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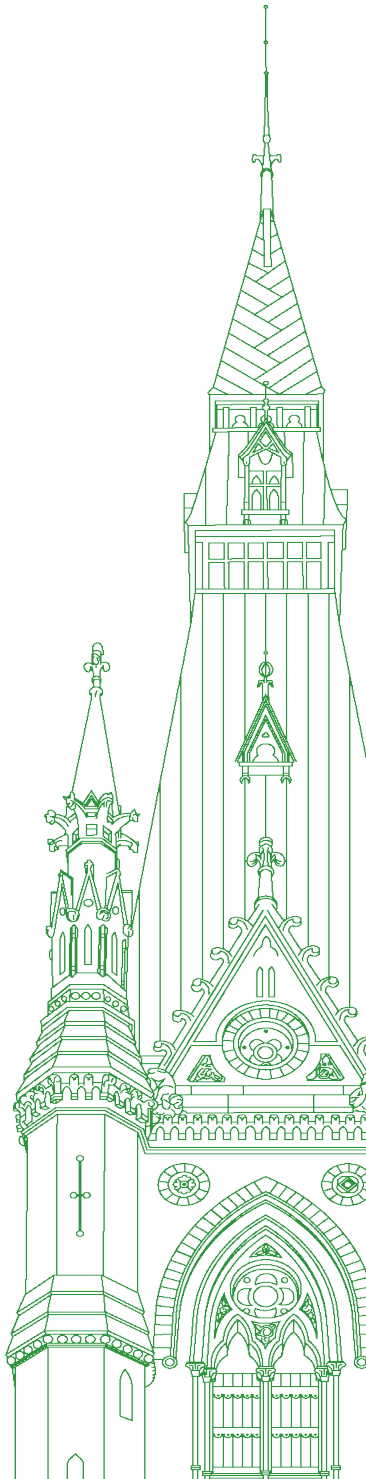

Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Tuesday, June 9, 2020

● (1710)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I have the honour of calling this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 15 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I would like to start by acknowledging that I am joining you today from the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonton nations.

Pursuant to the order of reference of April 20, 2020, the committee is meeting for the purpose of receiving evidence concerning matters related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. During this meeting the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline a few rules to follow.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much as it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French. In order to resolve the sound issues raised in recent virtual committee meetings and to ensure clear audio transmission, we ask that when you are speaking, you set your interpretation language as follows. If speaking in English, please ensure that you are on the English channel. If speaking in French, please ensure that you are on the French channel. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will also need to switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may want to allow for a short pause when switching languages.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can either click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, or you can hold down the space bar while you are speaking, and when you release the bar the mike will mute itself, just like a walkie-talkie. I will remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Should you need to request the floor outside of your designated time for questions, you should activate your mike and state that you have a point of order. If you wish to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, you should use the "raise hand" function. This will signal to the chair your interest in speaking. In order to do so, you should click on "participants" at the bottom of the screen. When the list pops up, you will see next to your name that you can click "raise hand".

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your mike should be muted.

The use of headphones is strongly encouraged. If you have earbuds with a microphone, please hold the microphone near your mouth when you're speaking to boost the sound quality for our interpreters.

Should any technical challenges arise, for example in relation to interpretation or if you accidentally are disconnected, please advise the chair or the clerk immediately, and the technical team will work to resolve the issue. Please note that we may need to suspend during these times as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

Before we get started, can everyone click on their screen in the top right-hand corner and ensure they are on gallery view? With this view, you should be able to see all the participants in a grid view so that all video participants can see each other.

During this meeting we'll follow the same rules that usually apply to opening statements and the rounds for questioning of witnesses during our regular meetings. Each witness will have up to five minutes for an opening statement, followed by the usual rounds of questions from members.

Now let me introduce our witnesses. Representing their views as individuals we have Éric Cardinal and Ellen Gabriel; from the Kativik Ilisarniliriniq, we have Robert Watt, president; and from Sheridan College, we have Elijah Williams, director of indigenous engagement for the Centre for Indigenous Learning and Support.

Mr. Cardinal, you have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Éric Cardinal (As an Individual): Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee, which is doing very important work.

When I look at how the handling of the COVID-19 crisis is being experienced in Indigenous communities, one thing stands out for me: the marked difference between the measures adopted or desired by Indigenous leaders and those adopted by non-Indigenous communities.

The divide is especially prominent in the regions, where we have seen Indigenous communities adopt much more stringent measures more quickly than their non-Indigenous neighbours. For example, most First Nations in Quebec locked down their communities rapidly to prevent the virus from getting in. We have also seen First Nations keep certain services and activities closed, while the province has reopened them.

Why is there such a difference? I submit two possible answers. The first is related to health reasons. As you know, Indigenous peoples are at a higher risk than others of contracting COVID-19, particularly because of their specific health, social and economic circumstances. Obesity, diabetes and a history of disease...

[*English*]

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): I'm so sorry to interrupt.

The sound of the interpretation seems to be cutting in and out. It's hard to follow. The sound of the interpreter's voice is cutting in and out.

Sorry to bother everybody.

● (1715)

The Chair: No problem.

Madam Clerk, are we aware of any other issues? Is this a singular problem with Ms. Zann, or are there other issues?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Evelyn Lukyniuk): I'll check that out right away.

The Chair: We'll suspend just briefly.

● (1715)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1715)

The Chair: Mr. Cardinal, you have four more minutes, so please continue.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Éric Cardinal: As I was saying, there is a major difference between what Indigenous communities are doing and what non-Indigenous communities are doing. There is the issue of health, of course. In addition, the number of people per dwelling in Indigenous communities is much higher than in non-Indigenous communities, which makes it difficult to observe physical distancing measures.

We must also remember that First Nations were particularly scarred by past epidemics, which resulted in cultural and psychological trauma that still exists to this day.

The main point in my presentation today is the separate management of Indigenous communities, which is founded on the right to self-government. The recognition of this concept is being questioned during this pandemic. I have observed that the crisis has made it very clear how difficult it is for governments to recognize the status of entities, otherwise known as band councils, as governments. To illustrate this, I will cite three examples of First Nations in Quebec.

The first example involves the situation that has garnered the most media attention in recent weeks, namely the reopening of Oka Park. The park is the Quebec government's responsibility, but it is located on the unceded territory of the Mohawk Nation. It was declared open without consulting the Mohawk Council of Kanesatake authorities.

The Mohawks decided to keep the park closed by setting up an impromptu road block. It was on the fête des Patriotes holiday, around mid-May. A conflict ensued between the Mohawk Council and the provincial government, forcing the federal government to step in.

This example clearly shows that government authorities do not have the reflex to consult First Nations leaders when they make decisions that affect so-called unceded territories, which, by the way, also includes a great deal of Quebec land. We see no consultation even when the land is in the middle of a territorial negotiation process, as is the case for the Mohawks of Kanesatake, in the Oka region.

The other two examples received less media attention, despite the efforts of Indigenous authorities to attract it. They illustrate the extent to which government services are still caught in the colonial stranglehold of the Indian Act.

Like many other First Nations, Long Point in Abitibi locked down its community and attempted to impose strict travel restrictions on its members. Because Long Point has no police force, it called upon the provincial police force, the Sûreté du Québec. Though it is regularly patrolled by police officers, they say they do not have the authority to enforce the First Nations measures. Why? Because the community in the village of Winneway is not officially a reserve under the Indian Act.

Even though it has been recognized since at least 1996, when the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was released, that self-government is an inherent Indigenous right protected under section 35 of the Constitution Act of 1982, and even though the federal government recognizes councils as First Nations governments in theory, we are still far from that recognition in practice.

The third example concerns a nation located in the Gaspé Peninsula.

● (1720)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Cardinal. We're well past the time. Please hold on to those points. I'm sure they'll come up again so that you can complete them later on in our panel.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Éric Cardinal: Okay.

[*English*]

The Chair: Right now—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Éric Cardinal: I am going to skip a part.

My third example concerns La Nation Micmac de Gespeg, which is not a reserve either. Because of that, the community does not receive emergency government support, which is available to all other First Nations.

Before the COVID-19 crisis and the railway crisis—let us call it that— that immediately preceded it, the Quebec and Canadian governments were engaged in a reconciliation process. We cannot let these crises cause a backslide in Canada-First Nations relations.

In short, the reopening—

[*English*]

The Chair: Sir, we understand.

That's fine. I don't want to lose any of the testimony you wish to present, but to keep the meeting organized, we go by our time limits on speakers and questions. If we don't hear your further testimony that you wish to give now, I'm sure it can be sent to us by letter so that we don't miss anything.

Now I'd like to call on Mr. Robert Watt, the president of the Kativik Ilisarniliriniq. You have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Robert Watt (President, Kativik Ilisarniliriniq): [*Witness spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᐋᐃ, ᐅᓐᓄᓴᒃᑯᑦ. ᓇᑯᕐᕆᒃ ᐱᕕᖅᑎᑕᐅᒪᒪ. ᐊᑎᒐ ᕚᐳᑦ ᒍᐊᑦ. ᐊᖓᔪᖅᑳᖑᔪᖓ ᑲᑎᕕᒃ ᐃᓕᓴᕐᓂᓕᕆᓂᕐᒥ. ᐃᓕᓐᓂᐊᓂᓕᕆᓂᖅ ᓄᓇᕕᒃᒥ.

[*Inuktitut text translated as follows:*]

Aai, good afternoon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. My name is Robert Watt. I am the president of Kativik Ilisarniliriniq, a school board of Nunavik.

[*English*]

First, I would like to thank you for inviting me. I'm glad to have the opportunity to inform you about how the Nunavik education sector has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As you are aware, the school year ended March 23 in Nunavik. Now we are planning to reopen school in August. This work is aligned with the health and safety measures announced for Nunavik as our communities reopen slowly.

These unprecedented times have highlighted key needs in education, and I would like to focus on six recommendations that are essential for education in Nunavik. I have filed a briefing document with the committee, where you will find comprehensive backgrounds on each of these recommendations. I encourage you to read it.

Regarding telecommunication infrastructure, without access to broadband/high-speed Internet, there is no real prospect for distance education and online education platforms to develop as a serious service offering in the youth, adult and post-secondary sectors in Nunavik.

With regard to access to technology, in Nunavik the cost of living is particularly high and the 2018 median income of Inuit families was $25,627, compared with $61,400 for the rest of Canada. Families and students must be provided the financial means to acquire technologies. This is essential to ensure the educational success of Inuit students as learning is likely to increasingly shift towards online platforms and tools.

With regard to testing, as we proceed with the reopening of our schools and adult education centres, and to foster trust in our transportation networks and institutions, it will be important for the Nunavik organizations and air carriers servicing our communities to have access to COVID-19 testing, with reduced delays for obtaining results. With the backdrop of a high tuberculosis rate and a recent history of devastating epidemics, this is key to addressing the fear that many Nunavimmiut feel about the prospect of reopening our communities.

With regard to water and sewer services, access to these services remains an ongoing issue in Nunavik. Lack of water or sewage service is a recurring cause of school closure in most of our communities. In the context of COVID-19, where the main health measure is to wash hands frequently, we need to see infrastructure investments that will support and ensure sustainable maintenance of our water and sewer services beyond this pandemic.

With a continuously growing student population and a renewed interest in post-secondary studies at a distance, we need to see infrastructure investments that will support the Nunavik education system beyond the immediate measures announced in the context of this pandemic. These include the construction, renovation and expansion of school and adult education centres, housing for employees, student residences in the adult sector; and study space for post-secondary students.

Last but not least is on-the-land education and Inuktitut language protection. The educational resources, digital content, online platforms and curriculum developed by the school board are available in Inukititut, English and French. We need to recognize that guaranteeing consistent access to content in Inuktitut that has been developed from an Inuit perspective requires additional time, specific expertise, and can only happen with access to adequate funding.

On-the-land education programs and activities offer unique educational opportunities that connect youth to their language, identity and communities. They play a critical role in strengthening the Inuktitut language, and require adequate funding.

At the school board, on-the-land education and educational excursions have benefited from the support of new paths for education, a program formerly administered under Indigenous and Northern Affairs. Discussions on the transfer of funding available through this program to the Province of Quebec are recurrently occurring. This means that the federal funding the school board currently relies on for on-the-land education would be distributed through the Quebec ministry of education. We would like to stress the utmost importance of ensuring a seamless transition of this program, as a gap in access to funding could jeopardize some of the culturally relevant activities offered by our schools.

● (1725)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, sir. Unfortunately, some of your presentation was not captured because of the Internet connection.

We have the six points you made. Hopefully along the way we'll be able to solve the Internet connections.

Hopefully, Ms. Gabriel, if you're all ready to go, we'll see how your five minutes of testimony works out technically. Please go ahead.

Mr. Powlowski, do you have your hand up?

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Yes, I have a point of order. So far in this committee, we are yet to see this. It's fantastic. I think we're getting translation from Inuktitut into English.

Is that not remarkable? Is this always available?

The Chair: Madam Clerk.

The Clerk: The witness was speaking English, but we do offer third language interpretation with advance notice.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: They were totally not lined up, so I figured we were getting a translation because the speaking voice was going at a totally different speed. Sorry about that.

The Chair: Okay. That was because of the connection, which is slow.

Ms. Gabriel, can you go ahead now for five minutes?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel (As an Individual): *Wa'tkwanonwerà:ton* to all of the parliamentary committee members.

Like many people around the world, when the pandemic began we felt like we were walking through a dystopian world in a blindfold. There was no leadership in the community for at least a month. We were vulnerable to outside community members coming in to buy marijuana or cigarettes and it took awhile for the emergency response unit to actually declare a pandemic on March 23.

My apologies to the translators. I realize I have five minutes and not enough time.

The fact that businesses in Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnwake have been vilified and ostracized by colonial entities made it more problematic, and we felt even more vulnerable at the start of this pandemic. As you may know, we live in a community that has been fighting for three centuries for our rights to our homelands and being ignored, and when you have no rights in a pandemic this does not improve the situation of fear, uncertainty and more land dispossession.

This problematic perspective of course is rooted in institutionalized and societal racism that devalues indigenous peoples' lives that have been subjugated by colonization and its impacts.

As Prime Minister Trudeau declared an epidemic, indigenous peoples were still in the throes of the Wet'suwet'en anti-pipeline protests for indigenous rights, and the pandemic suppressed this movement. While we understand why—because of the health precautions—the construction workers and police remained occupying Wet'suwet'en lands, and they continued in spite of an MOU with the traditional hereditary chiefs.

In Kanehsatà:ke we were trying to deal with economics before rights. We have an elder's home that was shut down when the pandemic was declared, so we have no cases there. I should clarify that the community I come from, Kanehsatà:ke, was also where the the Oka crisis occurred. I heard one of the previous speakers mention Oka Park. That's where I'm coming from.

There was a meeting of mostly local Mohawk merchants. Because we were told to stay home because of COVID-19, nobody knew about this in spite of people like Theresa Tam telling everybody to stay home. In spite of my hesitancy, I do agree with the checkpoints that were put up. There is a preconceived notion—and we are a community villainized by the media and the government—and fallacy that we are lawless, and so public attitudes seemed to dictate that no laws applied to our community even during a pandemic. We have youth who are on spring break coming to our community as if it were their playground.

The pandemic has caused us to be more vulnerable inside our checkpoints. Many human rights abuses were committed and people at the checkpoints were harassed even by the SQ, by a doctor, and by the mayor of Oka. These are outlined in my written submission.

As indigenous people we are shut out in silence by the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, Carolyn Bennett. She silences the voices of the traditional government. This is too big an issue to discuss at this parliamentary committee, but on a daily basis we feel vulnerable, especially when land dispossession is continuing because construction has been allowed while everybody has been told to stay home and self-isolate.

We do not have a voice and I think it's safe to say that we suffer from chronic fatigue of institutionalized racism. As indigenous peoples we have been made to feel, throughout our lives, as if we are dispensable by a settler society that has not come to the realization that our rights are human rights. We are peoples with a right to self-determination, but Canada still exerts colonial oppression, stalling any progress that could be made if it upheld the various international human rights norms it is signatory to. Instead, we are placated with engagement sessions that benefit the colonizers' dispossession of our inherent rights.

This year, July 1, 2020, marks the 30th anniversary of the siege of Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnwake, which you know as the Oka crisis. It is a time of awakening of a three centuries' long dispute by the Kanien'kehá:ka of Kanehsatà:ke. The Rotinonhseshá:ka people have been excluded.

As we witness the outrage in the U.S. and internationally of black lives matter and the murder of George Floyd, we see once again the heavy toll that institutionalized racism has taken.

● (1730)

Canada has had plenty of opportunities to make the sorely needed changes. Now it's time for reconciliation and reparations, pandemic or not. Economic self-interest has been the root of colonialization, free-market capitalists and the global economy.

As the first peoples of Turtle Island, we are never given respect for our rights on a daily basis, and more so in a pandemic. The protests and blockades will continue. The teachings of our ancestors tell us that there can be no peace in an atmosphere of fear; there can be no justice when we fight every day for respect for our fundamental human rights.

Thank you very much for listening to me.

● (1735)

The Chair: Thank you.

I know that our time seems limited, but over the next hour and several minutes I'm sure you'll be able to expand on some of your points.

We will move now to our final speaker, Mr. Elijah M. Williams, the director of indigenous engagement at the Centre for Indigenous Learning and Support, Sheridan College.

Mr. Williams, you have five minutes.

Mr. Elijah Williams (Director, Indigenous Engagement, Centre for Indigenous Learning and Support, Sheridan College): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Witnesses and honourable members, I am honoured to be here with you virtually. I am speaking from Oakville, which is in the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Wendat peoples, and my own people, the Haudenosaunee. I'll be speaking about the snapshot I heard from indigenous learners facing COVID-19 in post-secondary institutions.

COVID-19 has brought out many unprecedented challenges that nobody expected. Post-secondary education was no exception to the pandemic. Students and many of our indigenous learners have had to adjust to a new way of learning, through a virtual experience. In my work as director of indigenous engagement, I have heard from many students regarding this change. Many have had a hard time adjusting. There are students who have no access to proper Internet services on reserve, and in some cases have to drive to a nearby town or Tim Hortons parking lot to access Wi-Fi to conduct their studies.

School is already stressful as it is, but COVID has added a new layer of stress. Students no longer have access to spaces on campus where they would normally conduct their studies and no longer have access to indigenous centres for cultural support.

We have heard a lot that technology is an issue for students as well. A lot of people don't have access to computers or don't have their own computers, so access to campuses is a huge priority. At Sheridan, we have a laptop loan program for students in critical need. It is easy for those who live outside of a reserve community or rural area to immediately switch to remote working and learning, but for many of our students this is not the case. Many are out of work, and many cannot access the important support services that they require without going somewhere in person.

The post-secondary student support program is the main program that administers band funding, and each band has a different way of interpreting the national policy on it. We heard that many students had a difficult time receiving support from their band, as many were living far away from their community. Some students are even required to have an attendance sheet, because of the administrative burden the program places on students and staff.

I also want to bring up the follow-up paperwork that needs to be submitted. Despite COVID-19 and despite that everyone has had to adjust to a new way of working and learning, the deadline to submit follow-up paper submissions has not changed. In fact, instead, it has kept with the status quo. I know that in my own community of Six Nations of the Grand River, a lot of people still have to follow the same deadlines, so if they didn't have the Internet or a computer to apply online for the May 1 deadline, they were not eligible.

When I bring this up, I really hope that people understand that this program needs to be nimble. The information regarding supports for indigenous learners is not clear and there are no updates or guidelines for students who are being funded through their bands. In my belief, stronger communication between governments, organizations and post-secondary institutions will ensure that students are being supported as best they can be, because we at the school have direct contact with many of our learners. The funding formulas for this program should be examined, as many students are applying to post-secondary institutions. As the country reopens, many will also need to re-skill and potentially go back to school.

I heard from two students from different communities in northern Ontario. They were not allowed to go back to their communities because of access restrictions. They had to remain living off reserve because of that. In my view, it appears that indigenous learners are in the grey area when it comes to post-secondary education, as it's mainly a provincial responsibility. However, I know that the federal government has a duty to first nations, Inuit and Métis in this regard as well.

Before I finish, I want to share some exciting news with all of you. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, 51 indigenous learners graduated from Sheridan this term. I'm very proud of all of those students.

Niá:wen.

● (1740)

The Chair: Thank you very much

What a good note on which to conclude your presentation, although there is more to come, because now we go to rounds of questions.

Our first round is for six minutes each. I have on my list that the speakers will be Mr. Viersen, Ms. Damoff, Ms. Bérubé and Ms. Gazan.

Arnold, you're up for six minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I want to go to Mr. Cardinal first. He was cut off early in his comments on something about the Gaspé. I wonder if he could outline that particular scenario and finish his comments.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Éric Cardinal: Thank you, that is very kind of you, Mr. Viersen.

My third example concerns a nation located in the Gaspé Peninsula. It is the La Nation Micmac de Gespeg, whose members do not live on a reserve, much like the members of the Long Point Nation. Members live primarily on the unceded traditional territory in the Gaspé region. Even though the nation has no community to manage, its council still has responsibilities toward members, just like other First Nations governments. The La Nation Micmac de Gespeg applied for assistance from the Indigenous Community Support Fund. It did not ask for much, only $150,000. The government replied that La Nation Gespeg was not entitled to support since it is not a reserve.

However, since the crisis began, the council has been fulfilling its governmental responsibilities toward its members. La Nation Gespeg is asking for support to cover the additional costs associated with managing the COVID-19 crisis. It is being told that it cannot be granted any funds because it does not meet the criteria dictated by a colonialist view of First Nations crisis management. That is a far cry from the nation-to-nation and government-to-government relationship that the Canadian government says it wants to have. This was the third example I wanted to give to show how difficult it is to recognize First Nations governments while managing the COVID-19 crisis.

[*English*]

Mr. Arnold Viersen:

Thank you, Mr. Cardinal.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to move a notice of motion right now. I was going to do that right at the beginning of my comments, but I'll do that right now. The motion reads as follows:

> That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a comprehensive study of the Indian Act, an outdated colonial statute, and the Act's contribution to systemic racism, women's inequality, violence, injustice and poverty experienced by First Nations and that the scope of the study include but not be limited to discussing the abolition of the Indian Act and the fiduciary obligations of the Federal Crown to improve the living conditions of First Nations; that the witness list include Ministers and department officials, band councils, band members, individuals, and community groups; that the committee report its findings and recommendations of concrete steps the government can take to the House; and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the Government table a comprehensive response to the report.

The Chair: That is your notice of motion.

You have about three minutes left in your questioning.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to turn to Ms. Gabriel.

In her comments, she talked about how it seemed difficult to enforce lockdown measures around her community. That's totally different from the experience up in northern Alberta. In northern Alberta, typically most communities have maybe two or three routes in, and most of them were barricaded by folks who were monitoring the entrances and exits to the first nation communities.

Was that attempted in your community, or is that totally not feasible, given the location of your community?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: After three centuries of chipping away at our community, it's a checkerboard. The federal government tried to address this after 1990, and because of that there are certain areas where Québécois are living amongst us. There are Mohawks living in what's known as Oka, which is also Kanehsatà:ke.

When the checkpoints went up to protect the community from, as I said, this free flow of people who didn't want to stay home and who were coming into our community, there was support at first from the mayor of Oka. That quickly changed to, "Well, we have to open up the economy."

This whole mindless economy first, that the economy comes before human rights, and before safety and well-being.... There were threats, as I mentioned. It was problematic.

Many of us feel very vulnerable in our community on a daily basis. This has sort of enhanced it because when something happens, we're hesitant to call the Sûreté du Québec because they're racist. Perhaps not all of them, but they're racist. Then, on top of that, we live in a separatist province that has these preconceived notions that we are public enemy number one and that whatever kind of violence is set upon us we must deserve. So these people come in with impunity, whether it's the SQ officer spitting on a person at the checkpoint or a doctor coming in and hitting one of the people at the checkpoint. This is being reported to whom else but the SQ. Who else do we have to report it to?

It's very difficult to maintain security at checkpoints when the people at the checkpoints are not even allowed to ask for ID to determine whether or not someone is an actual resident and can pass through the community. It's neglect. It's a community being vilified and we have racism surrounding us on a daily basis. On top of that we have all of the problems rooted in colonialism that have been happening since forever—three centuries—but that have been really made worse in the past 30 years since the siege.

● (1745)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gabriel. We're well over the time.

We'll go now for six minutes to Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I'm coming to you as well from Oakville in the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. I want to thank all of the witnesses today for their testimony. I'm going to direct my questions to Elijah because I do want to talk about some of the things he mentioned about post-secondary education.

First of all, congratulations to the Sheridan grads. That's incredibly exciting and please pass on my congratulations. Elijah, you were talking about the support for your indigenous learners at Sheridan. Some of that is the regular funding that they get. I'm wondering if you're aware of any of your students being able to access funding through that $75.2 million. If they were not, what were the barriers to their accessing that funding?

Mr. Elijah Williams: I'm not aware of any right now because when that funding was announced, many of our students were already pretty much done. When that happened a lot of our students were trying to get home. Some students could not get home, as I mentioned, so they're still living here in Oakville.

We did encourage a lot of our students to apply for the funding for post-secondary support. I think that clarity isn't really there because when I spoke to some of them, they didn't know that their band was supposed to be receiving money to support them while they're in school. I see it as sort of like a broken telephone when these announcements are made.

We're also expecting students who are probably 18, 19, 20, and maybe 17 in some cases. If they don't really know it's out there for them, then how are they supposed to find it? I think communication is really key to that. Simplifying the language is key, because if we're speaking this big government bureaucratic talk, nobody is really going to relate to it and they won't understand what it's actually saying to them.

I think there's also mistrust. I know in some cases some people don't trust the government, unfortunately, so they're not going to access support that way either. However, they would really trust the indigenous centre. If we had more information faster we could say, "Here is what is out there for you and you should really consider applying for that." I think that's where the regional offices come into play. I think there needs to be a stronger connection with regional offices and post-secondary institutions.

● (1750)

Ms. Pam Damoff: You brought up connectivity, and when we spoke, Elijah, you were talking about the fact that the Six Nations of the Grand River don't have reliable Internet. So you don't have to go to the north for that to be a problem.

Our colleague, Mumilaaq, is unable to join our meetings because of lack of Internet in Baker Lake, but you don't have to go that far for that to be the case. You just go outside Hamilton, Ontario, to Six Nations.

How critical is that connectivity for your students, especially as you are looking at September when you may still be having to give courses online. I don't know if Sheridan has made the final decision.

Mr. Elijah Williams: It is so critical. About 98% of the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve don't have access to proper Internet. If you do, it's usually about three or five megabytes per second.

It's a shame that this reserve is not up north or not somewhere far off. It's close to the town of Caledonia, to Brantford, Simcoe County, London, Hamilton, and it doesn't have access to proper broadband Internet services. It's not impossible to bring it there, but there is a lack of infrastructure.

If we are still requiring people to go to school in the fall online—and most of our students will be online in the fall, though some programs won't—that's going to be a huge piece for students to access education supports.

The other hat I wear is that I'm on the board of directors for an employment agency. Over 50% of our staff can't work remotely because of where they live on the reserve. They can't access the portals for employment supports for our community.

Ms. Pam Damoff: One of the missing pieces in all of this that I have talked to my colleagues in the Liberal caucus about is youth voices. I'm wondering what your thoughts are on indigenous youth-led funding being provided and having some of those voices that you deal with as the director at Sheridan being shared with the committee to know what they're looking for in access to funding.

Mr. Elijah Williams: It is so critical because it opens up another lens they can see it through, as students in 2020, as indigenous learners possibly coming from a reserve, as learners in an urban setting, meaning they are going to bring a different lens to that table. Therefore, I'd say that their voice is really critical and needed.

In making sure the program is effective in what it's aiming to do, which is trying to provide educational outcomes for students, the program should reflect whom it serves, not the other way around.

Ms. Pam Damoff: You have students not just from the GTA, but from the far north, from all over Canada?

Mr. Elijah Williams: Yes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I think that is my time, Chair.

The Chair: It is. Very good, thank you.

Ms. Pam Damoff: You're welcome.

The Chair: Okay, I'm going to switch to French.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Bérubé, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses taking part in this meeting. I also thank the technicians and the interpreters, whose work is essential to the committee.

I am on the traditional territory of the Algonquin, the Anishinabe and the Cree of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou.

Mr. Cardinal, I am very happy you are here. Are you able to draw a parallel between the COVID-19 crisis and the railway crisis in recent months?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: That is a good question.

What we learned from the February railway crisis is how complex it is to reconcile the interests of economic development with the Indigenous rights of First Nations over their unceded traditional lands. We are seeing the same in the current crisis. As you know, a very large portion of Quebec is actually located on unceded traditional Indigenous territory, over which First Nations have rights, sometimes even ancestral title, which confers on them a right to the land itself.

Unlike the Wet'suwet'en people in British Columbia, most Indigenous nations in Quebec do not have traditional governments that can oppose the Quebec First Nations band councils, with a few exceptions. Elected chiefs and band councillors exercise both the powers of the band council, those conferred by the Indian Act, and so-called inherent powers, including that of self-government, recognized by Canadian law and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. First Nations councils are therefore governments with powers extending beyond community boundaries.

What we should take away from the railway crisis and the current COVID-19 crisis is that governments need to recognize First Nations governmental authority, not only on the reserve itself, but on a much larger territory, that of the unceded traditional land.

● (1755)

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you.

Mr. Cardinal, since you are also a communications expert, can you give us your opinion on the media coverage of the crisis, particularly as it relates to Indigenous people?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: To answer that question, I will go back to the example of the Oka Park situation.

When you look at the media coverage, you can see that the Mohawk council had a lot of trouble getting its message across and explaining that its position was founded on a responsibility to protect its members' health and public health. Many articles and news reports presented the situation as more of a holdover of the land disputes between Kanesatake and the municipality of Oka. Generally speaking, I see the same issues that I raised in my presentation to the Viens Commission, which dealt with the relationship between Indigenous people and certain public services in Quebec.

The most obvious observation, when looking at media coverage of Indigenous people, is the presence of bias in journalism. Personally, I think that biases come in three broad categories: those that can be categorized as ignorance; those that come from cultural differences; and finally, those that are more ideological in nature, which can include racism.

In addition to the biases in the media coverage, Indigenous leaders also have difficulty being heard in the media. We often perceive a kind of indifference towards them, which makes it hard to portray Indigenous issues properly in the media, even if it is in the public interest.

As you know, a few years ago, Richard Desjardins produced a film on First Nations entitled *The Invisible People* about the Anishinabe.

Indigenous people are invisible in the media and in the public sphere in general, and this is still a very real issue that poses a number of problems. The biggest problem, I feel, is the distorted image that people have of Indigenous people, an image that is strongly influenced precisely by what the media does or does not convey.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

[*English*]

The Chair: You have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: All right.

After COVID-19, the economic recovery is currently one of the government's priority issues.

Mr. Cardinal, in your opinion, is it also a priority for Indigenous communities?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: Absolutely. Economic recovery is certainly a priority for First Nations, but it raises many concerns. One concern is the fear that Indigenous interests are not being adequately addressed in government economic recovery plans.

This can be seen currently in Quebec's Bill 61. Just today, the chief of the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador, Ghislain Picard, appeared before the parliamentary committee in charge of reviewing the bill. He stressed that, despite the emergency situation, the government cannot avoid its responsibility to consult First Nations. He also raised the concern that is very worrisome to First Nations, namely the protection of the environment in general, natural resources and wildlife habitats.

At the same time, reopening and economic recovery must also be seen as economic opportunities for Indigenous businesses and communities. I feel it is important here to point out a very positive initiative by several national Indigenous organizations that decided to join forces to help the federal government better meet the economic development needs of Indigenous people. Together, they created the Indigenous business COVID-19 response task force, which aims to speak to the Government of Canada in a unified Indigenous voice in this time of crisis. I find this is good and important.

The team is currently putting together a comprehensive database of Indigenous businesses that can be used by federal departments looking for suppliers. It is also analyzing the impact of the crisis on Indigenous businesses and communities to ensure that the Government of Canada can provide adequate support measures, equivalent to those available to the rest of the Canadian economy. This is an unprecedented and very important collaborative effort that will facilitate better representation of Indigenous people in Canada's economic recovery plan.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you very much.

Mr. Éric Cardinal: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gazan, this is a six-minute round. Please go ahead.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all our guests for their excellent testimony so far.

Before I go to questions, I'd like to dispose of the motion I gave last week. I hope we don't waste too much time debating it.

I move the following:

> That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee invite the Minister of Indigenous Services and the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations to provide testimony regarding the Supplementary Estimates (A), 2020-21, no later than June 16, 2020.

● (1800)

The Chair: Seeing no comments, are we ready to vote? If we are, it will be a recorded vote by the clerk.

Ms. Damoff, you have your hand up.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Yes, Mr. Chair. I am just wondering if the member would also agree that Minister Vandal also appear at that meeting. There are actually three ministers responsible for indigenous and northern affairs in Canada.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, that's fine.

The Chair: It's a friendly amendment. Fine.

Go ahead with the call of the vote please, the division.

The Clerk: Thank you.

Before we proceed, I would like to inform the committee that the list of members eligible to vote includes the following: Jamie Schmale, Gary Vidal, Arnold Viersen, Bob Zimmer, Sylvie Bérubé, Leah Gazan, Jaime Battiste, Pam Damoff, Marcus Powlowski, Adam van Koeverden and Lenore Zann.

When your name is called, please allow for a two or three-second delay before answering. Your video should now be turned on. When you are recognized, please state clearly and verbally if you are in favour of or opposed to the vote.

I will now proceed to the taking of the recorded division on the motion.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gazan, let me give you three more minutes for your question.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ellen Gabriel.

You spoke a little bit about three centuries of fighting for your rights for your homeland, indicating that the pandemic has increased fear and uncertainty of more land dispossession. Can you explain this a little bit further?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: First of all, I want to say that I'm longhouse. I don't go vote in band council elections because they are an imposed system. I know that Mr. Cardinal works for the band council in Kanehsatà:ke.

As I mentioned before, our traditional governance was made illegal by a 1924 law within Canada. The land dispossession continues. There is a housing development in nearby Saint-Joseph-du-Lac. There is the unknown status of the so-called eco-gift by a developer, Mr. Gollin, who bought land, and uncertainty because we are excluded by the band council from knowledge of any kind of negotiations. It's the traditional governments that have the inherent rights and those who have survived colonization who have the rights.

I guess what I really want to say, with all due respect to Madame Bérubé, is that the questions she was asking should have been asked of an indigenous person. I respect Mr. Cardinal, and I think he answered very well. I just feel like sometimes I'm in an anthropology session, and I'm a third person looking in, and people are speaking about us.

I would appreciate it in the future that with anything that has to do with people living in the community, it be addressed to the people who are from that community, because land dispossession is continuing. Housing development continues. A new home was built on the border of the Pines.

We are far from resolving any of the land issues, and as I've mentioned previously, those checkpoints were not respected by the people in Oka. Our decision about Oka Provincial Park was not respected. This is something I think Grand Chief Serge did a good thing for, but we are so divided, and this is caused by governmental coercion to divide and conquer our community

It has to stop. There has to be some kind of resolution to this problem. Thirty years later we are marking another anniversary, and we are no further ahead in resolving these issues. With the pandemic, it is even worse.

● (1805)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We will go now to a five-minute round, beginning with Mr. Zimmer. Then we'll hear from Ms. Zann, Mr. Schmale and Mr. Battiste.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Hello, everybody.

I have a couple of questions for Mr. Watt and Mr. Williams.

As a former teacher, I too wrote a course about the transition to trades. I'm a former tradesmen as well. I'm really concerned about that aspect of education as one thing we can accomplish. There are certain courses online, but those tangible, hands-on courses I'm sure are going to be a challenge, if not now more in the future.

My questions are about PPE. The question is about courses that are happening now. I know that some of the programs have obviously stopped.

Did you have access to adequate PPE during the crisis?

If you could just answer that quickly, then I will have a follow-up question.

Mr. Williams.

Mr. Elijah Williams: At Sheridan, we completely shut down the school. All schools within a one-week span transitioned online. We had a transition of hundreds of programs online.

I think this is where the learning curve comes into play for some students because they went from in-person learning to learning online. We are doing an in-person pilot in the summer with a few students who have to do nursing programs. We are going to pilot that, and then we'll see how that's going to work out how we can do social distancing in the fall.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: We would appreciate hearing what you find out there. How successful it is or not is going to be interesting for us to know.

Mr. Watt, have you any comments about the PPE and access to it?

Mr. Robert Watt: PPE meaning—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: That is personal protective equipment—the masks, hand sanitizer and the like.

Mr. Robert Watt: Okay. I do know that within Nunavik here now we have airlines flying between communities, so they are providing masks.

As for our schools, this is something that's going to be under discussion. I know that we have approximately 370 adults who are attending our vocational training centre, so this is something we are working on right now.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Watt, just to follow up on that, are they attending right now, as we speak?

Mr. Robert Watt: Right now all vocational training courses have been put on hold, but we are providing access for them to be able to finish some of their courses online and even take an examination.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Where do we go from here?

I know the challenges. My file is economic development, so I'm asking from that perspective. Seeing that we definitely need to get our economies going again, education is a big part of that. As a former carpenter, I knew how important it was to have those students getting into the workforce.

I'm concerned about the PPE and the access to it and to testing, etc., to get us back to this new normal, because I have children who are in school.

It's a stopgap measure, but it certainly isn't where we want to be.

Where do you see education getting back to those normal sessions in class, with carpentry students doing carpentry work in those trade schools? How soon do you see our getting there, and do you see access to the appropriate PPE? Is that possible?

We'll start with Mr. Williams again.

● (1810)

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Elijah Williams: Yes, we can get there.

I think once we find out how the summer goes, in July when we have some students back, we'll understand more how the social distancing will work.

I think most of our programs will be online for the fall term. We're going to be preparing for the winter with a lot more classes being offered in person. It's going to be challenging, but I think we'll have to work out access to PPE and all of that with our local public health agency.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Watt.

Mr. Robert Watt: Recently we had our council of commissioners meeting, and we were advised that we are trying to reopen our schools. There are all different sizes of schools. Some are very small and some are much larger. We've been advised that it's going to take our bringing in transient employees in phases, so I think right now they're looking at different scenarios. We're not working single-handedly; we're working with the region here.

Kativik Regional Government has created these subcommittees to look at ways of reopening Nunavik. As much as we want to open and provide easy access to education and training, right now the mayors in the communities have a big say in this. We had our mayor on the radio this morning, informing the population that, rest assured, this is going to be a long journey, that it's going to take approximately two years to get back to “normal”.

The Chair: Let me leave it right there.

Thanks, Mr. Watt.

Ms. Zann, we have five minutes for you. Please go ahead.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you, *wela'lin*.

Hello to everybody from the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq here in northern Nova Scotia.

First of all I'd like to congratulate Mr. Elijah Williams on his students' graduation. That's wonderful to hear.

Many of our students from Truro go to Sheridan College to study musical theatre and things like that, so I am well acquainted with it. That's really great news.

One of the problems I have seen occurring in education over the years is that my parents were both teachers and when we moved to Nova Scotia from Australia, my mother said that the books she was supposed to teach history from were full of racist epithets.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Zann, there is no translation right now.

We're going to suspend briefly and allow the techs to see if they can fix it.

● (1810)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1815)

The Chair: Ms. Zann, you have four minutes left.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Let me just start right in there again.

Listen, I think one of the problems in Canada and probably in most of the world is that when it comes to education, the textbooks that have been used for many years have been racist. When my mother, father and I moved to Nova Scotia from Australia back in 1968, my mom was supposed to teach history and said to her class that she was going to show them where the history books belonged. Clunk, she threw them into the garbage cans at the front of the class and said, "I refuse to teach you because these are racist to the black community and to our first nations people. It's not true what they're teaching." My father taught at a teacher's college in Truro and there were no Mi'kmaq teachers in Nova Scotia. So he and Noel Knockwood and Bernie Francis, two incredible Mi'kmaq gentlemen from Nova Scotia, got together and put a program together called the Micmac teacher education program. This was in the early seventies and they trained Mi'kmaq students to become teachers and graduated 13 teachers. Now some government of the day eliminated that program afterwards. I think this is part of the problem: there are not enough indigenous people and first nation people in the system, and a lot of the history that Canadians have been learning is false.

I would say this has contributed to the racism in this country. I would just like to know what any of you might think about this and if you think this has contributed to racism, and what we can do to change things.

● (1820)

The Chair: You have a minute to answer that.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Who would like to answer?

Mr. Elijah Williams: I can speak on that. Certainly what I think the K-to-12 system has perpetuated is a lot of misinformation and stereotypes. From working in post-secondary education, I find that we're almost trying to re-educate people. A lot of this information should already be known about who indigenous people are, the relationship between indigenous people and the Crown, and the different assimilation policies that happen. What I find is that when they come to college or to university, nobody knows that. It's sort of like a first shock. The provinces have to be encouraged to do more in this regard, to do better in re-educating people and re-educating children and making sure that the curriculum is relevant to what's happening right now in 2020.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thanks, Ms. Zann.

We go now for five minutes to Mr. Schmale.

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

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for your testimony.

Maybe I'll start with Ms. Gabriel if I could. You were saying that you had some frustrations with the department, especially when it comes to communication with the minister. Do you want to expand on that?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: This has gone on for more than 100 years, but more recently we sent several letters. The traditional longhouse people, the Haudenosaunee people, have been excluded from many decision-making processes on land. It's not about the administration of services; it's about negotiations of land. Minister Bennett has refused to intervene on any development that's taking place on disputed land. She refuses to say that we have any kind of rights. She always defers to the band council. It's a colonial system that's been created to undermine the traditional governments that existed pre-European arrival. It makes no sense for the government to pick and choose which part of our inherent rights they, the colonizer, are going to allow us to enjoy, even though there are international human rights norms that talk about respect and the right to self-determination. It's a violation of the rule of law that we keep hearing, which is being thrown at us.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Just out of curiosity, I bring this up because there was an op-ed in the Vancouver Sun this morning regarding the governing structure of the Wet'suwet'en. I'm just curious because you mentioned the governance structure. How do you see, or what do you propose, or what are your thoughts on the governance structure?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: Well, there are differences.

We had proposed in 1990 that the band council could deal with the services. They are service providers, but when it has to do with how the land is being used, development or anything that has to do with the land, including Oka park, the traditional governments that have existed for centuries are the ones that the government speaks to. This is the true nation-to-nation relationship, rather than a band council that is created by Canada dealing with the government, because it's under Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. It's a department in itself, even though there is an election.

We were just asking for a meeting, and we have been denied over and over again, even from the Prime Minister, who said to go to speak to Carolyn Bennett, who said to go to speak to the band council.

In the meantime, third parties are taking our land. In the meantime, if we try to defend our lands, through protests or barricades, we are the criminals. As we've seen in Wet'suwet'en, it seems like the policing authorities are the ones who are working for the third parties. They are not there to defend indigenous people's safety and security. They're there to defend corporate interests. That's what we see all over indigenous territories.

● (1825)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay. Thank you very much for your comments. Unless you have anything else to add I will move to my next round of questioning.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: I think traditional governments have been recognized at the international level. I don't see why Canada is refusing and standing firm in the colonial structure that benefits only them.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Actually, before I move on, maybe I'll stay on this topic just a little longer.

My colleague, Mr. Viersen, read off a motion that we were looking to study.

Do you see the desire to move away from the Indian Act, if possible?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: If you're going to respect our self-determination, and if you're going to respect traditional forms of government and that traditional people be represented in any kind of discussion.... Because for us the women are the title holders to the land and the women are not being respected by someone who claims to be a feminist, like Minister Carolyn Bennett.

I would like to see something that moves in the way of relationship building, and then let's talk about nation-to-nation relationships.

Let's also put a hold on all development that's going on, because the economy can survive in a sustainable way without resource development or housing development.

The Chair: That's just about it, Jamie.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Okay. Maybe I'll pick up on that in my next round.

The Chair: Now we have Mr. Jaime Battiste for five minutes.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I am coming to you from the Mi'kmaq community of Eskasoni, which is on unceded land.

I've heard Mr. Williams and Ms. Gabriel talk about barriers that exist for indigenous people and about institutional racism.

I am reminded of my friend, the late Donald Marshall Jr., and his inquiry. His wrongful conviction highlighted racism within the justice system and made several recommendations about inclusion in education. I am wondering in what ways we can best decolonize education, take down barriers that exist for indigenous people in education, and at the same time, create awareness of our shared indigenous histories and contributions to Canada.

If you could each do two minutes, that would be very helpful.

Mr. Elijah Williams: There's a whole list of things that need to be done.

I think institutions are inherently colonial by nature. When we look at where education has come from, we see that it comes from the British and the Crown. When we look at education, we see that educational institutions have to make space for indigenous voices to be there. By making space, we really have to look at a re-examination of policy, not only internally to the school but externally through the ministry that oversees the education sector.

We have to look at how the intersection between communities and post-secondary institutions can be built better in terms of the relationship. I think what we've seen through post-secondary or higher learning is that there is an imposition of Eurocentric views on how people should learn or how people should view themselves, so we really have to re-examine how we conduct education. We really have to keep it a game-changing moment, so it's redefining what education can be for people, allowing for different modes of learning and allowing for communities to determine their own models of education. It's allowing different indigenous communities to say that they want this for their community as education, so it's not the universities or colleges dictating that.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you.

Ms. Gabriel.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: I think of language, culture and land, something combined that reflects indigenous peoples' identity and the ancestral teachings that talk about the land. As we're living in these uncertain times, with climate change being a very real issue whether you're living up north or down south, our lives have been impacted. We need to bring down the barriers that the provinces put up in not respecting our indigenous academics' ability to help us change the education system to decolonize it. A lot of walls have been put up by Quebec over the years, and I've experienced them. Our indigenous academics have a lot of things to share, as do our elders, and we don't need to have letters behind our names to be good teachers. We have elders who can teach the language and the teachings.

It's also about relationship sharing. If we're talking about battling racism, we can teach that to the youth. For everything we do in society, the youth, the elders and everybody in between need to work as one team. I don't think that works in education. I think we have a very isolated, very compartmentalized form of education. As our ancestors said in the 1960s and 1970s, we need indigenous control over indigenous education. I think that's what we need to start working on, with the full and effective participation of the provinces and the federal government.

● (1830)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Ms. Gabriel, I would like you to comment on what you feel UNDRIP would do for us if we were to implement it in Canada.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: The UN declaration is that framework of reconciliation, and not only for the settlers of our society but for us as well. We understand that this is what makes us *Onkwehon:we*; this is what makes us indigenous people. That land is part of this. It's the songs, the energy sharing, the respect that what we're doing today will impact people seven generations from now. Those are the things that we need to start considering. We should not let Eurocentric views further impact our education system.

The Chair: That brings us to the end of your time, Mr. Battiste. Thank you.

We'll now go to a two and a half minute round of questions. I have Ms. Michaud and Ms. Qaqqaq.

Please go ahead, Ms. Michaud, for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I would like to thank the witnesses.

My question is for Mr. Cardinal.

Mr. Cardinal, I would like to say a few words about the divide in the regions. You touched briefly on this subject earlier when you brought up the third example. You said that members not living on a reserve do not have access to federal support, and that this particularly affects them in times of crisis.

Could you tell us more about that?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: Everywhere, but especially in the regions, First Nations people live either in communities—on reserve, as they say—or outside of them. They receive services from either the provincial or federal government. So there is already some confusion, sometimes, as to who should provide services to members of certain First Nations. With the current crisis, members are looking to their government, which in most cases is the First Nations council. The council has to ensure the health and safety of its members, which creates competition of sorts between governments. Ultimately, it is a question of resources, especially financial resources.

The people of La Nation Micmac de Gespeg, as I mentioned, do not live on a reserve because they do not meet the criteria of the Indian Act and that means they do not receive the financial support that other First Nations receive. Therefore, the council cannot help its own members. These First Nations members are then referred to other forms of government support—provincial, municipal or federal. This is a major challenge right now, in my opinion.

Ms. Kristina Michaud: How can we rectify this problem? We talk about recognizing the council and that form of government. Of course, the crisis underscores this difficulty, but it was there long before the crisis.

What should the government do to help these people who are not sure where to turn at this point?

Mr. Éric Cardinal: To the question of recognition we must add the question of concrete resources.

It is a pervasive issue: because of the way government works, it is very difficult to recognize First Nations self-government. Not only do we have to look beyond the Indian Act, but we also have to go even further. It takes a truly political relationship between federal officials, governments, and First Nations representatives.

Your role as a committee is very important, and I thank you for the work that you do. It is useful right now.

● (1835)

Ms. Kristina Michaud: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Qaqqaq, you have two and and a half minutes. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq (Nunavut, NDP): *Matna*. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As always, thank you to all of the interpreters and the IT team. Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here and sharing your experiences and valuable knowledge.

My questions will be for Mr. Watt. I'm going to ask that you to stick to about a minute if you can, just because of my time crunch.

One of the real challenges we face in Nunavut when it comes to safely delivering education during the pandemic is the Internet connectivity in our communities. Can you discuss how your organization has been able to overcome these challenges? What further supports would you need if the pandemic extends into the fall?

Mr. Robert Watt: [*Witness spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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[*Inuktitut text translated as follows:*]

Aam, thank you for letting me speak right now.

[*English*]

We have not resolved anything when it comes to broadband Internet. High-speed is very slow. We definitely need support. We need to have the federal government—both governments—work on this because my connectivity here is already a challenge. I've been disconnected [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: It's disconnected now.

Perhaps, Ms. Qaqqaq, you could move to another questioner.

Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq: Yes, absolutely.

This question will be for Mr. Williams.

Can you talk about the impact around not having enough indigenous voices in the classroom, and what indigenous education could look like?

Mr. Elijah Williams: The impact of not having many indigenous students within the classroom is that, when they are in the classroom, they're usually the ones being called on to be almost the voice of all indigenous people. It creates an unreasonable burden on the student to speak truth to the discussion that's going on. When a student is educated within their own community, they're not faced with that same challenge. We have to do something about re-educating our staff in terms of the experience of indigenous people, but also about supporting communities in terms of allowing them to determine education for themselves as well, because we have the system developed. It's a matter of working together.

What we know from indigenous students in the classroom is that they usually experience more racism than anyone because of those questions. Sometimes they are stereotypical or outright racist, depending on the topic.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to a five-minute round now. I have Mr. Vidal, Mr. van Koeverden, Mr. Viersen and Mr. Powlowski.

Mr. Vidal, you have five minutes. Please start.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is going to be for Mr. Williams. Before COVID hit, I had the opportunity to have some ongoing discussions with some people at the University of Saskatchewan on their approach to indigenization on campus and how they're trying to build that presence within their own campus. I'm interested in hearing about the programs that your college was using before the pandemic began that were very successful in indigenous engagement. Maybe even refer to those 51 graduates you talked about. Congratulations for that.

What programs are engaging indigenous people very successfully?

Mr. Elijah Williams: We have our elder in residence program, which was successful in terms of bringing the culture to campus. Students will have access to an elder, and if they are far from their community, our elder reminds them of their own community. We do vigorous student engagement supports and personally call all students to check in on them at the start of term and end of term, and even after the next term to see if there's anything we can do if they're on academic probation or suspension.

In terms of our strategy, we have adopted three things that we're going to focus on for the next four to five years. The first is understanding the truth. Our whole learning community has to understand the truth of what has happened in the past. Quite frankly, it explains a lot of what is happening right now. The second is an unwavering commitment to supports for students, so increasing our number of indigenous staff and access to spaces. The third is redeveloping our curriculum, so really re-examining every single program in terms of where we can include indigenous content and where we can make sure there's proper representation, especially for critical programs like nursing, community, justice, law and a lot of health programs.

● (1840)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that.

I'm going to move to Mr. Watt, and maybe I'll come back to you, Mr. Williams. I'll see how much time I have.

Mr. Watt, in your presentation you talked about on-the-land education, and I will quote from your recommendations. In your brief, you wrote:

> The Inuit culture and identity cannot be dissociated from the territory. On-the-land education programs and activities offer unique educational opportunities that connect youth to their language, identity and communities.

Here in northern Saskatchewan the term we use is “land-based learning”, which I think sounds very similar to this, in which we're trying to connect youth to the culture and to their history.

Can you just elaborate a little bit on the on-the-land learning, what it looks like and what makes it effective in educating young people?

Mr. Robert Watt: Just recently a group of students went out on the land, where they got a chance to tap into their Inuit rites of passage.

I find way too often we separate our Inuit rites of passage from western education. Inuit rites of passage are very similar to a form of learning and I believe right now we have an opportunity to bridge western education with Inuit knowledge, which is our Inuit rites of passage.

When I was a young man, I was brought out on the land, and I still remember the skills I learned from that. I think it's very critical to not separate western education from traditional knowledge. I think there need to be ways for one to support the other and for them to complement each other.

In fact, through Kativik Ilisarniliriniq we are creating a new approach, which is called Inuit environmental science, through which we are trying to bridge on-the-land programming with science, so that's where I'm coming from.

Thank you.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I appreciate that answer.

I am going to jump back to Mr. Williams. I do end up with 30 seconds here.

Mr. Williams, you talked about the success you had pre-pandemic. Given all the stuff that's changed, can you speak to how you see these same programs that you talked about being successful earlier potentially being affected by distance learning and some of the limitations and what this might look like, for you, come the fall, post-pandemic, or maybe not post-pandemic but post the initial phases here that we've talked about.

The Chair: We're well past time.

Be very brief.

Mr. Elijah Williams: Just briefly, we're going to have to really adjust what we do, so there are going to be more online presentations with elders or more online events.

We'll make sure we're always available for somebody to call in more quickly.

The Chair: Thanks for that.

Now we go to Mr. van Koeverden for five minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to all the witnesses today, here on site. It's been so valuable.

First I'd like to acknowledge that I'm on the traditional unceded Algonquin and Anishinabe territory in Ottawa, in our nation's capital.

Given that we are fortunate enough to have witnesses who are Inuit or from Haudenosaunee and Mohawk nations, I would also like to acknowledge how I got here, which is indirectly in a kayak, which is an Inuit invention. I'm a white guy from Oakville and the appropriation is not lost on me, but I am grateful for the invention because it has allowed me to explore the world and certainly our country.

My question is around better outcomes in education for indigenous youth.

I'll ask, Mr. Williams and Madam Gabriel, if you could elaborate a little bit on how education empowers and connects youth back to the land and through traditional practices and also provides better mental health and resilience for these youth.

This has been a challenging time for kids across our nation, but certainly even more so for those who were vulnerable prior to COVID-19. We've heard from a lot of kids who have been having a tough time, and certainly from university students heading back to college or university with an uncertain future, so I want to recognize that it's tougher for most of the indigenous youth across the country and I'd like to hear how we can better serve them.

Perhaps I'll ask Ms. Gabriel to go first.

● (1845)

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: It's a really good question, and thank you for asking it, Mr. van Koeverden.

One of the things we started here was an adult immersion program for the youth to learn the language. It's a bit difficult now with COVID, because all of our first language speakers are elders and they don't really use Zoom. They're starting to learn.

It is really important for them to learn their history, just as it is for Canadians to learn their own history.

The issue with the land is that a lot of our medicines are on the land. The languages we use are strengthening the relationship of our lands with all our relations. I am a Turtle Clan, so any turtle is my relative in a sense. It links us to our ancestry. It links us to that creation story that we as Haudenosaunee people enjoy. The richness of those stories strengthens our identity. The curriculum we see now is exactly what people have been talking about—that old curriculum of just trying to pass kids through secondary V.

I know Mr. Williams has a lot things to also add and I don't want to take too much time, but I thank you for asking.

Mr. Elijah Williams: I would add that what it allows students to do when they do go to school is the exploration of identity.

Many students don't know who they are. They don't know where they have come from. There are some students who have status, but they don't know where they've come from. Our centre provides for those conversations to happen. We make events around that. We bring in different guest speakers. We've had people like Thomas King come in and do a reading of his book.

School allows for that identity exploration. Also, once there is one student who goes, there seem to be cousins who are interested—family members. My nieces and nephews started to go to post-secondary. Once you see a positive example of a role model, you can start seeing yourself in post-secondary because of other students.

This whole transformation is nice to see. From when someone comes in their first year to when they leave, you see how much of a positive impact it has had on them.

The Chair: Mr. Watt, did you have your hand up?

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: I was just going to ask if Mr. Watt could provide an answer.

I know you are having some connectivity issues, sir, but if you have something to add, we'd love to hear a northern perspective.

Mr. Robert Watt: Last week, we had an online graduation for our Nunavik Sivunitsavut program, which is kind of similar.... It is exactly like Nunavut Sivunitsavut.

Our students, when they take on that program, get to know their identity. They get to know where they come from. They get to know their history. It is a great platform to get over their culture shock, because all of our students are transported from this region in order to go to post-secondary studies. It's a fly-in community.

I just want to add that once our youth get to know where they come from, their history, they go a long way.

The Chair: That's a good place to finish—right on time.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Mr. Watt.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: I just want to tell Mr. Watt that I had the pleasure of flying through his community once, and I had a day to stop over. Kuujjuak is a beautiful place. Hopefully, I will visit again sometime.

The Chair: Mr. Viersen, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses.

I will go back to Ms. Gabriel.

The last time I had the floor, we were talking a bit about having barricades at the entrances to your community.

I'm wondering what it looks like in your community if somebody contracts COVID and has to go to the hospital. Is it possible to be treated in your own community, or do you have to go outside the community? Has a large proportion of the community had to go off reserve for treatment?

● (1850)

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: First of all I just want to correct you. They're not barricades; they are checkpoints.

We're 62 kilometres northwest of Montreal. They did some tests on May 29 and 30. As you know, Quebec has the highest number of cases across Canada, with three-quarters of the deaths. We are starting to finally get some help with regard to dealing with COVID.

If they have to leave, they would have to go to Saint-Eustache, which is about a 20- to 25-minute drive. It is very problematic for us to go there. I would prefer to go to Montreal myself.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Basically, have the checkpoints been effective in preventing COVID from coming to your community?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: So far there have been no cases that I know of. Now that the shops are open, I know that could very well change. There are still checkpoints for coming right into the community where we reside. Time will tell whether or not letting people into the community to purchase their products will change that status we have of no cases so far.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Getting gloves and face masks in northern Alberta has been a bit of a challenge for first nation communities, just due to the fact that there are great distances, but the province has been handing them out through the A&W and McDonald's. That seems to be working.

In your community, does everybody have gloves and face masks? If they don't, are they available in your community?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: You can get them at the local pharmacy. That's where most people pick them up. Even then, it took a while for us to get those.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: In your community, Mr. Watt, if I were at your house right now and wanted some gloves and a face mask, how readily available would they be?

Mr. Robert Watt: You would have to go to our health centre here. They're not made available. I know that in our stores they do have hand sanitizers, but as for gloves and masks right now.... Considering that we did have 16 active cases for a while but they've all recovered, right now we're kind of antsy about getting infected. They're very closed right now.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It's good to hear that everybody has recovered.

Mr. Williams, with the cohort of students that you deal with on a regular basis, have there been any cases? Has your department been involved at all in handing out masks and gloves?

Mr. Elijah Williams: There are no cases that we're aware of, and since we've shut down our schools so there's no access to campuses we didn't have to provide any masks, but we did provide cultural supports when students needed them. If they needed sage or sweetgrass, we sent that to them, but in terms of medical supplies, a lot of students went home back to their communities.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: What about mental health? For many of the people in my community, not being able to hang out together has been a challenge, and I know that for our first nation communities that's also a big part of their life. Have you been hearing anything in that regard?

Mr. Elijah Williams: Yes, a lot of people have said that. That adjustment of not seeing people is worse for some people. We make sure that if we do identify someone who is in critical need we'll have counsellors and our student-at-risk and responsibilities officers reach out, and we will also refer them to the first nations mental health and wellness line as a 24-hour support. There is added support, and if they are from a reserve or an urban centre, we do make sure that they're connected to both services that exist.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have one five-minute question time now for Mr. Powlowski.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I think that on this call we have a lot of witnesses who are educators, if I'm not wrong. Certainly, education is probably the best way out of poverty, so it's an important thing for everybody, but there's education that occurs in school and there's education that doesn't occur in school. I've spent a lot of years in university, but apparently not enough to know the difference between when someone is speaking Inuktitut and speaking English.

I would suggest that some of the things I've learned that are most important in life have been things that I have learned when I have not been in school, not just what I've learned in school. In keeping with that, I wanted to ask Mr. Watt about it, because he talked about learning on the land. This seems to me to be an important thing, but I wondered whether that was also offered to non-indigenous people in the community. To me, to see the way the indigenous people traditionally live would seem to be an important learning experience for non-indigenous people in the north also.

● (1855)

Mr. Robert Watt: That is a good question.

A quick answer is that we are a school board that has a dual mandate, which is to provide education to anyone living in Nunavik and to protect our culture and language.

Any child, any student, any youth who is within our school board has every right to participate in our land programs, so we're open. We are more than open to engaging non-Inuit to participate in any on-the-land programs.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Have some non-Inuit people taken part in that as well?

Mr. Robert Watt: Yes, students have. We have an average of 60 to 80 non-Inuit in our communities. I'm just talking about Kuujjuaq here. There are 14 communities altogether.

We are very open. We have an open-hand policy where we engage and ensure that our students are participating, whether they are Inuit or non-Inuit.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: When certainly racism is very much in the limelight now, how do you address racism?

When you look at what you teach formally in school versus what doesn't occur in school, do you find that bringing non-Inuit people onto the land gives them an added appreciation for indigenous ways of doing things, for the indigenous outlook?

Mr. Robert Watt: Once you're out on the land you quickly forget about racism. You are so immersed in being on the land that you forget about that, so the best medicine is being on the land.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I think that's a fantastic answer.

Maybe I could ask Mr. Williams that too. When it comes to addressing racism, how much can you do that in the classroom?

Mr. Elijah Williams: I think it goes beyond the classroom. I think it goes to how we teach people and what we're teaching them.

When we look at the Auditor General's “Report 5—Socio-economic Gaps on First Nations Reserves", we see that the graduation rate in 2016 was only 24% of students. That's what the Auditor General identified.

We really have to examine whether we are teaching the right content to students, whether the students see themselves and whether there is something that the policy has failed to do, because as you said, education generally gets people out of poverty, but if only 24% of our people are graduating, that's a big problem. This is something that the department should really be focusing on in terms of economic prosperity, when it comes to economic development and opportunity.

When you look at that report, it highlights a discrepancy there as well.

The Chair: We're at the time for the meeting, Mr. Powlowski.

Thank you for that very interesting perspective.

I want to thank our witnesses very much. This has been very fascinating for all of us. We're learning a lot, but we have much more to learn.

Thank you, once again.

I'm just going to ask the clerk if she might indulge me.

If I adjourn the meeting, could I leave the line open for one minute to ask a question of two of our...? Is that permitted under the rules? Can we adjourn the meeting now, but leave the line open for 30 seconds? Okay, I saw a positive nod.

This meeting is now adjourned.