrated why affordable medication is so important as part of a robust health care system. I look forward to continuing our work on ensuring that all Canadians can afford the medication they need.

[Translation]

The Chair: It is now over to Mr. Simard.

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A few weeks ago, the Prime Minister made a big announcement expressing his desire to launch an economic recovery plan that fast-tracks the transition to a green economy. Minister Guilbeault, Minister McKenna and Minister Wilkinson were appointed to a group tasked with doing just that.

Today, I worry that the group is nothing but an empty shell, a convenient post-crisis political pitch. On the natural resources front, the government's two main announcements primarily involve fossil fuels. We need only think of the \$1.7 billion being invested to clean up orphan wells.

Perhaps there is an environmental component, but I'm having trouble wrapping my head around yesterday's announcement by Export and Development Canada. It's going to lend TC Energy \$500 million to build its Coastal GasLink pipeline. That's \$500 million for a pipeline project that will eventually produce 8.6 million tonnes of greenhouse gases annually.

How does the government reconcile that with its desire to transition to a green economy?

The Chair: The honourable minister has the floor.

[English]

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (North Vancouver, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for the question. Certainly at this time, Canadians are most particularly focused on ensuring that support is provided so that they can put food on the table and pay their rent.

We are starting to focus on the relaxation measures in many provinces and territories in Canada. That is the primary focus of the government, as it is of Canadians. Certainly as we move forward, we need to be thinking about the kind of society and economy that we want to create for the future. In that context, we need to learn lessons coming out of this experience, and certainly we need to ensure that we are addressing challenges that are on the horizon, including the challenge of climate change. Those are conversations that will need to be had as we move beyond this phase of the crisis, but at the current time, the focus is clearly on combatting the virus.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Pauzé has a point of order.

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): There was absolutely no interpretation while the minister was speaking.

The Chair: Since so many are having issues with the interpretation, let's take a quick break while I try to fix the problem on my end.

I'm going to ask the minister to repeat his answer, and we'll see whether the interpretation comes through this time. If not, please let me know, Ms. Paupé and anyone else who doesn't hear it.

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson: Of course, the issues of the future are very important. That means not just climate change, but also other challenges that we saw during the coronavirus crisis, challenges we need to take into account. Now, I think Canadians want us to take the time to focus on what is currently going on.

We have put rules in place to protect Canadians. We really need to think about this. We need a plan. Of course, we need to think about the future, but I want Canadians—

• (1345)

The Chair: Mr. Simard has the floor.

Mr. Mario Simard: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to tell you that, of all industries, the one best positioned to make the energy transition is probably the forestry industry. Unfortunately, in Canada—a petro state—there always seem to be two sets of rules when it comes to helping key industries, including providing liquidity support.

Yesterday's announcement suggests that the \$500 million being provided by EDC is for a single project: Coastal GasLink. In 2017, under the softwood lumber action plan, EDC's entire budget for the forestry industry was exactly \$500 million. Now, EDC is shelling out \$500 million for just one project, Coastal GasLink, even though the whole of the forestry industry also received \$500 million when it needed EDC's support under a 2017 action plan to deal with tariffs.

The industry accounts for 58,000 jobs in Quebec and \$6 billion of Quebec's GDP. As I see it, there is a fundamental inequity.

My question is for the natural resources minister.

Does he think this situation is fair? Will he commit to providing the forestry industry with the same amount of liquidity being made available to the fossil fuel sector?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Mr. Chair, since 2017, our government has invested billions of dollars.

[*English*]

I'll answer the question in English.

[*Translation*]

Sorry.

[*English*]

We launched our softwood lumber action plan to support workers in communities. We introduced funding through the strategic innovation fund specifically for forestry. Building on our work today, we have included traditional investments to make sure this sector innovates, diversifies and grows.

Over these past two and a half months, I have spent an inordinate amount of time with CEOs, with heads of the forestry sectors from coast to coast. A few days ago, I convened a meeting of CEOs from all parts of this country, from Quebec to British Columbia, to talk to them about solutions, about answers.

The liquidity measures that were announced yesterday will help some of them. We will continue to work closely with industry to make sure we are there for them and that we stand by them through the COVID crisis, so we make sure that—

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

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm hearing from small business owners like Joel, who runs a fitness club here in Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, and is very concerned that their landlords refuse to participate in the rent assistance program. These businesses have seen revenue drops between 50% and 100% and are asking for just 25% off their rent.

When will the government help small businesses whose landlords refuse to be team players during this pandemic?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, first of all, we share the member's concern that small businesses be supported. That's why we've moved forward with a number of measures that are designed to be of assistance.

With respect to rent support, we are encouraging landlords to support this measure. Obviously, rent and landlord-tenant relations are under provincial jurisdiction. At every opportunity I talk to the provincial finance ministers to encourage them to get engaged there.

We will continue to support small businesses. We believe this program has significant merit. It allows for small businesses to significantly reduce their rent and for landlords to be protected with up to 75% of the rent. We think it is an excellent program. It will require the provinces to step forward and enforce it.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Mr. Chair, here in B.C., businesses are preparing for phased reopening. A number of my constituents, including Kathy, who owns a beauty salon, are concerned about meeting the PPE requirements.

What is the federal government doing to ensure businesses in my riding can get access to the PPE they need to keep their employees and customers safe when they reopen?

• (1350)

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, as a federal government, we are aggressively buying life-saving equipment and supplies. Our first priority is to provide PPE to our front-line health care workers. However, we are actively involved in trying to ascertain how the federal government can work with the provinces and territories to provide essential services and other businesses with PPE.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Mr. Chair, Craig and Matt are co-owners of Wanstalls, a firearms retail outlet in downtown Maple Ridge that employs eight people and serves thousands of law-abiding firearm owners in my riding, people who are now made to feel like criminals by the Liberal government. Further, they are now stuck with tens of thousands of dollars of inventory that they can no longer sell.

What are they supposed to do to keep open in this already tumultuous COVID environment?

Hon. Bill Blair: It's important to understand that none of the restrictions that we have put in place, the new prohibitions, in any way impact weapons that are used for the lawful purposes in Canada of hunting and sport shooting, so those weapons remain available to Canadians engaged in those lawful activities.

We have prohibited weapons that were not intended for the legal purposes of hunting and sport shooting and for which firearms are available to Canadians. What we prohibited were weapons designed for another purpose, an unacceptable purpose.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Mr. Chair, according to the CERB website, if a recipient earns over \$1,000 in a reporting period, their entire \$2,000 benefit must be repaid. I have constituents who are working part time and casually. They're worried that if they take an extra shift, they will lose their CERB, but if they refuse a shift, they will also lose their CERB. It's a classic Liberal catch-22.

A worker may unknowingly make over the \$1,000 by a couple of dollars. Does the government intend to make them repay all their CERB if they barely go over the threshold?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, that is why we're working with individual eligible CERB recipients to make sure they are not put in positions of undue hardship. At the beginning, the registration restricted it to basically not working, and then we relaxed the condition to earning up to \$1,000.

I can assure the member that we will work with individuals. Service Canada is reaching out to people so that nobody is in the difficult position he is talking about.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: There's a point of order.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There were some technical issues earlier during my fellow member Mario Simard's turn. Normally, each person gets five minutes. According to our calculations, he had about 45 seconds left.

This is a serious point of order. We shouldn't get the short end of the stick because we speak French in the House.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: All right. We'll check what happened, but I had stopped the clock.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I assure you he lost some time.

The Chair: The minister had to repeat his answer. We'll check and make sure it doesn't happen again. The good thing is that this is

all being filmed, so we can watch the video back to see what happened.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, because the ministers chose to answer in French owing to a technical issue, their answers were unduly drawn out, which cost my fellow member speaking time. I think he should be given a chance to ask one last question, to be fair. Otherwise, French speakers are going to be at a major disadvantage.

The Chair: As I said, I'll check what happened and we'll have a solution for next time.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We have another point of order.

Mr. Guilbeault now has the floor.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I hope the member isn't suggesting that, because some members of the House are making an effort to speak French, they are unduly dragging out the time, as he seems to have said. Good for them, I say, for trying to speak a language they aren't necessarily comfortable in for the benefit of other members.

The Chair: I think a debate is brewing, but I'm sure that's not what people want, so I don't want an argument to break out over the fact that different languages are being spoken.

We'll look into what happened and fix the problem so it doesn't happen again.

• (1355)

We will go back to Mr. Dalton. You have about 30 seconds for a question.

Thank you.

Mr. Chair, many farmers in my riding and elsewhere are afraid they won't have enough workers this summer and fall.

What is the government going to do to make sure those receiving the CERB and CESB have the right information and know about the job opportunities in the agri-food sector in our communities?

The Chair: The honourable minister has 15 seconds to answer.

[*English*]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Mr. Chair, I can assure the member that while we are supporting Canadians through both the CERB and the CESB, we are creating tens of thousands of jobs, including in the agriculture sector, to make sure there is labour available in this important and essential sector.

The Chair: Those are all the questions we will have for today.

I want to thank everyone. When I first got elected as Speaker, one of the things I mentioned was that you would want everyone who was watching, including your families and your friends, to be proud of you. I can honestly say that they would all be very proud of what we went through today. I am very proud of today's session.

I want to thank everyone for wearing the headsets. I didn't see anybody answer without one, and it is very much appreciated, not only by our fellow members but also by the people who are translating into the other language that you are not speaking.

Thank you all again.

[*Translation*]

Have a good day everyone.

[*English*]

The committee stands adjourned until tomorrow at noon.

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