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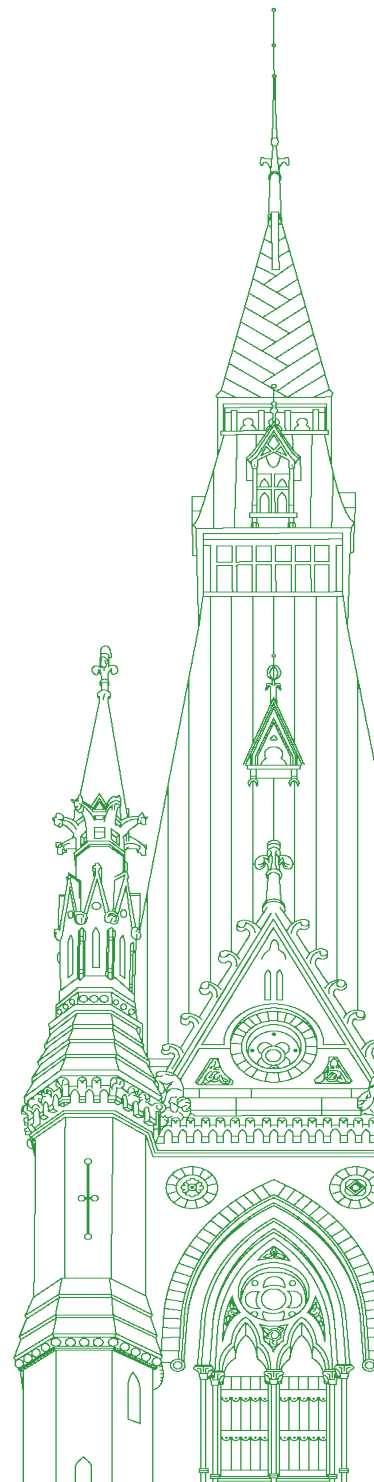
House of Commons Debates

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Tuesday, May 10, 2022

Speaker: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, May 10, 2022

The House met at 10 a.m.

[English]

Prayer

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

● (1005)

[English]

LEADERS' DEBATES COMMISSION

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I have the honour of tabling, in both official languages, the following reports: the Leaders' Debates Commission report entitled "Democracy matters: Making debates count for citizens, a report on the Leaders' Debates Commission 2021 federal election experience", the departmental results report for 2019-20 of the Leaders' Debates Commission, and the departmental plan for 2021-22 of the Leaders' Debates Commission.

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GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8)(a), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to six petitions. These returns will be tabled in electronic format.

* * *

[Translation]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the second report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development entitled "Resumption of Sino-Tibetan Dialogue".

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this report.

PETITIONS

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to present a petition on behalf of constituents and others concerned with the current state of ecological and environmental crisis. They point to the need, greater than ever before, for environmental education. They call on the House to take a leadership role in enacting a Canadian strategy to support educators, to support communications, to support community leaders to develop greater levels of scientific and climate literacy to be able to take actions that result in a healthy and sustainable future for all—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I have to interrupt the hon. member. It seems that we are having an issue.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Speaker, the interpreters are indicating that the sound quality is not good enough. The member's microphone seems to be positioned incorrectly.

[English]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The interpreters are signalling that the microphone was not positioned properly for the quality of the sound. Could the hon. member adjust her microphone?

[Translation]

Ms. Elizabeth May: Madam Speaker, I apologize. I will try again.

[English]

The petition I am presenting this morning relates to the nature of the environmental and climate crisis. It points out that we will need high levels of scientific literacy, environmental education and clear communications. We will need them as never before.

The petitioners are asking the House of Commons to put together a strategy for the federal government to take a leadership role to assist educators and community leaders to be able to increase the levels of understanding, of awareness and of environmental education, at a very high level of leadership from the federal government.

Routine Proceedings

UKRAINE

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am proud to present today e-petition 3917, signed by over 2,000 Canadians, who are drawing attention to the war in Ukraine by the Russian Federation. The war crimes that have been committed—

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

I do not know what is happening this morning, but there was no interpretation when the member began speaking.

[English]

Mr. James Bezan: Madam Speaker, I am proud to present e-petition 3917, signed by over 2,000 Canadians, who are drawing the attention of the House to the unprovoked war in Ukraine by the Russian Federation, how war crimes have been committed in the region by the Russian Federation, and how Vladimir Putin, as President of Russia, has threatened Ukraine, Canada and our allies with retaliation, including using nuclear weapons, which is a great risk. There are 1.4 million Canadians who identify themselves as being of Ukrainian heritage, myself included. The petitioners also draw to the attention of the House that Canada has participated in NATO missions all over the world.

The petitioners are asking the government to immediately provide to Ukraine bulletproof vests and helmets, to make sure that our Canadian Armed Forces are on high readiness and ready for rapid deployment, and to look at supplying lethal weapons and other supplies to Ukraine, and that NATO and our allies continue to help close the airspace over Ukraine to provide humanitarian corridors and, ultimately, provide peacekeepers to bring stability to the country.

CHARITABLE ORGANIZATIONS

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to present this petition provided to me by constituents of North Okanagan—Shuswap, raising attention to the fact that all Canadians have a right under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to freedom of expression without discrimination. The undersigned citizens call on the House of Commons to protect and preserve the application of charitable status rules on a politically and ideologically neutral basis, without discrimination on the basis of political or religious values and without the imposition of another values test, and affirm the right of Canadians to freedom of expression.

ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I rise to present e-petition 3812. The petitioners note that while Canada has committed to advancing gender equality, sexual and gender-based violence continues within the RCMP, and that officer-to-officer organizational violence, combined with the failure to investigate the complaint seriously, results in an unsafe and hostile workplace.

The hundreds of petitioners, including lead author Susan Rabichuk, call upon the Government of Canada to hold a debate in the House of Commons to review the current system of investigation

and accountability, to provide legal counsel and compensation to affected victims, to require the federal government to report on an ongoing basis the costs of legal and workers' compensation resources they are using to defend their positions against victims' complaints, and to honour its commitment to ensuring the national action plan aims are wholly fulfilled relating to female officers.

• (1010)

DEMENTIA

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am rising to present e-petition 3698 to the Minister of Health, a petition initiated by residents of Saint-Laurent and Canada. Camille Nicola Isaacs from Saint-Laurent, Parsa Famili and Fati Davoudi basically say that whereas dementia costs in Canada were estimated at \$12 billion in 2020 and projected to reach \$16.6 billion by 2031, and total out-of-pocket costs paid by caregivers were an estimated \$1.4 billion in 2016 and projected to rise to nearly \$2.4 billion in 2031, the growth in the number of persons diagnosed and living with dementia represents an unsustainable trajectory, with cases forecasted to amount to nearly one million by 2033, and disease prevention and health protection strategies must be a focus to reduce this trend.

The petitioners call upon the Minister of Health to, one, declare dementia prevention a national health care priority and, as part of the national dementia strategy, work with provincial governments to encourage the adoption of strategies to reduce preventable diagnoses through the delivery of health promotion and disease prevention services such as public education programs with strong calls to action for screening and early detection, decelerate risks and symptoms through the deployment of a standardized national cognitive assessment test targeting at-risk groups, and reverse symptoms for persons with mild cognitive impairment by providing access to clinical trials financed by a dedicated public-private sector fund and by matched funding collected from private sector and non-government organizations; and two, ensure training—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I will remind hon. members that we ask members to present a very short description of the petition and not read the whole petition. It takes a lot of time and there are other members who have petitions to present.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Madam Speaker, two is to ensure training for medical staff to learn how to screen for symptoms and better manage dementia diagnoses.

SENIORS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I have before me a petition that has been signed by many residents of Winnipeg North. Petitioners are asking all levels of government to work together on the important issues affecting our seniors, such as long-term care and mental health. They are putting an emphasis on programs such as New Horizons, Age & Opportunity programs, the OAS, GIS and other types of support programs.

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Madam Speaker, it is an honour to rise to present a petition today. The petitioners recognize that Canada has committed harm toward indigenous peoples through historical and ongoing genocide. They recognize that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was back in 2015, with 94 calls to action. Petitioners call on the Government of Canada to place all 94 calls to action at the top of the political agenda, with a particular focus on 18 to 24, which are focused on indigenous health.

FALUN GONG

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today Falun Gong practitioners are gathering on the Hill in advance of May 13, which is Falun Dafa Day.

The first petition I am presenting highlights the horrific persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China. This has been going on for decades. Various resolutions have been passed in other parliaments, such as the U.S. House of Representatives and the European Parliament.

Action is urgently required to address human rights abuses impacting all of the people living in China. Falun Gong practitioners, in particular, have been victims, in spite of the fact that their simple activity is a spiritual practice seeking to advance the principles of truthfulness, compassion and forbearance.

Petitioners call on Parliament and on the government to work to end the targeting of Falun Gong practitioners, in particular taking measures to combat forced organ harvesting and trafficking, to publicly call for an end to persecution and to use appropriate sanction mechanisms targeting the perpetrators of this violence.

I am pleased, especially today, to be able to highlight this issue.

HUMAN ORGAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is on a similar issue. The second petition is specifically to highlight Bill S-223, which is a bill that would combat forced organ harvesting and trafficking. It recognizes that this is a practice that happens in certain places around the world and it would seek to make it a criminal offence for a person to go abroad and receive an organ taken without consent. It would also create a mechanism by which someone could be deemed inadmissible to Canada if they were involved in forced organ harvesting and trafficking.

UKRAINE

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the next petition I am tabling is about the situation in Ukraine, in particular the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is an invasion that, in a sense, started in 2014. Of course, we have a

Routine Proceedings

further invasion in recent months. This is obviously an issue that the House has been seized with at various times, and there are a number of specific asks in here. Some of them involve sanctions and measures that have already been undertaken and the petitioners support those measures, but are calling for more to be done.

I particularly want to highlight the asks for a boycott on Russian oil and gas imports into Canada and Europe, and for securing energy agreements with western partners, increasing the supply of military equipment and lethal defensive weapons to protect the territory and human rights of the people of Ukraine, providing urgent humanitarian assistance to the people of Ukraine, providing vital assistance to refugees impacted by the conflict and allowing Canadians with family members in Ukraine to urgently bring family members to Canada for as long as the conflict persists.

These are a number of the asks, along with other measures involving sanctions targeting perpetrators of this violence.

CHARITABLE ORGANIZATIONS

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the next petition I am tabling is with respect to the political neutrality of charitable status. Petitioners are concerned that the Liberal platform actually talked, in the last election, about politicizing charitable status and applying a values test in association with charitable status, whereby the government would deny charitable status to organizations with which they have particular disagreements. This is a concern not just to those organizations that might be affected but to the whole charitable sector, to see what the impact would be if the government started to go down this road of politicizing charitable status.

Petitioners want to see the House of Commons protect and preserve the application of charitable status rules on a politically and ideologically neutral basis, without discrimination on the basis of those values and to affirm the right of all Canadians to free expression.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the next petition that I am tabling highlights the ongoing detention of Huseyin Celil in China. Petitioners note that, as a result of various efforts undertaken, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor were released after 1,000 days of unjust detention and are very pleased about the release of the two Michaels, but note the continuing detention in China of Canadians, including Mr. Celil, who has been there for well over a decade and a half. The Government of China has refused, in violation of its own law and constitution, to recognize Mr. Celil's Canadian citizenship.

Routine Proceedings

Petitioners want to see the Government of Canada demand the release of Huseyin Celil, and to formally state that the release of Mr. Celil from Chinese detention and his return to Canada are a priority of the government of equal concern to the unjust detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. They want to see the government appoint a special envoy to work on securing Mr. Celil's release, and they want to ask the government to seek the assistance of the Biden administration and allies around the world in obtaining Mr. Celil's release, just as we saw with respect to the two Michaels.

HAZARAS

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the next petition that I want to table highlights the human rights abuses targeting the Hazara community in Afghanistan. Petitioners note that various genocides have impacted the Hazara community over a century and a half, and the situation of the Hazaras was very challenging even prior to the Taliban takeover. Of course, it has gotten much worse.

• (1015)

The petitioners want to see the government take action to support Hazaras. In particular, this petition calls for the recognition of past genocides against the Hazara community and the designation of September 25 as Hazara genocide memorial day.

• (1020)

COVID-19

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, the next petition that I am tabling is on the issue of vitamin D and its benefits, as well as the data that exists with respect to its beneficial effects in the context of COVID.

It highlights a number of detailed studies that have shown that higher levels of vitamin D are associated with more favourable outcomes for individuals who get COVID-19. It cites those studies and notes that people get vitamin D from sunlight exposure, so during the wintertime especially it is important for people to get vitamin D exposure by being outside or through supplementation.

It calls on the Government of Canada to recognize the emerging scientific evidence that low levels of vitamin D are associated with worse outcomes from COVID-19, and to work to increase public awareness about the importance of individuals maintaining recommended vitamin D levels.

HUMAN ORGAN TRAFFICKING

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to recognize the Falun Gong on the Hill here today, and present this petition around combatting forced organ harvesting.

The petitioners want to make it a criminal offence for a person to go abroad and take an organ without the consent of the person giving the organ. This particular bill has passed through the Senate unanimously three times, and the petitioners are hoping that this Parliament is the Parliament that gets this bill passed.

VACCINE MANDATES

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Madam Speaker, the second petition I have to present today is from peti-

tioners from across the country who are opposed, and want an end, to the COVID-19 mandates.

The petitioners state that throughout the pandemic, truckers have served Canadians and are heroes, and now they are subject to a vaccine mandate. The petitioners are calling on the House of Commons to immediately end all COVID-19 mandates implemented and controlled by the federal government, which include federal employees, truckers and travellers. They are calling for an end to all COVID-19 mandates.

* * *

QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURNS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, if the revised response to Question No. 306, originally tabled on March 23, 2022, could be made an order for return, this return would be tabled immediately.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Text]

Question No. 306—**Mr. John Nater:**

With regard to the decision by Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) to recruit social media influencers to promote the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS): (a) how many influencers were sent recruiting requests or similar types of communication by PSPC; (b) what formula or rate is used to determine how much each influencer will receive in compensation for promoting the NSS; (c) what is the total budget for the social media campaign; (d) how many influencers have signed agreements with the government related to the campaign; (e) are the influencers required to have any type of disclaimer on their social media post mentioning that they are being paid by the government, and, if not, why not; (f) what are the start and end dates of the social media campaign; and (g) what are the names and social media handles of the influencers who have signed agreements with PSPC related to the NSS, broken down by platform (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc.)?

(Return tabled)

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

I would like to indicate that, pursuant to Standing Order 43(2)(a), all of the Bloc Québécois's speaking slots for today's debate on the business of supply will be divided in two.

* * *

[English]

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I ask that all remaining questions be allowed to stand.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CHANGE TO STANDING ORDER 30 REGARDING THE PRAYER

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ) moved:

That, given that the House respects the beliefs and non-beliefs of all parliamentarians and of the general public and it is committed to the principle of the separation of religion and the state, the diversity of views and freedom of conscience while upholding the secularism and religious neutrality of the state and out of a desire for inclusiveness, the reading of the prayer at the opening of a sitting be abolished and replaced by a moment of reflection; and that, accordingly, Standing Order 30 be amended, in paragraphs (1) and (2), by substituting the following: “(1) A moment of reflection be observed every day at the meeting of the House before any business is entered upon. (2) Not more than two minutes after the moment of reflection, the business of the House shall commence.”

He said: Madam Speaker, I am very proud to move a motion today on behalf of the Bloc Québécois regarding the House tradition of saying a prayer before the doors are opened every day that the good Lord allows.

I want to clarify something before we get started. I know some people will see this motion as an ill-intentioned, malicious, low-down move, but that is absolutely not the case. I am not here to set a trap in any way, shape or form. Today, we are calling for a healthy debate about a sensitive subject. Some people in the House may feel we are interfering with their beliefs, attacking them even, but I really want to make it clear that that is not what this is about.

What we are asking members to do today is reflect on whether this practice has perhaps outlasted its usefulness and may not be as relevant as when it was adopted. This is a sensitive subject, which may explain why nobody ever thought it was quite the right time to put it out there for a frank and honest conversation, as I am doing now. That may be why nobody ever dared do it. Nobody ever had the nerve to raise the issue of prayer, but I humbly submit that it is the right thing to do. This is the right thing to do today, and it is always a good idea to re-examine our practices and traditions from time to time.

Following our deliberations, the House will decide whether it is appropriate to continue reciting the prayer before we begin our proceedings or, as I believe, it would be more reasonable, appropriate and inclusive to abolish this ritual and replace it with a moment of personal reflection.

I want to assure members of the House that our goal is not to disrespect anyone's religious beliefs, and I can confirm that our remarks will reflect this position throughout today's debate.

We do respect religions, but I also believe it is important to respect those who do not belong to any religion, and that is what this motion is all about. I am in favour of inclusion that also takes into account those who are non-believers.

As I said earlier, today's context is different from the one in which many such parliamentary traditions were established. Although it pains me a little to do so, I will quote a certain John A. Macdonald who, in 1877, justified his motion to read the daily prayer in the House by saying that all Canadians were Christians.

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Let us say that this were true, which I doubt, even in the context of the time; it nevertheless shows that the context then was very different from what it is now. No MP in the House would dare claim that all Canadians are Christian. On the contrary, ever since Pierre Trudeau and his multiculturalism, there are some who insist that every religion is equal and should be welcome in the public sphere. Is that not another argument for opening the debate on the issue?

Years go by and customs change. Our institutions have a duty to adapt to the reality of the people, the constituents and the public they serve and, in order to do so, to agree to take stock from time to time.

To illustrate the importance of this motion being moved today, I will cite some data from a poll published by Léger in October 2019, which showed that only 51% of Quebecers reported believing in God. In the rest of Canada, the numbers are just as telling, although they vary from region to region. The fact remains that there is a significant percentage of people in Quebec and Canada who say that they neither believe in God nor belong to any religion.

At a time when we are trying to be as inclusive as possible, can anyone in the House honestly claim that the prayer read before the House starts its business respects every single person's beliefs and non-beliefs?

For example, right now, a member who is an atheist and feels that their personal convictions are being undermined by the prayer has the choice to sit and wait for the prayer to be over or to wait until the prayer is done before entering the chamber. I think that this member's conscience rights are being violated.

● (1025)

This same atheist member might appreciate our proposal for a moment of reflection, during which they could meditate or reflect on upcoming business, their grocery list or their weekend plans. It would be their time for reflection. The current prayer does not even reflect all religions. It is a Christian prayer read out in a chamber made up of people of different faiths, including Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus. Does everyone truly feel that this prayer reflects their beliefs?

I am being genuine. I honestly want to know. I think we will get an idea of where people stand throughout today's debate.

Business of Supply

The biggest advantage of our proposal is that if we replace the prayer with a moment of reflection, we could all use this time in accordance with our own personal beliefs. My colleagues do not need me to be able to pray. They do not need me to hear them. They can do so in private, in their heads, in silence. I think that would be just as good for the God they worship. One of the fundamental principles of secularism, as I see it, is that the state must never favour one religion over another. The best way to treat all religions equally is to avoid endorsing any religion.

The principle of the separation of religion and state is not new. There have been debates about it in the past, at various times. Its actual integration into the practices of various Canadian legislatures has happened at different paces. For example, in the British Columbian legislature, prayer was abolished in 2019. In Nova Scotia, MLAs had been saying the prayer for longer than members in any other Canadian legislature, specifically since 1758. In October 2021, the Nova Scotian legislature abolished the prayer. Both the Liberals and the Conservatives moved a motion to this end, and all three sitting parties—the Liberals, the Conservatives and the New Democrats—supported that motion. The premier of the province, Tim Houston, explained that this change sought to ensure that Nova Scotians felt represented in the legislature, regardless of their race, gender, sexual preference, language or religion. Here, I would point out that Mr. Houston is a Conservative premier, and I never thought I would see the day when I would quote a Conservative to support my argument about secularism, but these are extraordinary times. We have to be open and expect all kinds of surprises.

Interesting fact, in Newfoundland and Labrador the prayer has never been recited at the start of the sitting. In Quebec, the National Assembly decreed in 1972 that the prayer should be abolished and replaced by a moment of reflection. It was not until December 15, 1976, just one month after the election of René Lévesque's government, that the prayer was officially abolished in practice. I want to point out, as this may be a good time to honour him, that the speaker of the National Assembly at the time was Clément Richard. He passed away a little earlier this year in March.

In Quebec, this occurred in the context of significant social change and at a time when Quebecers were deciding—after generations of control by the Catholic church, which had a stranglehold on almost all aspects of civil society and our lives—to restrict religion to the private sphere and keep it out of the affairs of the state. I grew up in a practising Catholic family in the 1970s in Quebec City. My family went to church and I was an altar server. However, I was fortunate to have parents who always encouraged me to reflect, analyze and form my own opinions. Over time, I created my own spiritual comfort zone, far from religion. I said far from religion, but it is also closely related to it, because some of the values conveyed in religious teachings are values that I hold dear, such as respect, love for one's neighbour and sharing. Although some associate these values with religious teachings, I believe that they are basic human values needed to live in society.

I will end with something my late grandmother said. She was a woman of faith, but she terrorized the parish priests with her free spirit and her nonconformist attitude. Grandma was the one who had talked back to the parish priest, who suggested that she should

have more children than the nine she already had and she should heed his sermons. She told him that he could start giving advice on children when he had some of his own, and in the meantime he could go preach somewhere else because she was having none of that. She put several sanctimonious parish priests in their place. At home, when Grandma passed away, we thought that two or three parish priests in heaven must have been gritting their teeth, knowing that she was coming.

• (1030)

My grandma used to tell me that spirituality is like a very personal possession, that it is not something to be showed off, and that only gestures can have an impact. In that spirit, I am proud to move our motion today, and I look forward to the debate.

Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I always like my colleague's speeches; he is very eloquent.

I am curious, though. It is not often that we, as members of Parliament, have the opportunity to bring forward substantive motions. There are certainly a lot of issues that are of concern to Quebecers and Canadians right now, but I think Quebecers are not exactly losing sleep over the issue he raised today.

I am therefore curious as to why he thinks this issue is so important compared to other very legitimate concerns that Quebecers have.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Madam Speaker, I would like to respond by telling my colleague that there are indeed issues in the world that deserve our full attention, as they are more worrisome and more serious than prayer in the House of Commons.

However, the very purpose of an opposition day is to hold debates on topics that may not be as urgent as those we normally discuss in the House of Commons.

In 2019, the Bloc Québécois sought unanimous consent to adopt a motion with the same objective as the one we have today, but that motion was rejected.

That is why I think that opposition days—and the Bloc only has two in each parliamentary session—are a good occasion to introduce such a motion and to have healthy, honest and respectful discussions with my colleagues in the House of Commons.

• (1035)

[English]

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to focus my question on the issue of freedom of conscience. The member spoke as if a member listening to somebody else deliver a prayer would be an attack on their freedom of conscience, if they did not agree with the prayer. Respectfully, it is an absurd understanding of freedom of conscience to say that my conscience is violated by listening to somebody else pray. I have attended many religious services for faiths that I am not a part of and I respectfully listen, but I do not participate if I do not agree with what is going on.

I wish the member was more concerned about freedom of conscience. I wish he would take a stand, for instance, for people who do not want to be forced, as a condition of their profession, to participate in things or not do things that contravene their conscience. Surely, I think the member would agree that it is more of a violation of an individual's conscience when they are, as a condition of membership in a professional association or in wanting to work in a particular area, compelled to do something or not do something rather than simply being asked to listen to somebody else saying a prayer.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Madam Speaker, my first point is that we are in a place that represents Canadians and the people. We are in a place where state decisions are made and, in my opinion, there should be a clear separation of church and state.

My second point is that I do not feel attacked or concerned at the prospect of hearing prayer. I could turn my colleague's question back to him by asking how his expressing his religion in the House is worth more than my expressing my non-belief or my need to have a different personal reflection.

How would this moment of reflection preclude my colleague from saying his prayer in silence? I do not see how this can be called disrespectful or a violation of his conscience rights in a context like the one proposed.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Madam Speaker, I really enjoy working with my colleague. I have no problem with what he just said.

However, one has to wonder about the Bloc Québécois's priorities. We are in the midst of a climate crisis, international crises, a housing crisis in Quebec that is affecting Drummondville and other Quebec communities, and a pandemic.

One has to wonder why we are going to spend the entire day debating this issue. In any event, the Bloc decided that this is their priority for their spring session opposition day.

I want to ask my colleague a question. Since this motion seeks to change Standing Order 30, which deals with the daily program, would it also not be important to talk about the acknowledgement of indigenous lands? That is an issue that has been raised numerous times in the House over the years and that has never led to a change in the Standing Orders.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Madam Speaker, the motion that we are moving here deals only with the reciting of the prayer.

I will give my NDP colleague the same answer that I gave my colleague opposite earlier. There is no good or bad time to propose this kind of motion and hold this kind of discussion. The issue of whether to have the House include a statement regarding indigenous peoples is a whole other debate.

What we are proposing today is a moment of personal reflection based on each member's beliefs, or lack thereof, to replace the current prayer, nothing more, nothing less.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Madam Speaker, my first love as a student, as a teacher and even as a child was literature. In a way, literature was my alma mater.

Business of Supply

Through literature I perceived—or glimpsed, to be more accurate—the letters themselves, because letters both voluntarily and involuntarily encompass all of human knowledge.

That may be why I have always had a grateful admiration for and insatiable curiosity about the 18th century, and in particular the 18th century in France: That was the century of Enlightenment in England and the *Erklärung* in Germany. It was the century of reason, knowledge and intelligence.

The Enlightenment was the century of encyclopedias and rational dictionary of the sciences, arts and trades, the century of philosophers, of Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, the century that cried loud and clear, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”.

It was the century of man guided by the light of the spirit, of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, but also of woman and the citizen with Olympe de Gouges, the century of democracy, access to knowledge, science, the ideal of progress, of tolerance and humanism, of equality. It was the century of the French Revolution, as well as the American Revolution.

It was a century of emancipation. It was the century that began the long separation of church and state in France. After the French Revolution, in little more than a century, people had to win the fight for the right to govern themselves by taking power from those they peered up at from below. That century marked the dawn of the people.

These men and women left us a great legacy. That all men, not God, decide for all men. This is the legacy that gives me the legitimate right to stand here today, before the members of the House of Commons, to represent some 100,000 citizens in the riding of Manicouagan.

Members will then understand my astonishment when, in fall 2015, more than three centuries after the French Revolution, when I was about to take my seat in the House, I heard the following words resound before the opening of the sitting:

Almighty God, we give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Canada and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity and peace that we enjoy. We pray for our Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, and the Governor General. Guide us in our deliberations as Members of Parliament, and strengthen us in our awareness of our duties and responsibilities as Members. Grant us wisdom, knowledge, and understanding to preserve the blessings of this country for the benefit of all and to make good laws and wise decisions. Amen.

I was being forced to pray to the Christian God. I looked around and almost everyone was doing the same, whether they were Christian or perhaps Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, agnostic or atheist. I could not understand then, and I still cannot now, why Parliament should impose any faith, let alone its faith, on all parliamentarians, employees of the House and, by extrapolation, Quebecers, of course, and Canadians, even if it is with the noblest of intentions, unless it is being done unconsciously. I felt the House of Commons was depriving me of my freedom of conscience.

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Clearly, the Canadian Parliament has not yet finalized the divorce between church and state, which I believe is necessary, because every belief system carries with it its own sense of supremacy.

As a thinking being, capable of reasoning and blessed with freedom of conscience, the idea of relying on a higher power that has the ability to grant me “wisdom, knowledge and understanding” and that would be able to “guide me in my awareness of my duties and responsibilities” smacks of offloading my responsibility.

● (1040)

The blessings bestowed on Canada do not depend on some divine Christian will exercised through Christian members of Parliament.

The gifts Canada enjoys are preserved by the choices made by the representatives of the people, based on the will of the people. The government is responsible, and elected members are accountable.

I believe that this prayer obviously creates an insoluble conflict between freedom of conscience and empowerment, as well as between responsibility and accountability.

No one really believes something they are forced to believe. All they can do is pretend. No one takes part in a healthy debate if the conclusion relies on an intrinsic prior truth that they cannot understand. That is what this daily prayer symbolizes. These are essentially the two reasons that led me, on June 12, 2019, to try to table a motion on behalf of the Bloc Québécois to replace this prayer with a moment of reflection.

With all due respect for all religions, and in all humility, because I have no delusions of stealing heaven's fire like the mythological figure Prometheus, I have to say that taking part in a prayer that requires me to yield my freedom of conscience and reason to the invisible hands of a god, the Christian God, is something that is, in all good conscience, viscerally impossible.

To paraphrase Étienne de La Boétie, spiritual servitude can only be voluntary. I refuse to allow anyone to think for or through me. I refuse to have my thoughts dictated for me. I make my own choices, and I take responsibility.

My colleagues may have deduced that, in my opinion, religion is a private affair. Faith is a conscious and deliberate choice, and some people choose to adhere to the precepts and values of a theistic belief system in order to determine their existence, but that is a private and personal choice.

Faith is an individual decision, not a societal one. Beliefs cannot be imposed. Society cannot be forced to act according to imposed individual beliefs. The state must be neutral. It must be secular.

I will therefore not reveal to my colleagues what religion I belong to, whether or not I practise, whether I am an atheist or an agnostic, or what I think about the religion of the gods or of humankind. I will simply reiterate that I respect these belief systems. They all preach love, peace and sharing, and their core values have been shaping the world since the dawn of time. They are aimed at

transcendence, and they are what separates us from the animals, along with our intelligence and our humanity.

In closing, this explains why I stand behind the curtain during the prayer. I believe I am not the only one to do so, whether out of respect for ourselves or for others, for our beliefs or our intellect, whether discreetly or perhaps even ostentatiously. Religion is private. Like me, it should remain behind the curtain, to be practised only in our homes and our places of worship.

Let us all, as parliamentarians, gather together in a genuine moment of free reflection during which some may choose to consult their conscience or God. When that happens, I will step into the House, and the House will step into the 21st century.

● (1045)

[*English*]

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I do think it is important to note, in response to the member's speech, that the traditions of this place do not emanate from the horrific orgy of violence that was the French Revolution. They emanate from the British tradition of pluralism, of accommodation, and especially here in North America, of the combination of different linguistic, faith and other communities.

I am proud of our pluralistic tradition, instead of violently seeking to eradicate religious belief, as happened in the French Revolution. That is the history of that revolution, which was the attempted violent eradication of religious believers. Instead, we have a tradition of saying, “Can we accommodate difference? Can we listen, and can we accommodate different perspectives?”

Now, the reality of the way the opening program of the House works is that we have a monotheistic prayer, and then we have a period of reflection. Therefore, if one is a non-believer, one can listen respectively during the first part and then engage in one's own reflection. I think that reflects pluralism. There is space for all of those traditions.

Our Canadian model has worked far better than the effort to violently eradicate other perspectives. I hope the member would at least acknowledge that in the context of her discussion of the history.

● (1050)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Madam Speaker, at no point did I mention the Reign of Terror, if that is what my colleague is suggesting.

As I said earlier, I am passionate about both history and knowledge. Naturally I would love to have a conversation with him and very humbly share what I know about the historical period during which humanity achieved democracy. Great Britain is not the only place where peoples have fought for freedom and representation.

We have been told repeatedly that this subject is of no interest to the House of Commons and that other subjects are more deserving of our attention. However, as my colleague from Drummond said, opposition days give us a chance to do other things and explore other topics.

My colleague's enthusiasm indicates that this subject is likely to inspire debate. I very much look forward to hearing what he has to say about it. Perhaps he will speak today.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am surprised the Bloc has chosen this particular motion, and I will be able to address that shortly.

The question I have for the member now is this: Has the Bloc actually raised this issue at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, given it is really looking for a simple rule change, which is something that occurs every so often? Has it raised the issue at PROC?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question.

I believe that such important issues should be raised and debated in the House, and that everyone should have an opportunity to contribute to the debate. As parliamentarians, we are here to debate. Let us give everyone the opportunity to express their opinion, if I may echo what a colleague just whispered in my ear. That is the intent behind this motion.

We must be able to debate these matters before the general public. That is what they expect of us. If there are others in the House who share our view that freedom of conscience is very important, let us have that debate together.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her brilliant speech. I would like to hear her comment on some other points.

First of all, I would like her to comment on the fact that we are always told that this is not a real issue. Every time we have raised the issue of secularism over the last few years, we have been told that there are other, more important issues. However, the rise of the religious right is troubling, especially at a time when, in 2022, the Parliament of Canada refuses to reaffirm something as fundamental as abortion rights, which, as members will recall, is what happened just last week.

I would also like to hear her comments on the fact that the Constitution of Canada contains the words “supremacy of God” in its preamble and that the head of the Canadian state is also the head of the Church of England.

Is my colleague as fed up as I am with being in a theocratic monarchy?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Madam Speaker, I could go on at length about that with my colleague from Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot.

It seems clear to me that there is bias in the thought process, despite what one of my colleagues said earlier. Some say that it makes no difference to have a prayer at the beginning of the sitting. However, as I briefly explained, it is clear that the responsibility for our decisions comes from God, according to the text of the prayer. Our own ideas are being taken over by an ideology, a system of values

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or a deistic belief system. Some also talked about the issue of abortion.

I cannot see myself telling Quebeckers from Manicouagan, whom I represent, that it is an Anglican Christian god who makes the decisions—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Resuming debate.

The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am not too sure exactly what to think in rising to address this particular debate today. I asked the member from the Bloc whether or not they have even raised the issue at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The response was no, it is an important debate and every member should be able to contribute to the debate. Does the member not realize all the discussions that take place in our standing committees, and all of the different issues that we could apply that very same principle to?

My colleague from Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount made reference to issues in the province of Quebec today. However, for some reason, with my number of years as a parliamentarian, I do not quite understand the reasoning behind bringing forward a motion of this nature.

There are many other options the Bloc members could have taken. This tells me that they are making themselves absolutely and totally irrelevant to the issues in the province of Quebec and Canada as a whole. In the last six years, let alone the last two years, I have not had one constituent ever approach me to say this is an issue that has to be dealt with.

Canada has just gone through, and we are still at least in part in, a pandemic. In fact, the province of Quebec still has mandatory masks. Can members imagine what is in the minds of the people of Quebec and the members of Parliament for the Bloc? The member even stood in this place and said they only get two opportunities in a session, yet they choose such a topic as this.

It goes far beyond the pandemic. We could talk about what is happening in Europe. People are dying in Ukraine. They are the heroes of Ukraine today, and we in Canada could talk about what is taking place in Europe. However, the Bloc say that they are not interested in the pandemic, what is happening in the province of Quebec or the war that in Europe or Ukraine. What about some of the other issues that I know the people of Quebec are interested in?

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The party that claims to represent Quebec and its people's interests is not the Bloc. It is the members who are sitting across the way who are representing the interests of Quebec. Those are the individuals who I see stand in their place and talk about the environment. I can inform and remind my colleagues in the Bloc that the people of Quebec are concerned about our environment. I know that even though I am not from Quebec, but I listen to the Liberal members of the Quebec caucus, and I know the environment matters. Conservative members of Parliament will often raise the issue. We might at times disagree, but that is an issue in the province of Quebec. There is a genuine concern there. Why would the Bloc members not want to talk about the climate crisis, or other environmental issues the province of Quebec is facing today?

We often hear Bloc members ask questions on health care. It is an issue I am very passionate about. In fact, I have brought in petitions that talk about how important it is that we have a national presence in the issue of health care that goes beyond just dollars. The Bloc will just argue to give them money. Their justification for that has never been clarified in the House. Why would they not talk about health care? Canadians from coast to coast to coast in every region of our country are concerned about issues such as mental health and long-term care.

• (1055)

These are issues on which it does not matter where we are from in Canada; there are MPs who are talking about it, unless, of course, they are from the Bloc, because today they are saying that it is not an important issue. It is not important enough, but rather they want to talk about prayer—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I have to interrupt the hon. member.

[Translation]

The hon. member for Jonquière on a point of order.

Mr. Mario Simard: Madam Speaker, it would be nice if the member for Winnipeg North could talk about the motion we are debating instead of health care funding. I am all in favour—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I would remind the hon. member that members are given some leeway in what they say in their speech.

I will allow the hon. parliamentary secretary to continue, knowing that he will surely get there in the end.

• (1100)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I can assure the member I am going to be talking about faith and I am going to be talking about motions. I am really frustrated, because there are so many other opportunities. That is why I started off by posing a question for my friend across the way: Has the Bloc raised the issue at PROC?

Let us remember that what we are talking about is changing the Standing Orders. Which standing committee deals with changing the Standing Orders? It is the procedures and House affairs committee. It meets twice a week. The Bloc has representation on that committee. If it is such an important issue, why have the Bloc

members not at least addressed the issue or tried to bring it up at PROC? I think they are really off base on this.

There is a list of questions that we all have about the Standing Orders. In fact, there is a rule that says that every so often we have to debate the need for changes to our Standing Orders, and that is actually what the Bloc members are trying to do today. The month of June is when it comes up. We are actually going to be dedicating a day of the House to talk about changing the rules. Why would the Bloc not seriously raise the issue at that particular debate? If they are not happy with that because they say they cannot move a motion, why did they not raise it at the PROC committee? They say they want a full, wholesome debate here inside the House of Commons, but I can say there are many issues before our standing committees for which ultimately the very same argument could be made. I think they are using it as a justification.

When I was thinking in terms of the different types of issues on which I would have liked to contribute to the debate today, I made reference to the pandemic and to the war. I made reference to the environment and climate change. I talked about health care. What about the issue of seniors? Seniors in Canada are looking for strong political advocacy. We have seen a government that has been very proactive and progressive in dealing with sound policies around seniors. When we are talking about changing a standing order versus talking about what is happening in our communities with respect to our seniors, I would have put a whole lot more weight on that issue.

Let us think in terms of faith. Two weeks ago, I was at Kalgidhar Darbar Gurdwara. After visiting that Sikh gurdwara, I went to the Sikh Society's gurdwara on Mollard. My campaign co-chair, Ashas, actually has the entire Quran memorized. I had just recently given greetings for the 30th anniversary of Falun Gong, which is actually taking place later this week. I have a dear friend, a friend of 30 years, who brought me a while back to a Buddhist temple.

I say this because Canada is a great nation with a great deal of diversity. I understand the importance of spirituality and the role that it plays in society, and I am very respectful of that. Yes, I am of Christian faith, and St. Peter's Church is a growing church, with over 5,000 parishioners who attend it in Winnipeg North. I understand the multitude of different faiths and the important role they play in society, and I can say this: Whether I am visiting a gurdwara, a temple, a church or even someone's living room where we are talking about faith, no one, not one person in the last 10 years, has raised the issue of a prayer in the House of Commons. To me, that says a great deal.

• (1105)

In the last little while, I have stood in my place and talked about how important it is that we try to enable debate on a wide variety of issues that are having an impact on the lives of Canadians, day in and day out. It is one of the reasons, as a government, we are trying to say that we understand there is a limited and finite amount of debate that can take place inside this chamber, and we were prepared to extend the hours. With the support, not of the Bloc but of the New Democrats, we were actually successful in passing a motion that enables more debate on the issues that Canadians are facing day in and day out.

I am not too sure, but I believe the Bloc voted against it. Members can correct me when I get my questions and answers, but I believe they actually voted against it. Then, on the other hand, they often say from their seats that we should not be trying to speed through legislation, because they want more debate time. That tells me that they recognize the importance of the debate, which is a good thing.

In the past we have seen that the Bloc seems to recognize the value of a standing committee. This issue could go to the PROC committee just as easily; in fact it would be easier than bringing it to the floor of the House of Commons. I think they understand that. After all, when it came to the MAID legislation, Bloc members were advocating that we sit past the summer months, and because we have demonstrated as a government that we are listening and working with the opposition where we can, we are in fact sitting well past the summer on the MAID special committee. That in itself shows that the Bloc, or at least its House leadership, understands the process.

If that is the case, why would the Bloc be bringing forward this motion today? One can only speculate. Sometimes, when we speculate, we get into trouble. I believe that at the end of the day, the Bloc is trying to be a little mischievous here, as opposed to dealing with the issues of the day, and there are many.

Prior to getting into this debate, I brought forward a petition. I stood in my place and I presented a petition that was signed by residents of Winnipeg North. The essence of that petition was to say how important the old age supplement and the guaranteed income supplement are. It highlighted the government's New Horizons program and made reference to organizations like Age and Opportunity. It kind of brought them all together to say that as parliamentarians, we should be advocating for our seniors.

This is the part where I think the Bloc would be really interested. As part of the petition, it said that when it comes to seniors and talking about prayers, it is important—

• (1110)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard: Madam Speaker, the member has been talking for five minutes about a petition he presented on seniors. At some point—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Order. It is important not to interrupt a colleague who is giving a speech. The parliamentary secretary chooses how he answers the question, and he has spoken extensively to the motion.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I just raised the issue of the petition, only because I was talking about the petition earlier. I presented it earlier today, and I might have spent maybe a minute on it, but I think there is some relevancy to it, because federal versus provincial jurisdiction is an issue that the Bloc often talks about as being important. A part of that petition was calling on all parliamentarians to advocate for seniors and for governments of all levels to work together. It is a novel idea that I would suggest to my colleagues in the Bloc. This is something that is a reflection of many

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of the constituents I represent, some of whom actually signed that petition.

That is the point I am really trying to hammer home. It is the fact that we have a very finite amount of time to debate important public issues. The Bloc is in a very good position in the sense that, as the second opposition party, it is provided the opportunity to bring up opposition day motions. However, I truly believe that at the end of the day, the motion the Bloc is proposing that we debate and vote on today is very much off the topic of what is on the minds of Canadians.

When we talk about changing the Standing Orders, and that is what I would encourage my colleagues and others to contribute to when they are standing up and contributing to this debate, it is to broaden them. We can talk about the priorities, but we can also talk about the changes to the Standing Orders, because I believe there is a need for us to look at ways in which we can improve the functionality of the House of Commons.

As this is a motion that would change the Standing Orders, I would like to share a few thoughts in regard to what we could have been talking about, and no doubt what we will be talking about come June, because that is when the debate on the Standing Orders is going to be coming up.

There are some very simple changes that I would like. An example of that is that I like the idea that we should have some sort of digital time clock, so that members can look at the time clock and do their own count, in terms of time, so we know how much remains. That is a thing I think we would get universal agreement for.

I like ideas that might enable more members to participate in debates. There are many members of the House on both sides, for example, who would ultimately argue that we should work on Fridays, and others who would say that those should be constituency days. I would argue that we should start at eight o'clock in the morning and go until eight or nine o'clock in the evening, but with a bit of a condition: that the member of Parliament notify the Speaker in advance, let us say by the Wednesday, that he or she would like to be able to address a particular non-votable issue and allow it to go to debate. That member of the House could choose what he or she would like to debate, such as something that is in second reading, which would enable that person to provide his or her thoughts on important legislation. We might even expand that into Private Members' Business.

The point is that there are many standing order changes that would improve the functionality of this House, and that debate will be coming up in June. I would encourage my friends in the Bloc to take into consideration the motion we are talking about today, on the issue of prayers, and maybe bring it back into that debate. I would be happy to give leave for the Bloc to change the topic, and we could talk about our environment, housing, the war or the pandemic. There are many other issues we could talk about today, and we can continue this debate when the debate—

• (1115)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): We are going to hear questions now.

The hon. member for Jonquière.

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[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am always surprised when I listen to a speech by my colleague from Winnipeg North.

I simply want to reiterate some points in response to everything he said. We spent an opposition day discussing health care funding, and it went nowhere because his government did absolutely nothing. We had another opposition day on seniors, and a vote was held in the House, but your government did not budge. As for the environment, give me a break. We ask questions every day, but then you go and approve Bay du Nord.

You know, there is a strategy that is very—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I will remind the hon. member to address the Chair and not another member directly.

Mr. Mario Simard: Madam Speaker, thank you for the reminder.

There is a very simple strategy: If someone wants to put down their dog, they say it has rabies. The government does not want to debate the Prime Minister's ethical issues because it says now is not the time to be debating them. My Conservative colleagues do not want to debate abortion because they say now is not the time to debate abortion.

I have been involved in Quebec politics for the past 35 years, and one issue that has been omnipresent is the place of religion. The issue was examined by the Bouchard-Taylor commission. Ultimately, Bill 21 was introduced in the Quebec National Assembly and passed.

Someone who says that Quebecers take no interest in the issue of secularism is someone who knows absolutely nothing about Quebec's reality. Even today, people say that secularism is a type of racist policy. What we are trying to do is to make our institutions neutral. If that cannot be done with this legislature, we have one hell of a problem.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I would remind the hon. member to watch his language.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, what I am saying is that I believe Quebecers want to see parliamentarians of all political stripes talk about issues of the day that actually impact them. For example, the member made reference to health care and said that he has brought it up. Good for the Bloc for bringing up health care. I can assure Bloc members that there are many issues facing seniors. The member also made reference to the environment. We could talk about Quebec still having mandatory masking, and many politicians in the House would say that it is not a good idea. That is not coming from our government, because we follow health experts and science.

The point is that there are so many other things on the minds of Quebecers. However, the member should not worry, as I can as-

sure him that, at least from a Liberal caucus perspective, we will be dealing with those issues.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the opportunities in this place to discuss issues that everyone does not agree with. Obviously, that is the essence of what we do. However, to me and my constituents, it is offensive that the Bloc does not enter the House until after the national anthem, *O Canada*, is sung because they openly indicate that their purpose is to separate from Canada. They freely do not pledge allegiance to Canada, yet clearly all members and I respect the reality that this is their choice in this place.

The premise of the separation of church and state is an American construct, and it is being abused here, because its purpose is to protect the church from the state, not the other way around. Also, the Christian God is definitely not the only god being prayed to in this prayer, as the member mentioned. I too have wonderful conversations with colleagues across party lines about faith and their beliefs that define who God is, including those who honestly see themselves in that role for themselves.

Our charter is here to protect citizens from compelled belief by the government, and now it is being abused on fundamental freedoms: freedom of conscience, which the previous member spoke to, and freedom of expression in the public square afforded by the charter itself. Religion and the expression of faith are not just private matters—

• (1120)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, whether the national anthem is being sung in our classrooms, our schools, arenas or football games, the maple leaf means a great deal. I have always personally enjoyed hearing the national anthem sung on the floor of the House of Commons, especially when our pages do it. I look forward to the pages getting back to their whole grouping and the singing of the national anthem. It is a beautiful song when sung bilingually. I encourage all members to participate in the singing of our national anthem.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very proud to rise. For people back home who do not know what goes on in Parliament, opposition motions are really important because they give us the chance to lay out key issues. It has been fascinating listening to my colleagues in the Bloc talk about legislatures across Canada. I did not know they were so fascinated by the broader federal system. They are talking about regulations in Parliament that nobody has ever really heard of. This was an opportunity to bring forth big important issues, like, for example, Bay du Nord or Roe v. Wade and the rights of women.

Although I know he voted with the Conservatives to try to stop a woman's right to choice, I would like to ask my hon. colleague how important is it at this time to debate key issues that matter to people, as opposed to regulations in the House of Commons that nobody has ever paid attention to.

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Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, the member has been around for a number of years, as I have. That is why I tried to emphasize the last 10 years. If memory serves me correctly, I can honestly say that, since I became a parliamentarian over 30 years ago, it has not been an issue. If we look at it from that perspective and see what is happening around the world and in our nation today, whether it is a court ruling in the United States, a war in Europe or a worldwide pandemic, there is so much more we could have been debating today. I just see this as a lost opportunity.

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): Madam Speaker, many times I have heard the member for Winnipeg North speak in the House. Usually it is about delusional items, like how great his government is, but still I have listened. I never thought I would ever agree with the member for Winnipeg North because of that, but today I am.

I want to ask the member if he feels that Bloc members were trying to grandstand, divide our parties and create some kind of great wedge between us, but now they are starting to realize that their motion is going nowhere.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I appreciate the member's comments. If he wants to have a hug afterward, we can have a hug based on the question.

At the end of the day, I made the suggestion somewhat lightly, but I do think there is some merit to it. If the Bloc did want to change the topic, I could suggest one or two. One that comes to mind is the climate issue and our environment. I say that because I know that many of my Quebec colleagues within our caucus constantly talk about the importance of the environment and the impacts of climate change. With unanimous consent, we could do that. It would probably be the first time since I have been here, but I would be prepared to see that happen.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Madam Speaker, the member for Winnipeg North has mentioned his interest in getting questions from the Bloc on the climate crisis. While I cannot comment on their choice for today, they have often raised really important concerns, specifically with Bay du Nord.

I wonder if the member for Winnipeg North would like to comment on how the governing party approved Bay du Nord mere days after the UN Secretary-General called decisions like this “moral and economic madness”.

• (1125)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, that is a good question. As my New Democratic friend pointed out in his question, that could have been what we are debating today. There is no doubt that a lot of Canadians, particularly people in Quebec, are concerned about Bay du Nord. At the end of the day, if we were to have that kind of debate, we would hear critiques coming from opposition members and explanations coming from the government as to why this is a good thing for Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to once again rise in the House to speak on behalf of my constituents in Barrie—Innisfil. I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent.

[English]

Today is an opposition day, which means that one of the opposition parties gets to decide the topic of conversation here in the House. This is one of two Bloc opposition days this spring, when we get to discuss some matters that are important to the Bloc and I expect to the people of Quebec. With great respect to my colleagues, and I mean that sincerely, we should be discussing issues that are having a profound impact on Canadians and Quebecers, such as affordability, the RCMP investigation into the fraud of the Prime Minister and his lucky break with regard to that, the Liberals' conduct on foreign relations and government mismanagement with regard to accountability. We have a passport crisis, a fiasco, that is happening in this country that should be discussed. There is also the increasingly sketchy justification shown by the government for invoking the Emergencies Act. That is just to name a few.

This country has never been more divided than it has been in the last six and a half years, along regional, racial, ethnic and faith lines. The division we have seen in the last six and a half years is a result of the Prime Minister wedging, stigmatizing and dividing Canadians. We have been hearing a lot of disinformation in the House from the government side, and it is, quite frankly, disturbing. It relates to the invocation of the Emergencies Act. Talking today about Standing Order 30 will not, I suspect, gather much attention across this country, perhaps with the exception of the House.

I do not know about anyone else, but when I was in my riding this weekend, as I am every weekend, not a single person came up to me and asked what my position was on Standing Order 30. What is Standing Order 30? In short, it directs the Speaker to read a prayer at the start of the day's sitting before the TV cameras are turned on. No one sees this. It is a private moment of reflection for the 338 of us who sit in the House. That is why the Speaker always follows the moment of reflection with “Let the doors be opened”. The doors are opened and the public comes in.

Only on the rarest of occasions has the public ever actually been privy to it. My staff told me, and some staff have been here for more than 40 years, a long time, that the last occasion the prayer was read in public was October 23, 2014. That is the day after the terrorist attack at Centre Block and the National War Memorial. That was the day that Kevin Vickers, the Sergeant-at-Arms who downed the armed gunman in the Hall of Honour, led the Speaker's parade into the House.

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Mr. Vickers was rightly greeted with a sustained three-minute standing ovation by a packed chamber that morning. The prayer was read, and I can say that I understand the moment and the incidents of that week really put into perspective the prayer's call to "give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Canada and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity and peace that we enjoy."

After the prayer, the House erupted into a very emotional and heartfelt rendition of *O Canada*. Mr. Vickers, the true hero he was, did not gloat in arrogance or beam with pride. Rather, he struggled valiantly to keep his tears to a minimum, much as we might expect any genuine Canadian hero to be: modest in demeanour and deeply humbled by displays of gratitude.

All of that was visible to Canadians that day because the hon. member for Regina—Qu'Appelle, who was then the Speaker, made the executive decision to allow Canadians into the galleries and for the TV cameras to be turned on so we could witness it. The House needed it and the nation needed it, especially after a very distressing day in Ottawa, when no one really quite knew what or how much was happening.

The video of that morning of raw emotions when the prayer was open to the public can still send chills down one's spine. That procedure of a prayer normally read in private is rooted, as I mentioned, in Standing Order 30, which traces its origins to 1927, when our rule book went through a significant update driven by a special committee chaired by the Speaker. That amendment was a simple codification of a practice that began in the 1870s after the adoption of a recommendation from another special committee.

• (1130)

The current prayer read daily was developed by the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in 1994 under the chairmanship of Peter Milliken, with a view to having a short prayer reflecting the diversity of religions embraced by Canadians. Do we see a pattern here? It is that committees and consensus drove these decisions.

Canada's Conservatives have long held and long observed the importance and necessity of amending our internal rules and procedures through consensus. It is an important point when we are talking about the rules that regulate the balance between governments and oppositions, especially when we consider the fact that Canadians ask Conservatives and Liberals to swap sides of this chamber every few years. Another switch, I am sure, is coming pretty soon.

The approach is just as relevant when it comes to matters of conscience such as prayer. On top of that, we are required by our own rules to conduct a review of our procedures after every election. The motion would have been a natural suggestion to raise then.

Standing Order 51 requires the House to hold a day-long discussion sometime between the 60th and 90th sitting day of the Parliament. The results of that conversation are then referred to the procedure and House affairs committee to consider.

Today is the 68th day the House has sat since the election. Based on our calendar, the 90th sitting day will be on June 16. Quite liter-

ally, we are going to be holding a comprehensive discussion about changes to our procedures sometime within the next five weeks.

A member of the Bloc could have used a few minutes of his or her 10-minute speaking slot to make the suggestion and then seen where the committee goes with that idea. Perhaps a consensus would form around the proposal in today's Bloc motion. Maybe the consensus would back the status quo, or possibly even recommend some third approach we have not thought of yet. That speaks to the power of parliamentary committees and of consensus-based rule-making, and it should be happening in this case, as well.

Therefore, I will be voting against the Bloc motion, because I sincerely believe that permanent changes to our procedural rules, and especially on a subject matter like this, really ought to come from a Standing Order review process, be deliberated upon by a committee and be implemented as the result of a consensus-based recommendation coming from that committee of MPs, as they always have been.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would simply like to say that I think that the neutrality of institutions is likely one of the most determinative issues in politics. An institution must not speak on behalf of any one faith or ethnic minority. If we respect differences, then our institutions should be neutral. That is the first thing.

With regard to the choice of topic, I would simply like to point out to my colleague that, during the first wave of the pandemic, his party moved a motion on one of its opposition days to say that oil is irreplaceable and that Canada should have a national day to celebrate oil. That happened in the midst of the first wave. If we were to ask Quebecers whether they are interested in knowing that oil is irreplaceable, I am not sure they would say yes. If we were to ask them about secularism, a debate that has been going on in Quebec for the past 25 years, I think they would have something to say.

[English]

Mr. John Brassard: Madam Speaker, I am not sure if the motion he is referring to was about national oil day, or whether it spoke to the importance of energy independence in this country and not relying on despot nations such as Russia for dependence on oil, or on Venezuela or Saudi Arabia.

I guess there is a fundamental difference in perhaps, and I say this respectfully, what the Bloc feels is important. This, to me, is not necessarily an important issue when it comes to the orders of this place. It is done, as I said, in private. There is a moment for quiet reflection, and oftentimes in that quiet reflection I pray for a change of government. I pray for a return to normalcy in this country, where Canadians are united once again and not divided. Those are some of the things I focus on in my time of quiet reflection in private, in this chamber at the start of every session.

• (1135)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the opposition House leader made reference to the month of June, when we will be witnessing a number of debates taking place, all of which will no doubt be making suggestions for Standing Order changes that would ultimately then go to Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

I am wondering if the member could provide his thoughts. Could a motion have been brought directly to PROC before it would even be entertained to come here?

Mr. John Brassard: Madam Speaker, I think the hon. member knows the answer to the question. Absolutely, as I referred to in my speech today, there is a long-standing process for us to change the Standing Orders.

I am looking forward to that discussion. I am sure that all members on all sides of the House will have suggestions on how we can improve the Standing Orders, not the least of which, and I hope there is all-party consensus for this, is that we end this fiasco of virtual sittings and get back to some sense of normalcy, where all members come back in this place, as other legislatures have done in G7 countries around the world and other provinces in this country.

It is time we get back to normal, and I hope that the Standing Orders will reflect that.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will say, for my part, that I do not want to diminish in any way the significance of the motion that is before us. I know that Canadians come from all walks of life and different faith traditions. Some are not people of faith at all, but they have their own senses of values and what is important to them. I think that symbols matter here, and the opening prayer has been a symbol.

I think it is appropriate for us to discuss this. However, if the goal is to make a change, I do not think the mechanism of an opposition day motion is wrong, but I would say that none of us came to Ottawa on Sunday knowing that this was something we were going to discuss. It has not been something that we have had an opportunity to discuss within our caucuses. It is not something we have had an opportunity to hear from our constituents on.

It seems to me that this is not a great process. Even if it was to be done by an opposition day, the lack of notice means that we have missed an opportunity to really engage with Canadians about what this symbol, if it is indeed an important symbol to them, means to them to make these changes.

Does the hon. member want to comment a little on the nature of the process that we are undergoing right now?

Mr. John Brassard: Madam Speaker, I hope that I did not diminish, in any way. I really tried to show respect to the Bloc's motion on this. It is the party's right, in the supply period, to have these types of opposition day motions. They get two, as I mentioned.

There was a notice of two motions that were put on the order paper on Friday. We knew that one of those two was a possibility, and we prepared for the eventuality that this may be the motion.

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Again, I go back to the Standing Orders being the appropriate venue to change the Standing Orders based on consensus, based on the involvement of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs and based on deliberation through that process.

This is a long-standing tradition and process that we should continue to engage in, and not use opposition day motions to change the Standing Orders.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague, the House leader for the official opposition, for his very informative speech on parliamentary procedure, which is what we are talking about today.

Today we are debating a change to Standing Order 30 from the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. This standing order, which has been around since 1927, provides for the Speaker to read a four-sentence prayer. This has been a tradition in the House since 1877.

Yesterday I timed how long it takes to read the prayer. It took exactly 28 seconds. If I stumbled in reading it, it took 31 seconds. That is what we are debating today.

Allow me to give a little context.

Right before the doors open to visitors coming into the House of Commons and before the debates start being broadcast on TV, the Speaker enters the House and sits in the chair. The discussions happen in camera. The Speaker reads a prayer that, as I just pointed out, lasts about 30 seconds. The prayer is then followed by a moment of reflection. That is the tradition. Once that is done, the doors are opened.

I have been present for this procedure hundreds of times. I cannot recall anyone ever taking issue with it. The House reflects the Canadian mosaic in all its glory. We have people who are atheists and others who are Christian, Muslim or of any other faith. I do not recall anyone ever feeling uncomfortable during that ceremony. That is how I see this.

I have focused my attention on two aspects of the Bloc Québécois approach. The Bloc Québécois is suggesting that we abolish prayer and replace it with a moment of reflection. That would be like running headlong into an open door to try to open it. We already have a moment of reflection. The Bloc Québécois is suggesting that we replace something with something that we already have. It is not exactly a minor factor in the equation.

The other factor is that changing the Standing Orders of the House of Commons usually has to be done through the committee of the office of parliamentary operations, which meets once a week and is made up of all of the House leaders, the whips, the security teams and the Speaker. This committee meets in camera to debate certain proposals and traditionally makes decisions by consensus. This is a well-established standard procedure.

I am not saying that the Bloc Québécois is going against the rules. On the contrary, the Bloc has the right to do what it wants on its opposition day, but I will get back to that later.

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As my colleague, the House leader for the official opposition, mentioned earlier, the proper course of action is to debate this topic in the appropriate forum, every week that the committee meets. The committee of the office of parliamentary operations favours consensus and lets all political parties express their opinion. The Bloc Québécois decided to do things differently.

In my opinion, there are two somewhat surprising points of view. First, I find it surprising that the Bloc Québécois chose to use such a procedure, since this decision should be made by consensus. Second, it suggests replacing the prayer with a moment of reflection, when there already is one. I find that a little surprising.

There is something even more surprising, though. I have had the great privilege of being in politics, of having been elected to represent the people of Louis-Saint-Laurent, for almost seven years. Before that, I was a member of Quebec's National Assembly. Since I was also a journalist, I have been following political news for years. I can honestly say that no one has ever mentioned the prayer in the House of Commons to me. Some people may be concerned about it, and I certainly do not want to trivialize their concerns. In my 35 or 40 years of following politics, as a journalist and an elected member, I have never had anyone tell me that there was something wrong with saying a prayer in the House of Commons. That never happened, but that does not mean it is wrong to consider the matter. Now, the Bloc Québécois has introduced a motion.

However, there is one concern we hear about often. In my opinion, the one thing all Canadians are concerned about is inflation. Everyone is affected by it.

I would have liked to see a motion moved by the hon. member for Mirabel, who is an influential Bloc Québécois recruit from the last election and a major asset for his team. We could have debated concerns about inflation, problems caused by inflation and solutions proposed by the Bloc Québécois, but that is not what happened. Rather than talking about inflation with a motion moved by the hon. member for Mirabel, we are talking about prayer in the House of Commons.

• (1140)

We could have been discussing housing prices, which are continuing to skyrocket and which are a concern for Canadians. Young people do not have access to the dream we have all had in our lives, the privilege we had to be able to purchase a property when it was affordable. That time has passed. What solutions would the Bloc, the governing party, the official opposition and the NDP have proposed? We could have debated the subject all day, but instead we are talking about the 28-second prayer in the House of Commons.

We could have been talking about the carbon tax or the surging gas prices. Today, Quebecers woke up to the news that gas prices are now over \$2 a litre. Who would have believed it? The hon. member for Joliette has been sitting in the House since 2015 and is doing a good job. He could have raised this issue, and we could have debated it today. However, the hon. member for Joliette cannot talk about the cost of gas or inflation, despite the fact that he is a financial expert, because today we are talking about prayer in the House of Commons.

We could have discussed the 76th day of the war in Ukraine following the Russian invasion. Our Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs travelled to Kyiv this week, so it is a topical subject. We all want this war to end but, unfortunately, the ogre in the Kremlin has decided to continue attacking Ukrainians. We could have debated that in the House, but instead, the Bloc decided to talk about the 28-second prayer that is recited in the House of Commons.

The hon. member for Lac-Saint-Jean has asked dozens of genuinely interesting questions about Ukraine, specifically about how to get refugees to Canada. He has been asking these questions non-stop for weeks and weeks. The Bloc could have taken the opportunity today to dedicate its entire opposition day to addressing the topic that the hon. member for Lac-Saint-Jean has brought up from every angle since the very start. Instead, we are talking about the prayer.

We could have addressed this issue but, unfortunately for the hon. member for Lac-Saint-Jean and for the entire House of Commons, we did not. It would have given us an opportunity to explain how the government mishandled the issue. Are my colleagues aware that, yesterday, Newfoundland received Ukrainian refugees who landed here in Canada, in Newfoundland, thanks to the government of that province? The federal government is dragging its feet when it comes to letting refugees in, as the hon. Bloc Québécois member for Lac-Saint-Jean brings up every day, but Newfoundland managed. It would have been interesting to hear the Bloc Québécois talk about that all day, but instead we are talking about prayer in the House of Commons.

There is not one member of Parliament in Canada right now whose riding office is not being flooded with calls from constituents having problems with their passports. We are constantly asking questions about it here in the House, and we talk about specific cases in each of our ridings. That is a topic we could have discussed, as we did yesterday, when we brought up the problems with ArriveCAN that are affecting Canadians with travel plans.

The tourist season is almost upon us. Tourism is important in my region in Quebec City. ArriveCAN has to be flexible and ready for all Canadians, but that is not the case. That is a topic we could have discussed, but, unfortunately, we will not be discussing it today.

Interestingly, yesterday during question period, two members rose, namely the Bloc Québécois whip and the hon. member for La Pointe-de-l'Île. They asked questions about anglicization and the evidence that the French language is in danger. We could have debated that today in the House, but the Bloc decided otherwise.

What about the hot topic that is sadly affecting young people in some regions of Quebec, namely gun violence? Yesterday during question period, the hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord raised the issue because there had been a shooting in the Laval region. There was another shooting yesterday in Villeray. That is a topic that the hon. member for Rivière-du-Nord, a veteran MP who has served since 2015, could very well have raised in the House for debate, so that we could get to the bottom of the issue and suggest ways to improve the situation. Instead, the Bloc decided to talk about something else entirely. That is its choice.

• (1145)

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Madam Speaker, I liked the way the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent described most of the Bloc's interventions on the economy, firearms, anglicization and so on. This proves that we speak on a multitude of issues, and I thank him for that.

I do not understand why he is criticizing us for that, as if it is a bad thing. I also think it is a red herring to say that this is not a real issue because there is such and such other issue.

I would like to come back to the René Lévesque government, which decided to abolish this prayer in the 1970s. Did this prevent it from being one of the most proactive governments in the history of Quebec? I think the answer is no.

The member just reminded us that he sat in the Quebec National Assembly for a long time. Every time he stood up for the moment of reflection, did he curse the Lévesque government for having wasted time to get to that point?

I would point out that the purpose of our motion is not to add a moment of reflection, since it already exists, but to eliminate the prayer.

• (1150)

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Madam Speaker, the Bloc member should know that the Standing Orders were changed in 1972, but prayers were not abolished in the Quebec National Assembly until 1976.

During those moments of reflection, everyone reflects in their own way, as we do here in the House of Commons after the reading of the prayer, which no one has a problem with.

I am surprised that my friends from the Bloc are so passionate about secularism, given how much work awaits the member for Drummond. He moved this motion and claims to support secularism, but this principle should be fully implemented everywhere. In the member's own riding, we find Saint-Pie-de-Guire, Saint-Bonaventure, Saint-Guillaume, Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham, Sainte-Eugénie, Saint-Germain-de-Grantham, Saint-Majorique-de-Grantham, Sainte-Brigitte-des-Saults, Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Conseil, Saint-Lucien and Saint-Félix-de-Kingsey. There is also the Saint-François River and the Sainte-Croix hospital. There is quite a lot of work to do at the provincial level.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I enjoyed my friend's remarks this morning. I am listening to him read off a number of issues, and there is no doubt we disagree in terms of how the government has actually delivered on many of the points he has raised. Having said that, the essence of what he is saying, from my perspective, is about the opportunity for debate. Through this particular motion, yes, the House will be consumed with a day's debate on this particular issue.

Being from the province of Quebec, if he could have introduced a motion, what single issue would he have brought up today?

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Madam Speaker, for once I deeply appreciated the member for Winnipeg North's speech a few minutes ago. I

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know I recognize him for a lot of skills, but his speech today was very good, and for once I can say that today.

I think the member raised an issue that is very important, and it is concerning to all Canadians. Yes, there are some issues we are concerned with as parliamentarians, but we are here for the people. We have mandates from our people. Maybe I am wrong, but today I think people in my riding are more concerned about inflation, housing and affordability. Those issues are very concerning to all Canadians. I am not quite sure the prayer we have to say here in the House of Commons off camera is very important for the people we represent.

[Translation]

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I recognize the importance of faith and spirituality in Canadians' lives. I also recognize the importance of symbols here in the House of Commons.

However, I wonder why we are having a debate on an important symbol. If the goal was to reach consensus to make a change and steer clear of a divide, why did we only get one or two days' notice on a motion to change something that has symbolic importance, and then some?

In any event, in a few weeks, we will be having a debate on the Standing Orders of the House of Commons.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Madam Speaker, we work under a set of rules that must be agreed upon.

It is entirely legitimate that the issue of prayer be raised in the debate we are having here in the House; I recognize that. However, I am not sure that it is really topical. In addition, when it comes to the Standing Orders, this is not the way to do it. It is done by consensus.

I said it quickly earlier, but I will go into more detail. In 1972, after consulting with all political parties, the Quebec National Assembly concluded that it would withdraw the prayer. However, they did not do so immediately because they knew some individuals were still reluctant about it. So they started with an abbreviated reading and, upon reaching consensus in 1976, they removed the prayer with the support and concurrence of all members.

That is the way to do it, but that is not how the Bloc is suggesting we proceed now. It is disappointing.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to start by saying that I will be sharing my time with my hon. colleague, the member for New Westminster—Burnaby. I am very eager to hear what he has to say about the motion we are debating today.

My speech is divided into two parts. First, I will talk about how important state neutrality is for all leftist men and women and for all progressives. The role of the state is not to promote a particular religion or belief. It must even respect non-believers.

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On a personal note, I have been a member of Parliament for 11 years. I have the honour of representing the people of Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie. I must admit that, when I first came to the House, to Parliament, and I heard the morning prayer before the start of the day, I was a little surprised. I did not think there was a prayer. I did not think it was still current practice. There is a very clear religious connotation. It begins with “Almighty God” and ends with “Amen”. For an atheist like myself, there is a Christian connotation that can come as a shock to members of the House who are non-believers. It is an important message, since it links the Canadian parliamentary institution with religion, and with one religion in particular.

I am old enough to have had religion classes in school. There was a Catholic school board and a Protestant school board. I am very glad that the Parti Québécois government took religion out of the school boards in 1999. I think the separation of church and state was important for the neutrality of institutions. The NDP differentiates between institutions and workers. We can discuss that subject some other time.

Important things have been done. In his first inauguration speech, President Barack Obama acknowledged the presence of non-believing Americans for the first time. I thought that was an important gesture. It was an important symbol. Symbols are important. We agree on that. The separation of church and state is a major symbol.

Is this a topic worth spending an entire opposition day on? That is a valid question. It is a question worth asking. If the Bloc Québécois wanted to raise this perfectly valid question, it had a variety of tools to choose from. I think the motion makes sense, but our time in this institution is precious and limited. A unanimous consent motion takes about a minute after question period. My colleagues in the Bloc Québécois often take advantage of that procedure. A unanimous consent motion has the same effect as an opposition day motion. It is a declaration of Parliament's intent. If the Bloc Québécois wanted to talk about the matter at hand, it could have moved a unanimous consent motion.

If it wanted to change the House's internal rules, it could have addressed this matter to the Board of Internal Economy. The board meets after every election to review and revise the House rules. It should be meeting between now and mid-June. We could have had this discussion to determine whether we want to continue reciting the prayer or to replace it with a moment of reflection. With a view to a clearer separation of church and state, we could have had this discussion and potentially reached a consensus among all members.

We are taking a whole day to discuss something that may make me personally uncomfortable, but that does not change much in the lives of the Quebecers and Montrealers I represent. I more or less agree with my colleague, the hon. member for Louis-Saint-Laurent. I have been an MP for 11 years, and no one in Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie has ever mentioned the prayer to me. I may have an opinion on the subject. I may think it is important. I may not want to enter the House because I am uncomfortable during the prayer. I wait in the lobby and I enter once the prayer is finished. The prayer is not even televised, so it is not public. This is an internal administrative matter, so we should discuss it among ourselves.

In the House, we should discuss things that have an impact on families' lives. Right now, we are talking about ourselves. We will spend an entire day talking about ourselves to find out whether we agree or disagree, feel comfortable or uncomfortable.

A lot of people in my riding are asking for things. They are suffering, they are hurting and they are desperate because the federal administration is not working or because the wrong decisions are being made. I wrote to the employees at my Montreal office this morning and asked what people talk about when they call in.

● (1155)

There are a number of things we could have discussed today in order to find solutions, but the first thing callers talk about these days is the huge mess with EI. The processing times for EI cheques are horrendous right now. Dozens and dozens of people call the office to complain. These are not small delays. People who have just lost their job apply for EI because they need money to make ends meet, to pay their rent and pay for groceries, but they are being asked to wait three months, three and a half months or even four months. What kind of agreement can someone make with their landlord if there is no money coming in for four months?

I would have liked to talk about that today, because that is a priority for people in Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie right now. That is what they are concerned about this morning as we speak. They are desperate and they are panicking. That is not to mention the wait times for passports and everything to do with immigration, such as student visas, work visas, permanent residency, and citizenship. Wait times have soared in the past two years. It is crazy. People are living in uncertainty. They are being told that they will get a decision in two or three months but, in some cases, two or three years go by and they still do not have an answer. We recently learned that it can take 10 years to get the official document stating that they are allowed to build a life here in Montreal or Quebec. Right now, the federal government is conspicuously absent. For Canadians, not getting an answer can have serious consequences. Where will they live? Will they have to go back to their country of origin? Are they allowed to work here or not?

However, the Bloc members do not want to discuss these things. They want to talk about the prayer. They do not like the prayer, and neither do I, but that is not what Quebecers talk to me about in real life, on the ground. They talk about their living and working conditions.

Let us discuss EI. We are still awaiting EI reform. Let us not forget that the program was dysfunctional even before the pandemic. We knew it was ineffective. We need to prioritize EI reform, because most workers who pay into the program cannot get a cheque because the number of hours needed to qualify for EI benefits is too high, and it is even worse in some regions and in the case of seasonal workers. Workers who pay into EI cannot get a cheque, and that is not taking into account those who are not even entitled to contribute. Self-employed workers, freelancers and gig workers do not have a social security net and cannot even participate in the system, even if it worked, which it does not. I would have liked to be able to discuss this, to be able to say to the government, “This is the reality for workers and the unemployed in Quebec. How can we make it better?”

Let us talk about housing. There has been a housing crisis in Montreal and Quebec for years, and it is only getting worse. For both individuals and families, rent is always the largest household expense. During the election campaign last fall, people constantly brought the subject up in the streets, in parks, and when I was going door to door. They said they were afraid they would have to leave their beloved neighbourhood because they could not find housing that would not plunge them into debt or stretch their finances to the limit. A growing number of people are spending more than 30% of their income on housing. In my riding, there are people spending more than 50% of their income on housing. Until recently, the definition of affordable housing in Montreal, according to the Liberal government, was \$2,225 a month. Fortunately, the NDP was able to get the definition of affordable housing changed. For Montrealers, affordable housing will cost a maximum of \$730 a month. That is going to change people's lives. We changed the definition. It is established and paid for by the CHMC. That means \$1,500 less per month for people to have access to these housing units. These are investments in the rapid housing program. There is a shortage of housing units on the market, and we negotiated with the government to change the situation.

There is a lot more. We succeeded in getting money for housing co-operatives. This had not happened for 20 years. Housing co-operatives are an excellent system because the housing units are not affected by the market, market logic or profit. These are initiatives that make a difference in people's lives and that we would have liked to discuss, because there is still so much work to be done.

I could also talk about the climate, the climate crisis, the cost of prescription drugs or the safety of cyclists in Montreal and other cities. There are a lot of things I would have liked to discuss today instead of talking about my discomfort in certain situations.

● (1200)

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie for his speech. Our opposition day is clearly not useless since it has allowed the NDP to reel off its accomplishments. At least that is something.

Several thoughts came to mind during his speech. First, in 2019, we sought the unanimous consent of the House to adopt a motion with similar objectives, but it was defeated.

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An opposition day is purposely designed for proposing subjects that are not necessarily front-page news but that are nevertheless important to various parliamentarians. It is well within the Bloc's right, and it is our choice. I take some exception to the fact that some parties are now questioning our “editorial” choice for opposition day. In the end, it is our choice.

I have also noted that the Liberals, Conservatives and NDP do not seem to want to discuss the issue itself but are more likely to simply criticize our choice of topic.

The NDP is saying that we do not want to debate important issues, yet it is going to support a gag order on a bill that is over 500 pages long, that contains some 60 measures and that will amend 37 laws. It feels we do not need to debate that bill, unlike the motion we are discussing today.

I do not really have any other questions. I simply wanted to comment and invite my colleague from Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie to respond.

● (1205)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Madam Speaker, my colleague is absolutely right. Bloc MPs have the right to make deplorable choices, but that is up to them. Likewise, we have the right to an opinion on the subject. If they ask us a question, obviously they should expect us to have an opinion.

Let me offer this reassurance, however. I will vote in favour of the principle underlying his motion, which I find valid. It is a legitimate question about which people can have an opinion.

What I myself would rather have talked about is workers who do not have access to affordable medication, especially part-time workers, who sometimes have to spend 25% of their income on supplementary insurance. Because of this, they are forced to live in poverty. That is why the Union des consommateurs du Québec, the FTQ, the CSQ and the CSN are calling for universal public pharmacare.

[English]

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Madam Speaker, the debate we are having here today I find to be quite interesting. The motion at hand is leading to the undermining of our institutions and removing some of the foundation of this place. Even our charter and the Constitution of this country recognize the supremacy of God.

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As we abandon some of these things that come from our history, we remove the foundations of our society; therefore, one day we will look back and wonder how we ended up where we are today. It will likely be because we have forgotten our heritage and removed some of these things. We do not live in a vacuum. The prayer at the beginning of the day is something that grounds us: It says there are things that are greater than this place and that there is an ethos that comes to this place. The whole of western civilization is based on Christianity. The idea that democracy is born out of and grows in Christian soil is important to recognize, and I am very grateful for the prayer.

I wanted to get that on the record today. I think it is a shame that we are debating this today. I think it is a shame that we would question that, and I would say that we ought to recognize the rich heritage that this country has based on the supremacy of God and the rule of law.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Madam Speaker, I do not know where to start because my colleague raises so many points.

I thank him for making such a clear comment, but I completely disagree with him. I do not think that taking prayer out of the House will undermine the foundations of our society, our democratic system or our Parliament. I think we have to respect the beliefs of everyone, whether they are Christian or not. There is a diversity of views on this in our society, and I think this diversity should be recognized. I think we also have to recognize that non-believers deserve to have a place and to exist.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would ask you to please let me know when I have one minute left because I have an amendment to present later.

I have no problem with the motion, and I will probably vote in favour of it. However, I agree with my colleague from Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, whose speech I really enjoyed and who spoke so well earlier, and with my colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent.

A day is set aside for the Bloc Québécois to present motions. The Bloc only gets one day for the entire spring session, during which it can discuss any important topic. This time, it chose to move a motion to amend Standing Order 30, concerning prayer.

As members know, I have lived in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, the Eastern Townships, Montreal and, of course, the Outaouais region. In all my years in Quebec, no one ever spoke to me once about prayer at the opening of a sitting of the House of Commons. People talk to me instead about other topics, which are important. That is why I am sad that the Bloc has chosen the motion it is moving today, instead of choosing a topic that really affects Quebecers.

The housing crisis is affecting all parts of Quebec, including Drummondville. In some cities, the vacancy rate is now less than 1%. There is an affordable housing crisis everywhere in Quebec.

The vacancy rate in Drummondville is 0.3%. In Mirabel and Granby, it is 0.1%. There is currently a housing crisis in cities like Rimouski, Rouyn-Noranda, Blainville, Vaudeuil, Boucherville, Salaberry-de-Valleyfield and all across Quebec. However, the Bloc

did not choose to talk about that on its only opposition day in the spring session.

Like most Quebecers, I think the climate crisis is an extremely important issue because we see how that crisis is affecting people across Quebec and around the world.

What happened to the people in the greater Vancouver area last summer is a good example of the effects of the climate crisis. New Westminster and Burnaby were among the areas hit by a heat wave that killed 600 people, including about 60 in New Westminster and about 60 in Burnaby. The heat reached record highs in British Columbia. Some people, particularly seniors and people with disabilities, were stuck in their small apartments with no air conditioning or fan. These people were hit hard by this crisis.

When I see the effects of climate change, I wonder why the Bloc Québécois chose to spend an entire day debating the prayer in the House of Commons on its only supply day in the spring session. There are so many much more important topics that we could have been discussing today.

• (1210)

Madam Speaker, some members are talking very loudly. Could you call them to order, please?

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): It seems that conversations are taking place as the member for New Westminster—Burnaby is trying to deliver his speech. I did not hear anyone speaking too loudly, but it is clear that the voices are coming from this side of the room, so I ask people to take their conversations outside the chamber if they are not interested in their colleague's speech. The hon. member for New Westminster—Burnaby always has interesting things to say, so I will let him continue.

• (1215)

Mr. Peter Julian: Madam Speaker, looking at what is happening in the United States with respect to women's right to abortion, it would seem that this crisis has crossed the border. Some women in Canada also face limited access to abortion. In many parts of the country, women do not have access to this aspect of health care, which is so important. It is so important, in fact, that we could have spent an entire day debating it in the House of Commons. It would have been an important and vigorous debate.

Additionally, as everyone is well aware, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is causing an international crisis, and democratic structures are crumbling in several countries. More and more, dictatorships are taking over. This also has an impact throughout the world, including in Canada and Quebec. Today's debate could have been about the crises that we are experiencing on the international scene.

There is also the crisis related to children's health. We know very well that today, on a global scale, we are going to lose 30,000 children. This affects pretty much all children around the world, and could have been part of today's discussion.

I am also thinking of the pandemic, which is affecting Canadians. People are still dying. All the issues related to the pandemic and the response to the pandemic are important, and we could have been talking about that all day.

An opposition day is a day when we should be talking about the real issues, in other words, things that affect people, that affect our constituents. As I said at the beginning of my speech, in all the years I spent in Quebec, no one ever said to me that the prayer at the opening of each sitting of the House of Commons was important to them.

As other speakers have already said, this issue could have been addressed in the debates on the Standing Orders of the House, which are set to begin in a few weeks in any event. I think the motion is acceptable and I see no problem with it, but I just want to point out that all these issues related to the prayer will be addressed in a few weeks anyway.

As far as today's motion is concerned, I think that we should talk about indigenous land acknowledgement, which is something we should have had for years. That is why, in closing, I propose an amendment, seconded by the member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie. I will read it.

That the motion be amended:

(a) by adding, after the words “abolished and replaced by”, the words “an indigenous land acknowledgement and”;

(b) by deleting the words “(1) A moment of reflection be observed” and substituting the words “(1) An indigenous land acknowledgement and a moment of reflection be observed”.

• (1220)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): It is my duty to inform hon. members that an amendment to an opposition motion may be moved only with the consent of the sponsor of the motion. Therefore, I ask the hon. member for Drummond if he consents to this amendment being moved.

The hon. member for Drummond.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Madam Speaker, with all due respect, I do not consent to the amendment.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Therefore, pursuant to Standing Order 85, the amendment cannot be moved at this time.

[English]

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Drummond.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Madam Speaker, this gives me the opportunity to explain why I believe the NDP amendment proposed by my colleague from New Westminster—Burnaby is out of order. I do want to mention that I really enjoy working with him on heritage files, among others.

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Today, certain members stated in their speeches that our motion is not important and that there are more important matters to address. All of a sudden, though, it is considered important enough to try to slip in something that perhaps reflects the priorities of his party more. I believe that if my NDP colleagues wish to move such a motion, they will definitely have the opportunity to do so on their next opposition day.

That said, I would like to take a few seconds to ask my colleague from New Westminster—Burnaby if he agrees that replacing the prayer with a moment of reflection does not offend people of faith. On the contrary, the point of having a moment of reflection is to include people of all faiths and those who have no religious beliefs or are atheists. It is inclusive.

I would like my colleague to comment on that.

Mr. Peter Julian: Madam Speaker, I also have a lot of respect for my colleague from Drummond.

I find it sad that the Bloc Québécois rejected the amendment to acknowledge indigenous land. This is something that people have been suggesting for years, and it is sad that the Bloc Québécois did not accept this amendment, which just makes sense.

As I said earlier, I have no issues with the motion and will probably vote in favour of it. However, I think there are other more pressing issues, and that is what I expressed in my speech.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I just want to pick up on the idea of Standing Orders with the member. When I think of changes to the Standing Orders, where there is anything of any real substance, members would want to, at the very least, make an attempt to reach out to other caucuses or other members. When motions are brought forward to the House, we often see that consultations are done in advance.

In June, we will be having a discussion on the Standing Orders in general. I am wondering if my colleague could provide his thoughts in regard to having a dialogue on that day, or perhaps even going to the procedures and House affairs committee, as opposed to arbitrarily trying to change a specific rule.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

I agree that we should discuss any changes to the Standing Orders together. That is coming. That was one of the points I made in my speech. It is coming either way, so these issues can be raised.

However, I think this was a missed opportunity, given the affordable housing crisis in Quebec, which is affecting regions all across Quebec. The Bloc Québécois could have moved a motion on the shortage of affordable housing units in Quebec, which we could have debated. That discussion would have had some teeth, since there is a shortage of affordable housing units all over Quebec.

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• (1225)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, the motion before us today has to do with the prayer that is read at the start of every sitting of the House of Commons.

Earlier, the member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie spoke about the problems with the employment insurance system, which, unfortunately, seems to be designed on a hope and a prayer instead of on effective public administration principles.

What does my colleague from New Westminster—Burnaby think about that?

Mr. Peter Julian: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

I know that he is really advocating for an EI system that is accessible to everyone.

I commend him and thank him for his work. That is the kind of thing that we could have discussed and debated in the House today.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Madam Speaker, it is my pleasure to speak to the motion today. I am not going to repeat the text of the motion, since we have been discussing it quite a bit for the last two hours.

I was elected not by God, but by voters. My job is to represent the people in my part of the country. I obviously do not bring up religion when I go knocking on doors. I am no better or worse than any other member. As members of Parliament, our job is also to meet with the people we represent. I have never asked anyone what their religion is. I have too much respect for people's beliefs. Religion is a personal matter and nobody else's business, especially not the government's.

Personally, I try to do a good job of representing the people and representing them to the best of my ability. I have looked up the statistics, but I am not going to talk about numbers or what the beliefs of various individuals are. I will not share with the House all of the comments that I had in mind when I saw the extremely broad range of beliefs.

Let us start with atheists. Atheists do not believe in God. Are they good or bad? I could not care less. The fact is that there are atheists, that is, people who do not believe in God. However, we are praying to God. The atheists must feel that they are not well represented.

Then there are the agnostics, that is, people who question whether God exists or not. These people do not care if God exists. They say to themselves, "Who am I to know?"

There are also people who believe in one God, namely the monotheists. Many religions identify with monotheism. This is the case with the most popular religions, if I may put it that way.

However, there are also religions where there are several gods. The prayer does not say "Gods", but "God" in the singular. Those who believe in multiple gods must feel that the prayer does not reflect who they are, even if they are citizens of Canada. They must wonder why parliamentarians in a democratic institution are talking about a belief that is not their own. They must feel excluded.

Finally, some people do not have religious beliefs, but other beliefs.

As soon as we incorporate anything religious, we lose representativeness. We like to go on about how we have a duty to represent the people, the community and all of its diversity. It does not matter where someone falls on the spectrum of belief, because that is none of our business.

If we want to have a government that respects religion, that respects beliefs and that is inclusive, which is the operative word here, we need to come up with a solution.

For example, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario reads a rotating selection of prayers. One day, they read a prayer to one god. The next day, they read a prayer to another god, and so on. This puts the religions in a hierarchy. Some will say that various religions are included in the rotation, but not their own. That means this does not fulfill the objectives that the government should be pursuing.

Guess what? The best way to respect religion is for the government to stay out of it altogether. I am choosing my words carefully: The government must be secular and not display any religious symbols, at the risk of excluding a whole segment of the population or voters. This is really not what we should be doing.

Personally, that is what I say and what I think. Do people agree or disagree? We are going to vote on this.

Now let me read a few brief quotes along these lines. I want to show that I am not an outlier and that people have thought about this before me.

Sometimes we wish that we had said this or that, or we wish that we were the one who came up with such and such a quote. I do not want to take credit for these quotes, because that would be plagiarism.

• (1230)

In their book *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure provide a conceptual analysis of the principles of secularism. Here is what they have to say:

Although it is generally assumed that the aim of a regime of secularism is still to find the appropriate relationship between the state and religions, its broader and more urgent task at present is to make it possible for democratic states to adapt adequately to the profound moral and spiritual diversity existing within their borders. The state must treat with equal respect all core beliefs and commitments compatible with the requirements of fair social cooperation.

They are therefore calling for state secularism.

Marie-Andrée Chouinard had this to say in *Le Devoir*, on June 1, 2013:

...state neutrality is assured when the state neither favours nor hinders any particular religious belief, that is, when it shows respect for all postures towards religion, including that of having no religious beliefs whatsoever...

Thus, the idea of prayer is inconsistent with religious neutrality.

I was a member of Quebec's National Assembly for six years. As someone mentioned earlier, the National Assembly has a moment of reflection. That is the solution for us.

As of December 15, 1976, prayer was no longer part of the daily routine in the National Assembly. I would like to read an excerpt that will really enlighten us. This is what Clément Richard, Speaker of the National Assembly at the time, said:

Out of respect for the members of this Assembly, who are not all necessarily of the same religious denomination, and out of respect for the Assembly, I have chosen to allow every member to pray as they see fit. During the moment of reflection, each member will have the opportunity to say a prayer to themselves, and it is out of respect for the Assembly that I have made this decision.

We can discuss this at length, but everyone has their own religion. A moment of reflection will give these people a chance to reflect and pray if they so choose. Those who are atheist, agnostic or other will do other things, but I do believe that a moment of reflection will motivate them to do an even better job. We hope so at least.

In 2015, the Supreme Court said:

...the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs. The state must instead remain neutral in this regard, which means that it must neither favour nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non-belief.

I believe that everything is in place for us to achieve that.

When I arrived in the House of Commons in 2019, I was surprised that there was a prayer. I was really astounded. Honestly, I did not expect it. In Quebec, when people learned that this was the subject of our opposition day, they were shocked. They did not know that a prayer was recited in the House of Commons, and they thought it was absurd.

When I am told that no one sees us reciting the prayer, I answer that these are symbols, that we represent Canadian and Quebec democracy and that we must be respectful of these people. Setting aside the symbols, there are the people, and we must have absolute respect for them. The only way to do that is for the state to be neutral.

• (1235)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, when we think about what is happening in Quebec today, in fact in all of Canada, the things that come to my constituents' minds deal with issues such as health care, seniors, the pandemic, what is taking place in Europe, our environment and so much more. This is an issue, as I pointed out earlier, that I have not been approached about in 10 years. No one has even raised the issue with me, yet the Bloc seems to want to make this the issue.

Does the member genuinely believe that this issue is more important than all of the other issues that I just listed, and that the people of Quebec would support this particular motion being debated when there are so many other issues that the people of Quebec and Canada are facing today?

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Speaker, we can walk and chew gum at the same time.

The member from Winnipeg North tells us that people are talking to him about seniors and health. We have been talking about these issues for two and a half years, but he does not listen to us.

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Now he is lecturing us on how we should be talking about seniors and health. We talk about these things non-stop. We talk about health transfers. All the premiers of the provinces and Quebec have been calling for an unconditional increase in health transfers to 35%. He is not listening. What more will it take? Do I have to get out the puppets and crayons?

He does not get it. Now he is saying that things are terrible for seniors, but the Liberals are the ones who created two classes of seniors. They gave seniors 75 and over an increase, but they did not increase anything for seniors between 65 and 75. They tell them that if they want money, then they have to work. So much for championing seniors' issues.

The member then goes and lectures others. I would be embarrassed if I were him.

[English]

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is always a pleasure to rise on behalf of the people of Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo. I am fairly new to this place, but as I understand it, there are only three opposition days that are accorded to my colleagues from the Bloc Québécois—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Two.

Mr. Frank Caputo: Pardon me, Madam Speaker, there are two. I appreciate my colleague for Winnipeg North pointing that out.

Is this really one of the top two issues we want to debate and discuss? There are issues around the House's support for Ukraine, social issues and housing issues. Is this really one of the top two issues to take up our time today?

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Speaker, there are several parliamentary tools that can be used, including opposition days. We are using this opposition day because I already tried moving a unanimous consent motion in the House of Commons and it did not work. We did the same thing for the issue of Quebec's nationhood. Now we have been forced to use an opposition day to put forward a motion to vote on so that we can finally get rid of this prayer. That is what we are doing.

If my colleague cannot understand that this subject is not the only thing we are talking about, I wonder why he is even here in Parliament. There is a question period, there is committee work, there are bills, there are consent motions, and there are all kinds of other things we can do. If he wants to start judging what we do on our opposition day, I can tell him that the Conservative Party is in no position to lecture anyone. I would remind him that, on their opposition day, the Conservatives called for the elimination of pandemic restrictions when they do not even have the authority to do that. I will take no lessons from them.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Madam Speaker, I used to live in the member's riding. I also volunteered at the La Prairie seniors' club.

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[English]

I would like to speak about seniors to the member, just to ask about the multi-generational home renovation tax credit and the home accessibility tax credit. They require a disability tax credit eligibility. Does the member believe this is fair and equitable?

• (1240)

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Therrien: Madam Speaker, that is not relevant.

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Madam Speaker, as legislators, nothing we do can be taken lightly.

Every day, we have to make decisions.

[English]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Order, please.

I want to remind members that interrupting members through either heckling, having conversations or trying to talk to them while they have the floor is not respectful. I would ask members to please hold on to their questions and comments until it is time to do so.

[Translation]

The hon. member for Trois-Rivières.

Mr. René Villemure: Madam Speaker, I will start over.

As legislators, nothing we do can be taken lightly. Every day, we have to make decisions. We have to choose. We have to opt for one thing over another. Making a choice means accepting the risk. It is about being willing to take action as much as it is about being willing to not take action. It is difficult.

Of course, when we make our decisions, we are thinking about our constituents who voted for us, elected us and sent us here to represent them. However, we also have to think about the general public. Most importantly, we need to think about the future of our nation and the common good.

For us as legislators, nothing is simple, and it is not easy. Sometimes, we need a light to guide the way. Some of us are moved by personal convictions. Others draw inspiration from certain schools of thought. Still others prefer to turn to prayer or the teachings of one of many religions.

Prayer has been part of the rituals of the House of Commons since 1877. The House, like many other parliaments in Canada and around the world, long ago chose to recite a prayer before the start of its debates. This practice, indeed this tradition, is still followed in many legislatures.

Coming to terms with prayer and making choices is a highly philosophical question. In philosophy, there are three questions: Who am I? What can I do? What can I hope for? These three questions are the very essence of philosophy. If we apply the essence of our philosophy to our motion, what should we think of it and what should we do with it?

First of all, what is a prayer? A prayer is a request. We always call upon someone to ask for something. Often, we will say that we

are asking for God's grace. That is often what is invoked in the texts. Which god are we talking about, though: "gods" or "God"?

In a world that is becoming increasingly less religious, where more than half of Quebecers say they do not believe in God, prayer seems to have lost some of its popularity. Yes, the world has changed since the 1800s. It has become more diverse. It has been enriched by an otherness, often thanks to newcomers. Please believe me when I say that this diversity is a treasure. Learning from others is essential to our own understanding. Learning from others is also the way forward if we really want to talk about living together.

This country has long recognized everyone's freedom of belief, which is protected under the law. The legislator has clearly affirmed that in matters of religion, each person is autonomous and free to determine what he or she chooses to believe in. In short, belief is up to the believer.

This brings us to today's motion. Like my colleague earlier, I will not reread the motion, as I am sure that our critics and those around us have read it carefully. We are asking that a moment of reflection be observed each sitting day before the House begins its work. We further request that the business of the House begin no later than two minutes after this moment of reflection.

According to researcher Martin Lanouette, in order to meet the challenge of contemporary state neutrality, parliamentarians who have modelled their practices on those of Westminster have three choices when it comes to addressing the issue of prayer.

The first choice is the status quo, to remain as is. The second choice is an openness to making prayer more universal by alternating between various denominations and having a moment of silence and reflection. I believe that this second choice chooses not to choose. The third choice is to eliminate the practice from the public space in the name of the principle of separation of church and state, and in the name of the principle of each individual's freedom to believe in whatever they please.

In Canada, the various legislative assemblies have adopted one of those three options in one form or another. A study of the various existing models tends to show that the option that is most inclusive and respectful of the diversity of people's beliefs is the option to abandon the practice of prayer.

To take it a step further, I will cite some numbers. According to an October 2019 Léger-Le Devoir poll, when asked, "Do you personally believe in God?", 51% of Quebecers answered yes and 49% answered no. Among francophone Canadians and Quebecers, the majority are already non-believers. Another poll conducted online last fall among 1,545 Canadian respondents revealed some telling numbers from coast to coast.

• (1245)

Two out of three people in Ontario and Alberta and approximately one in two people in British Columbia say they believe in God.

A significant portion of the Canadian population no longer believes in God. The daily prayer in the House of Commons completely ignores the non-belief of this large proportion of the population. That is a good reason to replace the prayer with a moment of reflection. That is the first argument.

Second, belief aside, there is the matter of religious affiliation in Quebec. Again, according to a study conducted by the Quebec Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse in 2006, 83.4% of the population was Catholic, while 5.8% did not belong to any religion. This is a rather old study, but I am sure that, if we were to do it again now, we would see that the presence of other beliefs is growing. Non-belief and the proliferation of religious beliefs are growing global movements.

As the previous speaker just did, I too will quote Clément Richard for another reason, in order to put what happened in 1976 into context. He said:

Out of respect for the members of this Assembly, who are not all necessarily of the same religious denomination, and out of respect for the Assembly, I have chosen to allow every member to pray as they see fit.

Members could choose to pray or reflect. He made that decision out of respect for the individual.

The fundamental premise of our motion is the certainty that the government should treat all religions, convictions and core values that are compatible with life in society equally. I believe that the prayer does not respect non-believers.

While I recognize that each individual is free to choose their own beliefs and convictions or lack thereof, I believe that the practice that is most inclusive and that would be the most respectful of diversity would be to abandon the prayer and replace it with a moment of reflection.

Our decision today, which we will vote on later, must be based on respect itself, not on respect for a belief or a conviction, but simply on respect.

If we were to play with words a little bit, it is interesting to see that the word “respect” has two parts. The first is “re”, which means “twice”, as in “recollection” and “reflection”. The second is “spect”, which means “look”. Respect means to give a second look so as not to unnecessarily offend. This is the very definition of reflection: giving a second look, taking the time, not offending anyone unnecessarily.

This is our duty as legislators. We should be guided by recollection, reflection and respect, given that the population is made up of non-believers and believers who do not all share the same beliefs. Not unnecessarily offending anyone should be what leads us to abolish the prayer.

If we truly want to talk about living together in harmony, we need to start by granting everyone the freedom of thought based on one's own principles and convictions. I urge the members to vote with the Bloc Québécois and to unanimously agree to this motion.

[English]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am trying to wrap my head around how the Bloc

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Québécois members have determined that this, out of the two opposition days they have to put forward motions, is the motion that they should put forward. Notwithstanding the fact that I respect the importance of this particular subject matter to the Bloc Québécois, I just cannot understand how it takes precedence over some of the things that are happening in our country right now and, indeed, happening in Quebec right now.

Can the member just explain to me why this was considered to be of paramount importance so as to supersede all the other things that are going on in our country and the world right now?

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Kingston and the Islands for his question.

On the last Bloc opposition day, he asked me the same question. The choice that the Bloc has made is the Bloc's prerogative, and that is all. This does not mean that any other subject is being left out. It is an issue put forward for reasons that we believe are important. It is the Bloc's opposition day, and we do what we want.

• (1250)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, another Bloc member earlier referred to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor to bolster his argument in favour of state secularism. However, I think that Mr. Taylor would be one of the first to say that secularism can come in many forms.

The Bloc Québécois has proposed one solution today, but it has not considered the possibility of a real discussion on the different ways that secularism could be incorporated here. Instead, the Bloc has proposed a binary choice on how to incorporate secularism.

I would like to better understand the member's thoughts on this process.

Mr. René Villemure: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his very relevant question.

Charles Taylor, a world-renowned philosopher, participated in the commission that bears his name, during which he took some positions that he later walked back. I do not know what Charles Taylor would say today. I suppose it would depend on whether we are talking about Taylor 1 or Taylor 2.

Nevertheless, I think that, unfortunately, all choices wind up being binary. In terms of philosophy, we are better off not choosing avoidance. In a case like this one, we need to choose between believing or non-believing, beliefs or non-beliefs. We are unfortunately dealing with a series of binaries that require a binary choice. Under these circumstances, I think that this is the only worthwhile option.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, this is the first chance I get to speak to the Bloc Québécois's motion today.

I am sorry that the Bloc rejected the member for New Westminster—Burnaby's amendment, because recognizing indigenous land is very important in this day and age.

Business of Supply

That said, I do not think that the issue we are discussing today is the most important issue of the day. I will continue to pray because it is essential for me as a religious person. I am not yet sure if I will vote for or against the motion because I have a lot of respect for questions of conscience and of secularism in our Parliament. I simply wished to add these few words to present my position because I will not get the chance to make a speech.

Mr. René Villemure: Madam Speaker, I thank the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands for her comments.

The beauty of it is that she has the freedom to choose. She has the freedom to believe and to pray; she is granted that unconditionally. I hope that we can convince her with our arguments, but at all times, her religion is her own.

[English]

Mr. Chandra Arya (Nepean, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Kings—Hants.

I rise today to speak to the Bloc Québécois opposition day motion to stop the non-denominational prayer that we have at the beginning of each day in this House.

This month, the Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with Cardus, published a report that offers a comprehensive and first-of-its-kind look at the faith journeys of Canadians, not just among majority religious communities, but across the religious spectrum. Nineteen per cent of Canadians, or one in five, are classified as non-believers. However, four in five have some openness to God or spirituality. The cultural mosaic in Canada is ever-shifting. While those born in Canada continue to shift further into areligious identities, being raised in a religious tradition is common in Canada, with 72% saying that they grew up with religious teachings.

As a Hindu Canadian, I concur that Canadians who are raised in the Hindu faith tend more toward the privately faithful. With that said, the prayer that we have, in my view, is more a tradition that is part of the fabric of the society in our Christian majority Canada, and I support that we continue the current practice.

Many Hindu Canadians during Christmastime have lighted a Christmas tree in their homes. It does not mean that Hindus are practising Christianity; it is about embracing the culture and heritage of the society we live in. The prayer that we have every day, while reflective of the different religions embraced by Canadians, also represents the culture and heritage of our country.

Let us look at the practice of the prayer that we have from a historical perspective. Although the practice of reading a prayer at the start of each sitting was not codified in the Standing Orders until 1927, it has been part of the daily proceedings of the House since 1877. Much later, suggestions were made to rewrite or reword the prayer in a non-sectarian form. Until 1994, no major change to the form of the prayer was made, aside from references to royalty. At that time, the House concurred in a report recommending a new form of prayer, more reflective of the different religions embraced by Canadians. This prayer, which we use now, was read for the first time when the House met to open its proceedings on February 21, 1994.

Sir Gary Streeter, a member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, on a similar motion in the U.K. House of Commons in 2019, said:

The crux of the argument for abolishing Parliamentary Prayers is that by taking all references to religion and God out of politics and public life, we will then have a truly neutral public square. However, that would just be to replace one worldview and set of beliefs with another. As human beings, we all bring a set of beliefs about the world and the nature of human life to any debates around pursuing the public good. Secularists might argue that their worldview is the best on which to base society, but they cannot do so by claiming neutrality. Rather than striving for a 'neutral' public square, we should instead recognise that we are increasingly becoming a pluralistic society, where a multitude of different beliefs and worldviews coexist. In a pluralistic society, freedom of belief is vital, yet this is not achieved by forcing all references to religion and God in public life to be pushed to one side.... For those who do object, for whatever reason, there is no obligation to participate in the prayers.

In an article published in the Canadian Parliamentary Review in 2009, Martin Lanouette said:

...the form and content of the prayer recited in parliamentary legislatures is part of a debate that seeks to pit the special relationship each legislature has with its religious heritage, against the desire to adapt this heritage to contemporary cultural realities.

● (1255)

He went on to say:

So why does the need for prayer persist despite this secular storm and all the unending controversies? As stated in *Marsh v. Chambers*, traditions are often seen as "a part of the fabric of the society," and at a time when contemporary societies are tending to become more diverse, the argument for tradition continues to occupy an important place in the collective imagination. A defensive reaction? Quite likely. A bastion of identity? Most definitely. All of which has not stopped many parliaments from wanting to take matters even further, not to weaken the "old" identity but to breathe new life into it.

He continued:

If it is to be practised, this ritual must be an act of recognition that focuses on uniting rather than dividing people. Simply eliminating the prayer is another option, but it is not a more impartial one, since the adherents, who have the same rights, will feel they are victims of discrimination as well.

There is a growing trend in our society to identify and amplify the things that divide us, rather than the things that unite us. The intolerance that is being propagated today by those on the extreme left of the political spectrum is the same intolerance that was the cornerstone of the extreme right. In the name of political correctness, voices are being shut down, books are being banned, and any view or opinion that deviates even an inch from the far-left ideology is immediately drowned out.

The practice of praying does not mean that the state is in bed with religion. None of the issues we discuss and debate and none of the legislation we pass here in any way or form connect any religion to the state. Let us continue the practice of the prayer we have out of respect to over 80% of Canadians who practise one religious faith or another.

As a politician, I go to temples, mosques, synagogues, churches, etcetera, but it does not mean I associate the state with religion. Since 2019, I have seen the Bloc Québécois opposition day motions, and never once have I seen them propose anything that is of importance to Canadians' economic realities. Today we are facing challenging times; the energy transition is going towards the battery, and Quebec and Canada could become leaders in the world in this technology. We have not seen the Bloc Québécois present any motion on anything that is of economic importance.

• (1300)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Madam Speaker, towards the end of his speech, my colleague suggested that talking about state neutrality and saying that the House of Commons, which represents the state, should not say a prayer before question period is a divisive issue. I do not know if that is what he meant, but that is what I understood.

I would like him to explain to me how secularism or state neutrality is a divisive issue.

[English]

Mr. Chandra Arya: Madam Speaker, 80% of Canadians practise one religious faith or another. As I have said, this is more of a cultural thing, a tradition of the country's heritage that we share every morning.

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for his comments. I do not always agree with members on the other side, but in today's debate I find myself in agreement.

I have to ask myself why the Bloc would be bringing this question to the House when there are perfectly legitimate channels. I am not dismissing the legitimacy of the question, but of the process.

Could my hon. colleague comment on the motivation here? I really do have issues with members bringing issues here only for their divisive nature. He mentioned division in his speech. Is this simply an opportunity for a wedge issue? Could the member comment on a party bringing wedge issues to this House?

Mr. Chandra Arya: Madam Speaker, as I mentioned, there is a tendency to identify and amplify the issues that divide us, rather than the issues that unite us. This should not have been brought here, in my personal view.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Madam Speaker, when I was elected as a young member of Parliament, I was denounced from the Catholic church and excommunicated for speaking up for the rights of same-sex couples. I would do that again in a heartbeat, so I understand the importance of the separation of church and state.

That being said, this is not a debate that is happening out in civil society right now. What we are talking about in civil society is coming off a pandemic. We are talking about massively high inflation. We are talking about a housing crisis. We are talking about a climate crisis. We are talking about the right of women to protect the choices they have over their bodies, given what is happening in the United States.

Business of Supply

I would like to ask my hon. colleague a question. What does he think is happening here, when we are bringing forward a debate over a piece of parliamentary procedure that probably nobody in Canada has ever paid much attention to and nobody even knows exists, when there are so many other pressing issues to deal with?

Mr. Chandra Arya: Madam Speaker, I certainly agree with my hon. colleague in relation to the issues he mentioned, because there are issues that are facing our country. The knowledge-based economy is taking over the world, and we have to work hard to make sure that Canada is in the forefront of this new economy. We have to invest in new technologies, in artificial intelligence, in battery technologies, in genomics. These are the kinds of things we have to discuss, debate and legislate upon, not this particular issue.

• (1305)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, on the question of divisions, I do not think it was necessarily clear in this debate that the prayer happens before the doors open. There is no question that it is theist, but the prayer itself is not specific to any denomination; it does not reference Jesus Christ, nor does it reference Mohammed. I wonder if the hon. member had any thoughts on whether it makes a difference that this is a private prayer, before the doors open.

Mr. Chandra Arya: Madam Speaker, I agree with the hon. member. As I said, for me, this is more about the cultural heritage of our country than a prayer to any one god.

[Translation]

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Madam Speaker, today I have the opportunity to speak to an opposition motion regarding the text of the religious prayer we say before starting our business in the House.

I must admit that I was surprised when I received the text of this motion last night. As other members of the House have said before me, there are many problems in the world, such as the war in Ukraine, the importance of fighting and addressing climate change, and the importance of ensuring that our social programs meet Canadians' needs.

My hon. colleague from Drummond has put forward a motion that I do not think addresses a very important problem today.

[English]

I had the opportunity to review the text, and let me start by saying it also gave me the opportunity to look at the history of our daily prayer. If nothing else, the motion has allowed me to look at some of the history of this place, and again, kudos to the House of Commons team that helps provide some of the history. I thanked them for their work on electoral boundaries and, when we were having a conversation on Bill C-14, the extensive history of the House in this place. I will also give a tip of the cap to them in terms of their history and understanding of how the daily prayer has come to pass.

Business of Supply

It is important for the House and for the Hansard to reflect the fact that this is a practice that was started in 1877. This is something that parliamentarians decided was important at the time, and pardon me but I think that tradition in this place carries a lot of importance. Yes, we have to look at ways we can modernize and meet the realities of today. We will undoubtedly have a conversation about the nature of virtual Parliament, the ability for parliamentarians not just to do their work here, physically, in this place, but indeed to use some of those tools virtually, to make it more modern and perhaps even more friendly for our colleagues, particularly for under-represented groups in the House.

It is important to note that the prayer has evolved over time. It has not stayed static since 1877. It is something that has constantly evolved when parliamentarians have had the opportunity to make it better reflect the variety of religions that we worship and respect here in this country, and that is extremely important. The member for Nepean touched upon that just before me, about that particular dynamic.

At the end of the day, the House of Commons has to balance those members in the House who might have religious beliefs and those who may not believe in a particular god or follow a particular religion. When I had the time to reflect about how we conduct ourselves in the House, my thoughts were as follows. When we actually look at the text in question, as I mentioned it has been amended over time through the PROC committee to try to reflect the broad range of religious diversity, but it is also relatively short.

[Translation]

The speakership therefore has about 30 seconds to say the prayer in the House. That is very little time. After that, we have a moment of silence and reflection.

I feel that doing it that way in this place, we can recognize people with certain religious values, while also showing respect for those who would rather think in a non-religious way.

• (1310)

[English]

The text of the motion talks about diversity and inclusion. The way the House of Commons works right now is that we have a short prayer for those who might have religious beliefs, and then we have a moment of reflection for all members, such that they are able to reflect and perhaps give strength to whatever might drive them in their daily pursuits. By getting rid of it, I do not think we are giving that same respect for those who might actually hold religious beliefs.

Let me add this. I do not want to seem discomforting or saying that this is the only fashion in which we can work, but if someone is really disrupted by the fact that we have a 30-second daily prayer, perhaps they could step outside of the House and not be part of it for the short 30 seconds it takes, then reconvene and stand here for the minute in which we all reflect in silence, such that they do not have to be part of the prayer. I think that right now there is a healthy balance between the two.

Let me also say that I started my speech speaking in French intentionally, because I dare say there are very few Quebecers, in-

deed very few Canadians, whose top priority is the prayer right now. With respect to my colleague from Drummond, who brought this forward, which it is well within his right to do, this is an entire day that we are going to spend on this subject, when there are very pressing, important problems of the day and opportunities that we as parliamentarians should be working collectively to encourage the government to pursue. We are going to be spending time, as I am doing right now, trying to find 10 minutes to rationalize some type of argument on something that I think is quite frivolous.

Let me also say that this is not the place for this debate.

[Translation]

My hon. colleague has the opportunity to present this idea and change to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which is responsible for the parliamentary work essentially involving review the actions of the House.

Why is my hon. colleague not presenting his motion to the committee?

[English]

Why is it that we are having this debate here, when that could already happen at PROC if it was the will of a majority on the committee to move forward with a particular study? I know there is already a lot of good work that goes on to talk about the issues of the day and how we can improve aspects of this place.

I am going to wrap up with this. We have the war in Ukraine; we have climate change; we have affordability for Canadians, and we have a whole host of issues on the heels of a pandemic. Indeed, we are not completely through the pandemic. I am a little disappointed, I will use that word, that the member for Drummond chose this forum to move this forward. I recognize that it is his parliamentary privilege and that the Bloc Québécois has chosen this forum to bring this forward, but I think that most Canadians, indeed most Quebecers, if they are watching this, are scratching their heads and asking why this is a good use of parliamentary time. I think most would come to the conclusion that it is not a great use of parliamentary time; it is not the best method; it is not the place where this should be introduced and, unfortunately, we have lost time to discuss and debate other issues that are prevalent to Canadians and more pressing. I will leave it at that.

[Translation]

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Madam Speaker, there are a number of points I want to address in the speech by the hon. member for Kings—Hants, but first I want to congratulate him because he is just about the only member of the Liberal caucus who took the time today to discuss the substance of the motion, and I appreciate that. In fact, I believe he received the same memo from his party as his colleagues, warning that the Liberals were going to steamroll over the Bloc by saying that it was not the time to talk about this issue because there were so many other pressing issues.

I would like to come back to the matter of the lesson the Liberals want to give us on the relevance of the issues we debate in the House of Commons. If my colleague's government would take the time to answer the questions we have been asking for months on these pressing issues, such as the war in Ukraine, perhaps we could take a lesson from them. For the time being, however, that is not going to happen.

I am going to give a little lesson of my own. The role of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs is to make recommendations, so it could very well take up this matter and make recommendations to the House. However, it is up to the House to discuss it and amend the Standing Orders. Therefore, the motion we put forward today is very relevant and has its place.

If my colleagues took the time to read the motion and said to themselves that the House has a great opportunity to discuss a sensitive and interesting issue, we would perhaps have more constructive debates today.

• (1315)

Mr. Kody Blois: Madam Speaker, I disagree with my colleague's proposal. I think that the best option here is to present this motion to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Then, if the committee decides to pursue this proposal, it can be presented to the House.

The Bloc had the chance to raise some very important questions and to exchange some ideas that are very important to Quebecers and all Canadians. However, they decided to do things this way and I do not think this is the right place to have this discussion.

[*English*]

Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is always a pleasure to rise on behalf of the people of Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo. I would like to thank my colleague for his intervention and thank my colleague for Nepean who spoke before him, as well.

While I agree with him that this should have been brought up at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, I do have a question. When this is eventually debated at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, would he support, for instance, the integration of other faiths, a multitude of faiths, in the opening prayer? Does he have any ideas on that?

Mr. Kody Blois: Madam Speaker, as I mentioned in my remarks, I had the chance to look over the history of how the daily prayer became what it is today. Since it was introduced in 1877, there have been modifications over time to reflect the fact that Canada and its makeup, in terms of demographics and faith backgrounds, have changed. There has been consideration given to that.

If we feel that now is an important time to look at the text and to make sure we are reflecting a full scope of the different faiths that are recognized and worshipped here in Canada, then I absolutely think this is an opportunity to do so. I remain quite resolute, in that I think the prayer should stay. We can also have a moment of reflection, so that we recognize those who are both theist and atheist.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have been here for 11 years and I am probably the least familiar with the prayer. As a non-religious person, I be-

lieve I have only been in the House twice for that prayer: One time was after the shootings of 2014, to show unity, and the other time was actually by accident.

I will be voting to eliminate the prayer, but I think the member made an interesting argument. Because opposition day motions are for the opposition to raise failings of the government, which failings of the government would he prefer to be discussing today: the failures on climate change, or the failure to introduce a disability benefit?

Which failings would he rather be talking about today?

Mr. Kody Blois: Madam Speaker, it is a bit of a sinister question, of course.

We are trying to actually improve decorum in debate in this place and, with all due respect to my hon. colleague, that was a very facetious question. Let me get to the point that he made, which is that he will be supporting this opposition motion, but in 11 years, he has only ever stood in this place twice to hear the daily prayer.

It seems to me as though the ability to respect religious freedoms has not been a major inconvenience to him, and that he understands some colleagues who, as he mentioned, he has joined in solidarity.

Perhaps he could continue to stay outside of the House for the 30 seconds that the daily prayer does happen and join for a moment of silent reflection.

This is such a non-issue, I cannot believe I am standing here in the House even talking about it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am a bit puzzled by everything that I have heard this morning. I am puzzled and perhaps angry as well.

I have heard people question the appropriateness of having this debate today. There are great democrats in the Liberal and Conservative parties who are eager to tell us how we should be using our opposition day, not to talk about an issue that deals with secularism, but to talk about issues that relate to current events.

I would remind my colleagues that we do this all the time and that it is rhetoric that I see in the House. I am thinking, for example, of the Minister of Canadian Heritage. If we bring up the French language, if we bring up Quebec's place, or if we bring up immigration, he tells us that the Bloc Québécois is trying to pick a fight. Talking about issues that affect Quebecers in this assembly is tantamount to picking a fight. I have heard that many times.

Our colleague from Winnipeg North asked us why the Bloc members are not talking about health transfers or seniors. I would point out to him that we had two opposition days on these issues, which resulted in motions. However, I have yet to see any action by the government.

Business of Supply

I would also like to point out to my Conservative colleagues that, in the middle of the truckers' blockade in February, there was an opposition day about Canadian Pacific in Saskatchewan. That is not my issue, but I have no say in what the Conservatives choose. I participated in an NDP emergency debate on the pandemic in Alberta. The Alberta health care system is none of my business, and it is not the business of the House either. That is what they wanted to discuss, so good for them.

The worst thing I heard today is that the prayer is a wedge issue. That is a convenient way to avoid taking a stand on something. Why would it be a wedge issue? I have a lot of trouble understanding my colleagues' logic when they say that prayer here is a wedge issue. Reciting a prayer before we meet for question period is complete nonsense. It is the opposite of what we see in the modern world, which is a neutral state.

Yesterday, I was talking to a former French academic colleague who could not believe that we still do a prayer in the House of Commons before we begin our sittings. In his opinion, it is totally archaic and completely unthinkable.

A number of people have come to us to ask why we have not considered this issue on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, or why we were even asking this question today. We put forward a motion about it in 2019. We never reached unanimous consent in the House. However, this is the kind of debate we need to have, and it has to be in the public eye.

I want to hear what the Liberal Party has to say on how religious differences should be accommodated in this House. How our Parliament, the institution of institutions, can be neutral. I want to hear from the Liberal Party on that. I want to hear from the Conservatives. Their response is quite different. They say that this debate is a point of contention, perhaps because they want to charm certain religious communities in their ridings, for they feel that talking about this picks up on an obvious fact that no one wants to talk about.

I am going to talk about the elephant in the room, namely the debate on secularism. There are people in the House who are having a very hard time with the debate on secularism. I would like to address it head-on. Earlier, the hon. member for Winnipeg North told us that no one in Quebec was interested in this topic. I have been observing Quebec politics for the past 30 years. Over the past 30 years, there has been a lot of talk in Quebec about the issue of religion in the public sphere. There was the Bouchard-Taylor commission on accommodation. What was the cornerstone of that commission's mandate? The place of religion. How can ethnocultural minorities be accommodated in the Quebec context? What will be the place of the sacred in the Quebec context? These questions were examined by the Bouchard-Taylor commission in 2008, as I recall. We spent more than 15 years going over this in Quebec. It led to Bill 21, which provides clear guidelines on the place of religion in the public sphere in Quebec.

• (1320)

I suspect that the conflict between secularism and identity is what scares my Liberal, Conservative and NDP colleagues, who do not want to take a stand on this particular issue.

However, there is a great deal to discuss. As I recall, one thing the Bouchard-Taylor commission explored is how to accommodate community identities in relation to their religion.

To define secularism, the commission's report outlined four main principles.

The first principle is the moral equality of persons. Whether one is a believer or thinks that Platonism, Neo-Platonism or Aristotelianism is what gives meaning to life, everyone is equal.

The second principle is freedom of conscience and religion. This is actually an expression of the next principle, the separation of church and state.

The third principle, as I just said, is the separation of church and state.

The fourth principle is state neutrality towards religions and deep-seated secular convictions.

I am trying to understand how saying a prayer at the beginning of one of our sittings meets the four principles outlined in the Bouchard-Taylor report.

Now I would like to talk about something that seems essential to me but that has not yet been brought up.

Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean was confronted with the issue of the prayer within its institutions for three years. I am not sure if my colleagues are familiar with the 2015 Supreme Court ruling entitled *Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay (City)*.

I want to focus on two key aspects of the ruling.

First, the definition of neutrality, found at paragraph 74:

By expressing no preference, the state ensures that it preserves a neutral public space that is free of discrimination and in which true freedom to believe or not to believe is enjoyed by everyone equally, given that everyone is valued equally. I note that a neutral public space does not mean the homogenization of private players in that space. Neutrality is required of institutions and the state, not individuals. On the contrary, a neutral public space free from coercion, pressure and judgment on the part of public authorities in matters of spirituality is intended to protect every person's freedom and dignity.

Is that not what is at issue today, namely protecting every person's freedom and dignity? That is the Supreme Court's answer to what neutrality means.

Another essential aspect is the Supreme Court's definition of discrimination.

Paragraph 64 reads as follows:

Sponsorship of one religious tradition by the state in breach of its duty of neutrality amounts to discrimination against all other such traditions. If the state favours one religion at the expense of others, it imports a disparate impact that is destructive of the religious freedom of the collectivity.

The debate we are trying to have today is about whether our institutions are neutral with respect to religion, is it not? That should be the underlying principle. The easy answer, which everyone fell back on today, is that the prayer happens before the doors are opened and does not inconvenience anyone. This is not about inconveniencing people. It is about sending a clear message that our institutions are neutral.

Personally, what I want to hear in my colleagues' questions over the next few minutes, what I want to know from them, is what secularism means to them.

If they think this debate is old news and unimportant, I have only one thing to tell them. They are out of step with what the people of Quebec think. I look forward to hearing my Conservative colleagues from Quebec comment on this subject.

The last thing I want to say is that when the Prime Minister's ethics are at issue, the Liberals tell us they do not have time to talk about it and this is not the right time to talk about the Prime Minister's ethical irregularities.

Last week, when people talked to the Conservatives about abortion, they said the same thing: now is not the time to talk about abortion; they have other problems to deal with.

I hope they do not play the same card here. That is an outdated argument in politics.

• (1325)

[English]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, perhaps the only thing more perplexing than the issue being raised today by the Bloc Québécois is the responses to questions about why they raised it. Every time somebody gets up in the House to ask why they raised this and why it is so important, or to get them to explain why this trumps everything else when they have two opposition days, they become extremely defensive and say they have the right to bring forward whatever they want. Indeed, of course they do. I think everybody respects that right, but the question is, why this? Why is this more important than those other pressing issues?

Can the member answer that question, rather than just saying they can do whatever they want? We are aware of that. Why is this issue so important?

• (1330)

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard: Madam Speaker, basically, what my colleague is saying is as crazy as asking why democracy and collective deliberation are important. It makes as much sense as that.

The primary principle in modern democracies is the neutrality of the state. What message does it send when this House, an institution that is supposed to be above all other institutions, says a prayer before it begins its proceedings? That sends a very bad message.

If my colleague is unable to chew gum and walk at the same time, he has a serious problem, and maybe he is in the wrong place.

[English]

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a little perplexing that the Bloc sees this as a priority at a time like this. As someone who is Christian and was the chair of the National Prayer Breakfast for four years, I have deep respect for prayers in Canada, prayers in the House and the freedom to pray.

Business of Supply

The freedom of religion has been recognized in our charter. The first line in the charter says:

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law

It is indeed the foundation of our society. This is a practice that was started in 1877 and later codified in the 1920s.

Of all the things we are dealing with in Canada, freedom of religion and freedom of expression are sacrosanct. Why would the member choose to take steps to eliminate that for this place?

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard: Madam Speaker, there is a rather simple principle. Generally, the way our societies work is that they are divided into three parts: the state, which represents the public sphere; civil society, which represents the civic sphere; and the family, which represents the private sphere.

Generally speaking, religion should be relegated to the civic and private spheres, not the public sphere. That is a key principle in the modern world. It is completely possible that our Constitution contains pious nonsense about how we put God first above anything else.

In a polyethnic society, is it still acceptable for a religious statement to be made in the House that is completely inconsistent with the beliefs of the majority? Our beliefs must be relegated to the civic and private spheres, period. That is what the majority of the world's democracies do.

[English]

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Madam Speaker, the member spoke about neutrality, and this place is not neutral for anyone who comes here in a wheelchair. When a person in a wheelchair arrives in this place and wants to sit in the House, they cannot get to a seat. They could not get to the seat I am sitting in. It is not accessible.

I would ask the member to speak a bit about the physical barriers that he sees in this place.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Simard: Madam Speaker, the principle of reasonable accommodations has been talked about extensively in the legal context. I think it would be reasonable to accommodate a member who wants to enter the chamber in a wheelchair, but that is not what this motion is about.

I think it would be even more reasonable to respect the neutrality of the state and to eliminate this archaic tradition of praying before each sitting.

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Madam Speaker, it is an honour to rise today. I did not know where to start, so I decided to start by talking about myself, which is not something I often do.

Business of Supply

I grew up in a small town of a few thousand people in northern Quebec, north of Abitibi. Religion was a big part of this town, the community and my family. As a child, I had to go to mass every Sunday. It was not all bad. I do have some wonderful memories of the highly constructive conversations we would have when Bishop Drainville, who was the bishop of Amos, came over for dinner.

Of course, there was religion at school. In elementary school, we had religion classes a few times a week. It was part of the curriculum. In May, the month of Mary, some of my teachers would start the day with a dozen or so rosaries.

In high school, we had Catholic religious classes. In a class of 30 or 32 students, there were always three, four or five oddballs who were not of the same religion as the others. They would leave and go to moral education class. We looked at them as if there were aliens.

When I was partway through high school, the Quebec government did away with these classes and took religion out of schools, deciding to leave religious education to families and communities.

What happened when the schools became secular? God, religion and the priest did not leave the village. People continued to worship in private, at church and in their own private spaces. For me, that is exactly what secularism means.

I believe that secularism means respecting every individual's religious observance. For me, secularism means going to Mirabel, passing by the magnificent Saint-Benoît church, but not being obliged to go to mass there if I do not want to. The same thing goes for the Oka church. It means going for a walk in Outremont and passing by a synagogue but not having to participate in the service, even though I fully respect the Jewish community. It means helping out the Muslim community in Sainte-Marthe-sur-le-Lac, which teaches the Quran and gives Arabic lessons, as I do regularly without necessarily inviting myself to participate in their prayers.

That is the kind of openness we should be aiming for. By extension, secularism does not mean transforming a school into a church, or making a court look like a synagogue. It means having the assurance, in both appearance and substance, that the laws of the secular state are above those of any god. This is a principle that is extremely important to me.

I am going to say something that I truly believe. I became a Catholic without consenting to it. I was baptized without anyone asking my permission. The first few times I went to church, I entered without really consenting to it. One day, for personal reasons, I decided that I would no longer go to church services, but that I would respect those who did. I was at peace with that.

However, the day I walked into the House of Commons in 2021, that feeling that my freedom of thought and freedom of conscience were being violated came flooding back. When I walked in at the beginning of the sitting day and it was explained to me that there was a denominational prayer, I realized that I was not welcome. I experienced that feeling that I had hoped I would never have to experience again in my life.

That is why secularism is important. It is a question of respect for everyone's beliefs. This debate has been held at every judicial

level, right up to the Supreme Court, in a case that put an end to the prayer at Saguenay city hall.

The debate is still very relevant and important in Quebec. As Justice LeBel said, "the evolution of Canadian society has given rise to a concept of neutrality according to which the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs...It requires that the state abstain from taking any position and thus avoid adhering to a particular belief."

The final ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada, a Canadian court that struck down sections of Bill 101, states that because of the state's duty of religious neutrality, it may not profess, adopt or favour one belief to the exclusion of all others.

• (1335)

Some members will say, as the Liberals did earlier, that we can modernize the prayer, add denominations, make it more neutral and so on. However, the fact remains that it is a prayer.

The problem is the ruling itself. It recognizes atheism as a personal religious belief that must be respected just the same as any other.

The issue is not whether the prayer is appropriate in the House; it is not. The issue is how to replace it. We take that very seriously. We could have joked about it and proposed a prayer that would make the Liberals happy, something like, "Lead us not into the temptation of going to the Aga Khan's island on vacation, but deliver us from the Ethics Commissioner. Amen." We could have also proposed one for the Conservatives, such as, "Hail Suncor, full of gas. The pipeline is with thee."

We could have proposed replacing the time for prayer with something more useful, like a training session for ministers on how to answer questions in the House instead of reading the Prime Minister's notes. We could have proposed that the member for Winnipeg North take a course on how to give a speech in the House in under 300 minutes.

We took this seriously. We are saying that we must move forward. It is true that some legislatures still recite the prayer. It is true that not everyone is ready to embrace secularism. Quebec is not perfect either. We know that there is more to be done. However, major advances have been made. In 1976, the Quebec National Assembly made a decision to replace the prayer with one minute of reflection. I am going to read an excerpt from the proceedings of the National Assembly. This is what the Speaker stated on December 15, 1976. I remind the House that Quebec society was predominantly Catholic at the time.

Out of respect for the members of this Assembly, who are not all necessarily of the same religious denomination, and out of respect for the Assembly, I have chosen to allow every member to pray as they see fit. During the moment of reflection, each member will have the opportunity to say a prayer to themselves, and it is out of respect for the Assembly that I have made this decision.

Now the Conservatives are getting up and saying that this is not on the agenda and it is a question of freedom. They were talking about freedom yesterday, the day before yesterday, and they talk about it every day. The member for Carleton spends his time travelling from coast to coast to coast, saying that he is going to make Canada the freest country in the world. Freedom is always important to the member for Carleton. However, freedom of religion and freedom of conscience also apply to the religion of others. They also apply to the conscience of others. It is embarrassing to see the Conservatives invoke the right to say a confessional prayer. When these folks go around talking about freedom, they defend the convoys in the name of freedom and they use their opposition day to talk about the same thing as us. It is shameful.

I am thinking of people like the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent who pointed out today that many of our towns and villages have the word “saint” in their names, such as Saint-Lin, Saint-Clin-Clin and Saint-Meuh-Meuh. There is a very clear line between what heritage is and the neutrality of the state.

For example, in Quebec, there are concerns that a police officer who wears a religious symbol might be implying that their religious beliefs change the way they do their job. That is the concern. It is not about whether a police officer who is not wearing a religious symbol hands out more tickets on Saint-Jean Street or Saint-Paul Street than on Park Avenue. These names are our heritage. It is really important to understand that. Anyone who makes that argument to counter the issue of state neutrality is ill-intentioned.

I will conclude by saying that it would be inclusive to turn this prayer into a minute or two of reflection, although some members would do well to take three or four minutes. Hardly anyone comes into the House during that period because so many people feel uncomfortable, yet that is the only non-partisan part of the day. It is the only part of the day when everyone has the opportunity to be together. Everyone has the opportunity to reflect together. Everyone has the opportunity to come together and rise above the partisanship that can sometimes ruin our days, our weeks, our work and our democracy.

We need to take advantage of this time. This motion would allow us to do just that, which is why I will be very happy to vote in favour of it.

• (1340)

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech. I would like to ask him two questions.

First, I am curious to know whether the Bloc Québécois is seeking to import the debate on Quebec's Bill 21 into the House to discuss secularism.

Second, I believe that the current method, namely a prayer followed by a moment of silence, is equally appropriate for both people with religious values and those without. Why is my colleague against the current method?

• (1345)

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Madam Speaker, I can assure my colleague that if his god has any heart, his god will still hear him if he prays in silence.

Business of Supply

That being said, the Liberals are judging the way we use our time on our opposition days. Does anyone know what I have in my hands?

It is the budget they presented a couple of weeks ago. It is a rag. They ruined a day's worth of budget discussions, and yet they talk to us about the way we use our opposition days—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I remind the member not to use props in the House.

I will let the member finish his answer, but he should make sure he does not show the document in the House.

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Madam Speaker, they presented a very thin budget in which they overlooked health care, seniors, the provinces and just about everyone else. They missed a budget day, as well as a budget debate. Because budget debates annoy them, they want to cut them off.

They feel that they can judge how we use our time. Shame on them.

[English]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Madam Speaker, the individual does not feel welcome here because of a 30-second prayer, yet freedoms that take away other freedoms are not freedoms for anyone. To me and my constituents, I have to say it is offensive that the Bloc members do not enter into the House until after the national anthem, *O Canada*, is sung, because they openly indicate that their purpose is to separate from Canada. They openly and freely do not pledge allegiance to Canada, yet I, and clearly all the members of this place, respect that reality. This is their choice.

They have a choice of whether to attend to a 30-second prayer that all kinds of individuals in the House, whom I meet with and who are of different faiths, value. I believe that in this case everyone has a beliefs system, including the member who just spoke. That always impacts our decision-making, and we should have the freedom to continue to exercise this opportunity within the House. In the same way Bloc members have the freedom not to come into the House before *O Canada*, they can certainly do the same in regard to this prayer.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Madam Speaker, I never thought about that. I just realized that, for my colleague, this represents only 30 seconds of our time. Well, I believe that every minute of my time is valuable. I work hard, which is something that she does not seem to do.

That said, if my colleague does not like Quebec's ideas or seeing us raise these issues, then she should let us go. I am only too ready to leave.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have no issues with the motion. I will likely vote in favour of it.

However, I am of the opinion that opposition days are an opportunity to highlight issues that affect or constituents.

Business of Supply

I would like to point out, in the context of the affordable housing crisis in Quebec, that Mirabel has the lowest occupancy rates and the highest vacancy rates in all of Quebec. At 0.1%, it is tied with Granby. That means that the housing crisis hitting Mirabel is also hitting Granby. I know that community well, since I knocked on doors there.

My question is simple. If the member were to go visit his constituents in Mirabel, and considering the low occupancy rates and the lack of affordable housing, would he talk to them about the prayer in the House of Commons or the lack of affordable housing?

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon: Madam Speaker, I am perfectly capable of talking about all kinds of things.

That said, the population of Mirabel has almost doubled in 10 years because it is an amazing place, a fantastic riding.

Obviously the housing issue is top of mind. That is why we have frequently criticized the fact that the national housing strategy, which is out of line with Quebec's priorities and demands, was postponed for three years in Quebec because the federal government wanted to impose its conditions.

I do not know if the New Democrats will still have opposition days now that they are in power. Maybe when they have a government business day, they can address this issue.

• (1350)

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Vaughan—Woodbridge. I know the member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan is disappointed to hear that I will be speaking for only 10 minutes.

I must say that I was quite perplexed when I saw yesterday the notice go out with the opposition day motion that was scheduled for today. I am in no way trying to suggest that the content is not an important discussion to have: the Bloc members feel very passionately about this particular subject. I just cannot understand how it takes precedence to some of the things that are going on in the world right now, and indeed in our country and in Quebec.

I listen to the Bloc members ask their questions routinely during question period with great passion and bring up very important issues. I have never heard the Bloc ask a question during question period about the prayer, which is 30 seconds long and happens at the beginning of each day in the House.

The prayer, which I might add is very generic in nature, certainly does not support one religion or another. It is about 30 seconds long, and is followed by a moment of silence and personal reflection. If the Bloc had said that the motion was to remove *O Canada*, I think I would understand where their passion was coming from a little more. Indeed, the fact that the members have chosen to be extremely critical of a 30-second-long prayer without addressing the fact that we sing the National Anthem, of which they do not want to be part, and which they actively stay outside of the chamber for during the time we are singing it every Wednesday, would be more

germane, at least from my perspective, in terms of the priorities of the Bloc.

Nonetheless, there are very important issues going on right now. Inflation, housing and the war in Ukraine are issues that should be dealt with. Opposition parties have very limited opportunities to come before the House and present motions for the House to consider. As a matter of fact, the Bloc Québécois only has two opportunities between January and June in this session, yet members have chosen to use one of those opportunities on this motion and I just cannot understand it. Again, I can appreciate the Bloc's interest in this issue. I just do not understand how it supersedes everything else that is going on right now.

Perhaps what is even more confusing for me is that when I have asked the Bloc about this, and a number of us, including Conservatives, have asked over the past couple of hours why this is so important and why it is more important than everything else going on in the world right now, the reaction from the Bloc is to become extremely defensive and upset with us and say, "It is our right. We can bring whatever we want forward." Of course, the Bloc members can bring whatever they want forward. It is their prerogative to bring forward a motion that they see fit, but they are not answering the question. They refuse to answer the question. The question is why. What is so important about this particular issue that takes precedence and trumps all those other issues that we are dealing with in the House right now?

The member for Winnipeg North said it, and I could not agree with him more. In the almost seven years that I have been around here, I have never once had this topic brought up with me. Not a single constituent has ever called me and said, "I want to talk to you, MP Gerretsen, about the prayer that is being said every morning when the House starts at the beginning of the day." Not a single constituent has brought that forward to me. However, there are a lot of areas that we know that the Bloc and indeed the Conservatives go off from time to time on what is going on—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to reiterate again that the members know full well that when somebody else has the floor, they are not to interrupt, heckle or yell across the way. I know we are getting close to question period, but I would say to members that there will be time for questions and comments to the hon. parliamentary secretary, so please keep your thoughts to yourselves at the moment.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

• (1355)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, I can really get the passions of the member for Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman going from time to time. I think that is where this comes from.

There are issues that come up on a daily basis in the House during question period that Bloc members are extremely passionate about, and I do not understand why they would not use one of their two opposition days to bring forward one of those issues. I actually want to apologize to the Conservatives, because I usually stand here and criticize Conservatives for bringing forward motions that are not of substance. I quite often reference the NDP and the Bloc as parties that do bring forward motions of substance. I stand corrected, because the motion we are seeing from the Bloc today is by far one of the most outlandish attempts at politicizing an issue that I have seen. I do not understand the angle of it. I do not understand what exactly the Bloc is hoping to accomplish here.

If this is so important to the Bloc, which I believe it is because it has used one of its days for it, the proper place to bring this would be to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. I sit on that committee, and have sat on that committee for the past three years. A Bloc member has been sitting on that committee since 2019, and never once has a member of the Bloc Québécois brought this issue up at PROC. Never once has a Bloc member said, “We need to study this issue about the prayer that we have at the beginning of the day and make a recommendation to the House.” For it never to come forward, and then for the Bloc to suddenly introduce it in one of its two precious opposition day motions, I find to be very perplexing. I do not understand where it is coming from on this.

The member for La Prairie earlier made reference to the fact that Quebec used to have a prayer and then got rid of it. I thought that was a very interesting comment. I wish he would have provided the text of that prayer so we could compare it with the one that is said in this House at the beginning of the day. I wonder if there was a much more denominational undertone to it, toward a specific religion, or whether it was much more generic, like the one we have. It would have been great had he said that.

My understanding is that although the Quebec National Assembly got rid of the prayer, the cross still exists in the National Assembly. If I understand correctly, and I could be wrong so I hope members in the Bloc would correct me, the cross used to be in the chamber. People would not move it outside of the building: they just moved it outside of the chamber, so the cross still exists. Even within the National Assembly, Quebec continues to have religious symbols.

At the end of the day, in addition to the opportunity to bring this up at the proper committee, the Bloc could also have raised this during the standard procedural debate we are going to have. There is a requirement after every new Parliament is formed that, within a certain number of days, we have a debate on the standing procedures in the House. If my memory serves me correctly, not that I was here, but I heard that it was former prime minister Paul Martin who made sure that happened. It has not happened yet, and it has to happen before we recess in June.

Therefore, there will be a whole day when Bloc members can bring up this particular point about the Standing Orders and how they are concerned about this particular part of the Standing Orders, in which case I would encourage them to do that. They are blowing an entire day today: an entire opportunity to bring forward the very important issues of Quebecers that the Bloc Québécois, particular-

ly, is passionate about. All they are really giving me is an opportunity to not pick on my Conservative friends across the way for one day. I see a number of them are clapping.

In conclusion, I just cannot see the level of importance. I cannot understand why it was decided that this had to be debated and waste an entire day on it, rather than move forward on some of the very important issues that I know the Bloc Québécois cares about. I hope that later on during this debate, I will get an answer to that question.

• (1400)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The hon. member will have five minutes for questions and comments when the House gets back to the debate on this subject. Order.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

JURY APPRECIATION WEEK

Mr. Yasir Naqvi (Ottawa Centre, Lib.): Madam Speaker, this week is Canadian jury appreciation week. From May 8 to May 14, I encourage Canadians to heed the call of Mark Farrant and the Canadian Juries Commission to show their support for jurors across the country.

[Translation]

Every year, hundreds of thousands of Canadians do their civic duty by answering the summons for jury duty. Jurors are our family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues and members of our community. They make countless sacrifices, and it is extremely important that we celebrate this very valuable work.

[English]

Being a juror is not an easy job. Trials often deal with crimes that can have a lasting impact on a juror's mental health. As Ontario's attorney general, I was proud to bring free mental health supports to jurors suffering from PTSD related to their trial.

Jurors provide an indispensable service, and they deserve our appreciation.

[Translation]

We thank them.

* * *

[English]

SASKATCHEWAN FARMERS

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Madam Speaker, with some just beginning and others well on their way, I want to take the opportunity today to wish all farmers in northern Saskatchewan a safe and successful spring seeding season.

Statements by Members

Spring is a time of year when farming families incur significant financial risk, and one that can be very stressful. With the current situation in Ukraine, this year's seeding season feels even more crucial, as it is essential to the world for Saskatchewan farmers to get their crops in. With Saskatchewan accounting for more than 40% of Canada's arable land, our farmers not only are vital to our own food security but are responsible for setting record exports in 2021, worth \$17.5 billion. Saskatchewan's farmers have fed the rest of Canada and the world for generations. They are a significant part of the economic stability of the country.

To our farm families in Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, I thank them for all their hard work and for their contributions to Canada.

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DURHAM GREENER HOMES PROGRAM

Mr. Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Lib.): Madam Speaker, we understand that the less energy we use, the more money we save, whether it is at the gas pumps or on our monthly utility bills. While we are keeping more money in our pockets, we are also reducing our greenhouse gas emissions.

That is why I was honoured to announce, on behalf of the Minister of Natural Resources, a \$3.4-million contribution to help launch the Durham greener homes program. This investment will help Durham Region residents by supporting deep retrofits in single-family homes built between 1970 and 2000, which account for almost half of our region's housing stock. The Durham greener homes program provides an innovative concierge platform to make the whole process easy, including on-bill repayment plans, while saving homeowners an average of 30% on their monthly utility bills and creating local jobs.

This is another great example of how we can create the prosperity we all want while protecting the planet we cherish.

* * *

[Translation]

LAZHAR ZOUAÏMIA

Mr. Denis Trudel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Madam Speaker, today I would like to welcome Lazhar Zouaïmia back to the country. He is one of my constituents, and he was wrongfully imprisoned by the Algerian authorities for many weeks for attending demonstrations in Montreal calling for more democracy in Algeria.

Mr. Zouaïmia is a symbol of courage and resilience, a true defender of the principles and values that we all hold dear, namely democracy, the rule of law, freedom and respect for human dignity.

As we speak, several other people are in the same situation Mr. Zouaïmia was in. That is why we must strengthen our ties with Africa in order to support the members of African civil society who are calling for more democracy in their countries.

Again, welcome home, Mr. Zouaïmia. I hope he gets to spend quality time with the people he loves.

• (1405)

NATIONAL NURSING WEEK

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to wish nurses across Canada a happy National Nursing Week.

[English]

National Nursing Week begins on May 9 and ends on May 15. This year, the theme is #WeAnswerTheCall, which highlights the important role nurses play in our communities. Since 1993, this week has been dedicated to promoting and celebrating the achievements of this profession.

[Translation]

I would like to recognize the health care providers in my riding of Madawaska—Restigouche for the excellent work they do in their many roles on the continuum of patient care. They demonstrated courage and perseverance during the pandemic.

[English]

Their hard and exceptional work does not go unnoticed. Despite all the challenges they had to go through, they continued to work with pride.

[Translation]

The community and I are very grateful for their work. I congratulate and sincerely thank them.

[English]

I thank again our nurses for all their good work and dedication to their profession.

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EAST LILLOOET INTERNMENT MEMORIAL GARDEN

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise this afternoon and thank the East Lillooet seniors garden committee volunteers for all their hard work and selfless dedication in building the memorial garden honouring the history of Japanese Canadians.

On Saturday, May 7, I attended the 80th anniversary of the Japanese Canadian internment event. The day was marked with the grand opening of a beautiful memorial garden, a tribute to a very dark time in Canadian history. In 1942, the Canadian government wrongfully detained Japanese Canadians living in B.C. during World War II. There were 21,000 who lost their homes and businesses and were detained in internment camps in places like Lillooet.

This garden is especially important for the remaining survivors. Many dedicated their work to their parents, who suffered the most. This garden reminds us all how communities suffered great losses. As a country, we suffer great losses when we discriminate.

* * *

QUEEN'S ON PARLIAMENT HILL

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to welcome representatives from Queen's University to Parliament Hill today for Queen's Day on the Hill.

Queen's is a leading university, with more than 27,000 students from across Canada and from 126 countries around the world.

In my riding of Kingston and the Islands, Queen's contributes one in every 10 jobs to the community and has helped more than 600 start-up companies grow. Its students, staff and faculty raise more than \$1 million annually for local charities like the United Way.

Queen's produces highly skilled graduates and groundbreaking research. Research like that from Professor Cathleen Crudden, which was supported by a \$24-million grant from the new frontiers in research fund, is changing the world by making new coatings that could stop bridges from rusting or be used to fight cancer.

Internationally, the recently announced Times Higher Education impact rankings placed Queen's University seventh in the world out of 1,500 universities for advancing the United Nations' sustainable development goals.

I encourage all members of the House to join us later this evening for an official reception hosted by Queen's University, starting at 5:30 p.m. at the Metropolitan Brasserie. Once again, I welcome Queen's University to the Hill and offer best wishes for a successful day.

The Deputy Speaker: I remind members that statements, S.O. 31s, are one minute in length.

The hon. member for St. John's East.

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UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

Ms. Joanne Thompson (St. John's East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to welcome 166 Ukrainian refugees to Newfoundland and Labrador, who arrived last night on a charter flight arranged by our provincial government and Premier Furey. On March 22, they sent a team of dedicated employees to Warsaw to provide on-the-ground information, assist with logistics and support the immigration process.

There is no doubt that this will be a difficult transition for many. However, I know my province will show our world-famous hospitality. The Association for New Canadians has recruited volunteers and is supporting the refugees' arrival in St. John's. Others have come forward with clothing, bedding and accommodations, while the business community is working to provide employment opportunities.

Statements by Members

I thank Premier Furey and his government for their leadership and collaboration. To those arriving in St. John's, we are here to assist them and I look forward to meeting them. I welcome them to Canada.

* * *

● (1410)

INFLATION

Mr. Tako Van Popta (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it was supposed to be temporary, transitory and tied to supply chain disruptions with the pandemic, and things were going to get back to normal with the lifting of gathering and transportation restrictions, but if we ask the average Canadians today what they think about inflation, if we ask my granddaughter, who filled up her car in Vancouver yesterday at \$2.20 a litre, if we ask the couple in my riding of Langley who are seeing house prices go up faster than they can save up for the down payment, if we ask the average family, who see the grocery bills going through the roof, they will all tell us that inflation is our new reality.

It is time for us to get the government to recognize that new reality. It is time to start thinking about monetary policy and getting big spending under control. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to pass on a sound economy and a Canada proud, strong and free.

* * *

BRAMPTON BOARD OF TRADE

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since 1887, the Brampton Board of Trade has been a strong voice for Brampton businesses. It has been offering services that help businesses grow and prosper. This year, the BBOT celebrates its 135th anniversary, and I want to recognize its dedication in serving the business community.

Businesses faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic, but with the leadership of the chair, Donna Fagon-Pascal, and the CEO, Todd Letts, BBOT helped businesses navigate through this tough time.

I want to thank the BBOT for connecting the business community through advocacy issue forums and networking events, which promote economic development. From funding the Riverwalk flood mitigation project to supporting public transit, upskilling our workers and supporting affordable child care, we have always worked hand in hand and will continue this work into the future.

*Statements by Members***ONLINE STREAMING ACT**

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-11 is the latest of the Liberal government's attempts to regulate the Internet and restrict what Canadians can post online.

Bill C-11, which is essentially a carbon copy of last Parliament's Bill C-10, would give sweeping powers to the CRTC to regulate the Internet and limit free expression. To make matters worse, the consequences of this poorly drafted legislation will likely be to weaken consumer choice and hurt the potential of Canadian creators.

There is no doubt that the Broadcasting Act needs to be modernized for the 21st century, but Bill C-11 is not the vehicle to do it. The heritage minister needs to scrap, today, Bill C-11 and go back to the drawing board once and for all.

The Deputy Speaker: I would remind folks to keep the comments down so that people can get their S.O. 31s through.

The hon. member for Fundy Royal.

* * *

BILL C-5

Hon. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last Friday, the president of the National Police Federation told the justice committee that the Liberal government's effort to get rid of mandatory jail time for serious crimes related to weapons trafficking and firearms offences is "inconsistent with the expressed intent of the government to reduce firearms violence in Canada." In no uncertain terms, the Liberals' Bill C-5 would make Canadian communities less safe.

We are all familiar with the long trail of broken promises left by the Liberal government over the past seven years, but it seems particularly offensive to tell Canadians that the government will crack down on gun crime while writing a bill that does exactly the opposite. Regardless of whether people live in an urban centre or in a rural community, they deserve to feel safe.

I invite the Minister of Justice to take the bill back to the drawing board and to shift his focus from protecting criminals to protecting Canadians.

* * *

[Translation]

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Hon. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, American civil rights leader Martin Luther King said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice".

He made that comment in the context of the consensus stemming from the Second World War that everyone should be treated equally. Civil rights were granted to women, racial minorities, religious practitioners, and people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and abilities. The extension of rights to all these citizens is a sign of a healthy society.

I am concerned about the draft ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court, which could become the first example of rights being overturned in that country. Once that starts, where will it stop? Although this is an issue affecting Americans, we must ensure that we stand up for

women's rights in Canada. To extend rights to one is to preserve rights for all. To limit the rights of some is to weaken the rights of all.

* * *

• (1415)

[English]

MEADOWLARK NATURE FESTIVAL

Mr. Richard Cannings (South Okanagan—West Kootenay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Meadowlark festival, a celebration of the unique and rich natural heritage of the South Okanagan and Similkameen valleys, is happening once again this year on the May long weekend.

We started the Meadowlark festival in 1998 to give residents an opportunity to celebrate the special place they live in and to let everyone learn about its natural diversity from expert guides through hiking, biking, canoeing, horse rides and more. We were told at the start that it would be difficult to organize a weekend festival featuring 80 or more events with a group of volunteers, but the festival is still going strong 24 years later. It has thrived through the efforts of those volunteers, but I want to mention three in particular who truly built the festival early on: Doreen Olson, Lisa Scott and Margaret Holm.

I invite everyone to take part in the Meadowlark festival and celebrate the spectacular natural environment of the South Okanagan and Similkameen.

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[Translation]

SERGE BLONDIN

Mr. Jean-Denis Garon (Mirabel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take a moment in the House to highlight the work of a constituent in my riding.

Serge Blondin, a proud resident of Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines, was until recently the owner of Le point d'impact, a newspaper covering current affairs in the Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines community.

It was a lifetime of work that ended last January. We learned, with regret, that after 33 years of journalism and loyal service to the community, the local newspaper was going to publish its last edition. Almost everyone in the community knows Serge, the journalist. When he was not at town hall meetings covering political news, he was visiting merchants and organizations or organizing the next annual business dinner.

Serge left his mark on those around him throughout his career. On behalf of the Bloc Québécois, all the people of Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines and my riding, I would like to salute Mr. Blondin's exemplary career.

I thank him and say bye for now.

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[English]

BILL C-5

Mr. Rob Morrison (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the city of Cranbrook is family friendly, but that reputation is under threat because of Bill C-75's existing offender release legislation. Bill C-5, now being studied at the justice committee, would remove mandatory minimum penalties and introduce new catch-and-release conditional sentencing orders. This would make the existing situation worse. In fact, the Attorney General of B.C. has acknowledged the problem and pointed a finger right at the federal government's legislation.

As we work to address the opioid crisis, Canadians should not be left to accept criminal behaviour, vandalism or violence in our communities. Residents have had enough. Individuals are being threatened with machetes. Businesses are being broken into, and students are being intimidated at work. How many other small communities across Canada have the same situation?

As we consider Bill C-5, we must pursue legislation that serves to make our communities safer. This will only be realized when the government stops aiding offenders and begins to prioritize victims.

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KRAFT HOCKEYVILLE 2022

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pride that I congratulate both the Blizzard Female Hockey Association and the Capers women's hockey team on being named Kraft Hockeyville champions for 2022.

It is great to see that women's hockey will now be front and centre in our community. Now, \$250,000 is being invested in a building and a home dedicated to women's hockey in Cape Breton, the first of its kind in all of Canada. The Canada Games Complex will serve women and girls of all ages, and will eventually develop the next generation of hockey all-stars.

I was inspired by the display of unity, collaboration and passion among the many folks back home who voted for the Canada Games Complex in the Kraft Hockeyville competition. Once again, I wish my sincere congratulations to all of the organizers and to the young women who now have a place to call their home of hockey.

ORAL QUESTIONS

• (1420)

[English]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Hon. Candice Bergen (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Conservatives have always opposed Bill C-69, the no more pipelines bill. It has kneecapped Canada's ability to develop and export our natural resources, and it has killed jobs across the country. Bill C-69 was bad for Canada and, frankly, the world because of its negative effects.

Oral Questions

Alberta's top court has just ruled Bill C-69 as unconstitutional. Will the Liberals now reverse this terrible piece of legislation and let Canadians get back to work building pipelines and selling our energy to the world?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Impact Assessment Act delivered on an important promise we made to Canadians to reform a broken system and restore public trust in how decisions about major projects are made. The previous Conservative government gutted environmental protections, eroded public trust and discouraged investment and made it harder, not easier, for major projects to be built. We will be appealing this decision.

* * *

TAXATION

Hon. Candice Bergen (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister is spreading misinformation, and his bill is unconstitutional.

Speaking of the cost of gasoline, the cost of gas is crippling Canadians and the NDP-Liberals have no plan to give Canadians a break. France, Japan, Italy, the U.K. and Germany are all cutting taxes on gas to help reduce the price.

What is the government doing? It is doing nothing except raking in billions of dollars of extra cash, all on the backs of Canadians who are paying far too much at the pumps. When other countries are offering gas tax relief for their citizens, why is the Prime Minister increasing taxes and the cost of everything?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, picking up on what the Leader of the Opposition just said about measures that were unconstitutional, I will remind her of what the Conservative Party's position was when that same Alberta court came out against our national price on pollution. The Conservatives cheered. We then appealed it to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court found that, indeed, it is the responsibility of Canada as a federal government to continue to put a price on pollution. That is exactly what we are going to do to ensure that major projects get built while we protect the environment. That is why we are going to the Supreme Court.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Let us start off right. Let us keep it down a bit. It is a gorgeous day outside. If members need to go for a walk, they can please take that walk.

The hon. leader of the official opposition.

Hon. Candice Bergen (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what the Prime Minister does not realize is that Canadians are suffering. Canadians are suffering because he is increasing taxes year after year and month after month on the backs of everyday Canadians who cannot afford the price of gasoline.

Oral Questions

His government, with the help of the NDP, is raking in billions of dollars of extra revenue while Canadians are suffering. When will the Prime Minister, for just a moment, empathize with everyday Canadians, stop spreading information and give Canadians a break?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we will continue to spread information, including the information that the price on pollution actually gives back more money to people in the provinces where it is imposed than it takes away. An average family does better with this price on pollution in places such as Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta because of the price on pollution. Indeed, the Conservatives should talk to their colleague from New Brunswick who wanted them to return to the federal measure because it puts more money back in the pockets of Canadians. We will continue to have Canadians' backs and to fight climate change.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): More disinformation, Mr. Speaker.

On the contrary, the Parliamentary Budget Officer says that money will not end up back in the pockets of Canadians. I look at the Prime Minister today and he is smiling: He is happy to see that the price of gasoline for all Canadians is over \$2 a litre. He just did that in front of all members of Parliament and all Canadians. He is happy to have put a price on pollution that empties all Canadians' pockets.

When will the Prime Minister show some compassion and give Canadian families a break?

• (1425)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since we took office in 2015, we have helped Canadians and we have been there to help families. We have lowered taxes for the middle class by raising them for the better off.

I know that Conservative politicians do not feel this way, but most Quebecers are grateful to us for putting a price on pollution that will help fight climate change. When provinces refuse to take action on pollution, we are going to put more money in the pockets of families who need it in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario.

We are there to support families in their time of need.

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THE ECONOMY

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister continues to spread misinformation.

Could the Prime Minister come with me to a grocery store so he can see how much Canadians are paying every day for the various things that they buy? For example, the cost of bacon and pasta has gone up 18%; cereal, 12%; oranges, 24%. We can both try to find something on the shelves that has not gone up in price. It is not true that he has helped Canadians. Canadians are having a harder time.

When will he realize this? When is he going to give Canadians a break?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, global inflation, first caused by the pandemic and then by

Vladimir Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, is putting real pressure on families. We see this especially with gasoline and food prices.

As we did during the pandemic, we will continue to support Canadians and make life more affordable for families by increasing the Canada child benefit in line with the cost of living, creating \$10-a-day child care for families, and increasing the guaranteed income supplement for vulnerable seniors.

The problem is that the Conservatives continue to vote against these things.

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OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, there is a language crisis in Quebec, but the federal government wants to prevent Quebec from enforcing the use of French in all workplaces. With its official languages bill, Bill C-13, Ottawa is creating an exception for federally regulated businesses.

Thanks to Bill C-13, these businesses will be able to continue to work “bilingually” or, as they say at Air Canada and CN, “in English only”. The Charter of the French Language will become unenforceable at these businesses.

Does the Prime Minister realize that allowing bilingual work at these businesses is not defending French, it is simply speeding up the English takeover of Quebec?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are here as a government to protect French, not only in Quebec, but throughout the country. That is why we have committed to protecting and promoting French throughout Canada, and we introduced Bill C-13. It adds important provisions that ensure better compliance with the Official Languages Act while also giving the Commissioner of Official Languages more power to strengthen the use of French in federally regulated businesses in Quebec as well as other regions of Canada with a strong francophone presence. We are always here to defend French not just in Quebec, but throughout the country.

Mr. Alain Therrien (La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, French should be the language of work for everyone in Quebec, but the Prime Minister's Bill C-13 makes French optional.

This is not hard to understand. He is telling Air Canada and CN that, if they want to make an effort for French, they can adopt the Charter of the French Language, but, if they do not, they can keep being bilingual, as they have been for the past 30 years. We see what the results are today.

If the government's goal is to anglicize French even faster, that would do it. It seems very hard to admit that bilingualism is not in jeopardy in Quebec but that French is. Why is that?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, not only do we recognize that French is in decline in Quebec, but we also recognize that it is in decline across the country. I realize the Bloc Québécois does not really care what happens outside of Quebec, but we do. We will be there to protect French across the country, and that is exactly what we are doing with Bill C-13.

* * *

TAXATION

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, five of the largest oil companies made nearly \$21 billion in net profits in 2021. They really raked in the dough.

This year, they have already reached \$9 billion and counting, with record prices of \$2 a litre. People's purchasing power is shrinking, while the CEOs of the big oil companies are getting bonuses averaging \$13 million. It is obscene.

When are the Liberals going to tax the excessive profits of the big companies that are taking advantage of the crisis to line their pockets?

• (1430)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one of the first things we did in 2015 was to raise taxes on the wealthiest people in Canada so we could lower them for the middle class.

We continue to invest to ensure that we have a fairer and tougher tax system for the wealthy. We are currently moving forward with tax increases for the largest banks and corporations that are making the most profits, including the profits they made during the pandemic, to ensure that we can continue to invest for families, seniors and youth, and in order to be there for Canadians.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while Canadians are being gouged at the pump, big oil and gas continues to make record profits. Imperial Oil made its highest profit in 30 years, and today, media told us that Suncor Energy earnings are almost \$3 billion. This is not just companies passing on their costs to consumers. This is companies making tremendous profit.

While everyday Canadians in this country pay more than their fair share, when is the government going to make those big companies pay theirs?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, building a fairer and more inclusive economy has been a central focus for our government since day one. That is why we raised taxes on the 1% so that we could lower them for the middle class. That is why we introduced the Canada child benefit, stopping cheques from going to millionaires in order to send more money to families that needed it most, and more. That is why budget 2022 just introduced a temporary Canada recovery dividend and increases corporate income tax on banks permanently. Businesses must pay their

fair share of taxes, and that is exactly what this government is ensuring.

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CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mrs. Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Heritage keeps assuring Canadians that Bill C-11 will not interfere with their online viewing choices. Sure, perhaps the bill does not dictate which algorithms have to be used, but it does effectively take control of a person's search bar by determining what content that individual can and cannot access online. Say goodbye to consumer choice and say hello to whatever the government wants to force in front of our eyeballs. The minister will say that I am wrong. He will put on a great show.

Why does the minister insist on misleading Canadians?

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I do not have to tell my colleague that she is wrong. Everybody knows that she is wrong. They keep inventing facts all the time, but there is one thing that remains: They do not care about our culture. They do not care about our films, our movies and everything that is produced in Canada. That is not important for the Conservatives and that is a shame.

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TAXATION

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): Mr. Speaker, other G7 leaders are trying to help their citizens and businesses deal with the higher cost of fuel, like releasing gas reserves in the United States. We may not have a strategic gas reserve here, but the Prime Minister can lower gas prices by temporarily reducing the GST on gasoline and diesel. This would save small businesses, commuters and seniors on a fixed income 8¢ a litre.

Will the Prime Minister, who said in Vancouver that higher gas prices are exactly what he wants, set aside his inflationary policies and work with the Conservatives to give Canadians a break at the pumps? Will he do that?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our government absolutely understands the affordability challenge that so many Canadians are facing. That is why our budget includes a number of measures to help Canadians with affordability: dental care, doubling support provided to the first-time homebuyers' tax credit, introducing a multi-generational home renovation tax credit and a \$500 payment for people facing housing affordability challenges.

Oral Questions

Mr. Warren Steinley (Regina—Lewvan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister continues to spread misinformation. We heard it today. The government continues to play the blame game with rising gas prices: It is COVID; it is Putin; the dog ate my homework. Everyone else is at fault but the Liberals. Moms trying to decide between filling up with gas and buying healthy snacks for their kids do not want to hear the Prime Minister's cherry-picked stats. Canadians should not be punished for driving to work and trying to return to their normal lives.

Does the government have a plan to rein in soaring gas prices, and will it finally scrap the carbon tax?

● (1435)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me start by saying that our government absolutely understands the affordability challenges that too many Canadian families are facing today. That is why, since we formed government in 2015, we have been working hard to support Canadian families. We created the Canada child benefit, which is indexed to inflation. Thanks to that benefit, a single mother with two children will receive up to \$13,600. We are increasing the OAS by 10%, and for early learning and child care, fees will be reduced by half by the end of this year.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are suffering. People in my riding are seeing the escalating price of gasoline. It has nearly doubled, and it is driving the cost of food and everything else up. The Liberal environment minister promised that the price of the carbon tax would not go above \$50 a tonne. That promise was broken. Now we have had multiple increases to the carbon tax in the middle of a pandemic, when many Canadians have lost their jobs.

Canadians are at their limit. Will the government take some action to reduce the price of gas in Canada?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we will take no lessons from the Conservatives when it comes to supporting the most vulnerable Canadians with the cost of living. It was our government that introduced the CCB, indexed to inflation, and it lifted more than 300,000 children out of poverty. We increased the GIS, also indexed to inflation, and it has helped over 900,000 seniors. When we formed government in 2015, nearly 5.2 million Canadians were living in poverty. By 2019, the last year for which data is available, that number had dropped to 3.8 million.

[Translation]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this morning, Quebecers woke up to some very bad news. Across Quebec, a litre of gas now costs more than two dollars.

That psychological barrier has now been broken. This means that Quebecers and Canadians have to pay more. It affects everyone, not just those who put gas in their cars. It affects the transportation of all goods, such as food. The cost of food will rise, due in part to the fact that the government implemented the Liberal carbon tax and increased it on April 1.

I have a simple question for the Minister of Finance: Can she tell Canadians how much money she has received since the Liberal carbon tax was increased on April 1?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to reiterate that our government understands the affordability crisis that so many Canadian families are facing.

That is why we have taken major steps in the budget to help Canadians with the cost of living, including providing dental care to Canadians, doubling the first-time home buyers' tax credit and providing a one-time payment of \$500 to people facing housing accessibility challenges.

[English]

Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Saint John oil refinery produces gasoline for pumps in Atlantic Canada and New England. In southwest New Brunswick today, a litre of gasoline is selling for \$1.89, but less than 10 minutes away, in Calais, Maine, gasoline, after the currency exchange, is 50¢ less a litre. The difference is all taxes, which the Liberals and NDP plan on driving up every year going forward.

Why is the government working so hard to drive up energy prices and make energy and life more unaffordable for Canadians?

Hon. Jonathan Wilkinson (Minister of Natural Resources, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, certainly the rise in gas prices and indeed in other commodities is very much a concern. As the members opposite know full well, petroleum products are priced in a competitive free market without government intervention.

Around the world, global energy markets are in flux due to strong demand from the COVID recovery, but also with respect to the invasion of Ukraine. Affordability here in Canada has been and will continue to be a primary focus of this government in everything that it does.

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● (1440)

[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal government says it is shocked that CN appointed a unilingual English-speaking board of directors, but it is avoiding the most obvious solution.

If the Charter of the French Language applied to CN, this never would have happened. CN, a Montreal-based company, never would have developed a corporate culture that is so out of touch that it would appoint a 100% unilingual anglophone board of directors without even realizing that it is a problem.

Why does the minister continue to refuse to apply Bill 101 to federally regulated businesses?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Official Languages and Minister responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, again, I thank my friend for the question.

As a francophone who lives in New Brunswick in an official language minority community, I know the importance of protecting and promoting French throughout the country, including in Quebec.

That is why we are introducing a bill, a new version of the Official Languages Act, and I hope the Bloc Québécois and every opposition member will support our bill, which is very important and will make a real difference in the lives of all Canadians.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the unilingual English appointments at CN are the result of the federal Official Languages Act. The federal government created this situation by allowing CN to circumvent Bill 101 for three decades in favour of the Official Languages Act.

The application of the federal Official Languages Act in Quebec creates corporate cultures like the one at CN, where French is not important.

Why is it that, even today, the new Liberal bill continues to encourage CN and similar businesses to circumvent the Charter of the French Language?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Official Languages and Minister responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is quite the opposite.

With our bill on the Official Languages Act, we want to ensure that francophones inside and outside Quebec can work in their language, French.

We recognize that French is declining in Canada, including in Quebec, and that is why we are moving forward with a new version of the law, a law that has more teeth to ensure, once again, that francophones will be protected across the country.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Salaberry—Suroît, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Quebecers want French to be mandatory in workplaces.

Workers can, of course, be bilingual or even trilingual, but French should be the language of work in our businesses. There is a solution, which can be found in Bill C-238, which I introduced. This bill would make federally regulated businesses subject to the Charter of the French Language. It is as simple as that.

Does the minister realize that by refusing such a simple solution she is encouraging businesses to avoid using French?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Official Languages and Minister responsible for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, once again, I encourage my hon. colleagues to read through Bill C-13. They clearly have not read it.

Under Bill C-13, federally regulated workers will have the option, or rather, the right, to work in French, an official language. Once again, we want to ensure that we protect and promote French all across Canada, including in Quebec.

Oral Questions

I hope that the Bloc Québécois will work with us to ensure that our bill moves forward.

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[English]

HEALTH

Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 50,000 fans watched the Jays play live, with no masks and no mandates. Over 20,000, with standing room only, will see the Leafs in the playoffs, with no masks and no mandates. Thank goodness the government is not in charge of sports. The secret public health advice that it is getting seems exclusively focused on punishing Canadians who want to fly to see their families or get back to work.

I will ask this again: Which day will the government end the vindictive mandates?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy to answer this question.

There is no secret and no secret evidence. Everyone knows that vaccinations save lives. About 163,000 lives would have been saved in the United States just from omicron if they had had a higher vaccination rate. In Canada, we have been vaccinated to a large extent, and that is why we have been successful, with one of the lowest rates of death in the world from COVID-19.

Ms. Melissa Lantsman (Thornhill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will invite the minister to table the secret public health advice that is different in this country than it is in any other country.

The Jays and the Leafs are both busing to the Buffalo airport to join the rest of the league without delays, and that is because of the ineffective redundancy at our own airports. Most Canadians do not have that luxury. Lineups and wait times at Pearson airport will only worsen over the summer unless the government acts.

I will ask this one more time: When will Canada join the rest of the world and drop the restrictions?

• (1445)

Hon. Omar Alhabra (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me start with the good news first. More Canadians are travelling today than in the last two years. It is good for tourism—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Let the minister answer the question.

The hon. Minister of Transport.

Hon. Omar Alhabra: Mr. Speaker, the good news is that more Canadians want to travel, want to go on trips and want to visit family, and we are seeing large volumes at airports. We are working on these delays.

Oral Questions

Yesterday I met with the CEO of CATSA. We struck a working group a few weeks ago to address these issues and work quickly to address the surge in demand.

We are seeing surges across the entire economy. Our government is responsive. We are working proactively to address these issues as quickly as possible.

The Deputy Speaker: The next time I have to stand, I will skip to the next party's question. This is the warning.

The hon. member for Wellington—Halton Hills.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's mortality rate is not the best in class. Japan, Finland, Australia and many other OECD countries have much lower death rates from COVID.

Canada is one of the few remaining countries with domestic air travel restrictions in place. Canadians have endured the isolation of the pandemic and separation from loved ones. We live in a vast country where air travel is often the only way to visit loved ones.

There are some three million Canadians who remain unvaccinated who cannot board a flight to see loved ones. When will the government lift these domestic air travel restrictions?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me say what everyone knows, which is that vaccination is not punishment. Vaccination is protection. When we vaccinate ourselves not only do we protect ourselves against a disease that can be very serious, but we also protect those around us whom we like and we love. Therefore, we protect them and their community. With respect to vaccination, just in the past few months, the rate of boosters in Britain has avoided about 130,000 hospitalizations just during omicron.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has always said that Canada's response to the pandemic is based on science.

While countries around the world have already abandoned mandatory proof of vaccination, the Prime Minister continues to require it at Canadian airports.

If we are talking about science, how does he explain the fact that we can have 28,000 people in a sports stadium without proof of vaccination, but we cannot travel within our own country?

Can the Prime Minister share his science with us and explain why he insists on maintaining these restrictions at airports?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the reason we can relax public health measures is that Canada has high vaccination rates.

Without vaccination in the last six months of 2021, without strong public health measures, by some estimates, we would have had 400,000 deaths in Canada during that period.

We cannot choose to relax public health measures without having the right vaccination rates.

[English]

THE ECONOMY

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while people are struggling to live, the increasing costs of groceries, gas and housing are making it even harder and caregivers are feeling these increasing costs. The Canada child benefit is a crucial benefit to help caregivers with the cost of living, yet during the pandemic the government clawed back on the benefit for families who needed CERB.

The Liberals claim to support everyday people. Meanwhile, they are standing by while families struggle. When will the minister fix this issue and support those who lost income because of ruthless government cuts?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for raising this important issue. We understand that the cost of living has gone up, particularly because of COVID and because of the illegal war in Ukraine. That is why we have the Canada child benefit in place, which, in fact, we had before. It has helped lift over 300,000 families out of poverty and we continue to ensure that it is indexed to inflation so that we can help families who we know are in need.

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● (1450)

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, people with disabilities make up 41% of Canadians living in poverty. These were the Canadians hardest hit during this pandemic and now a disproportionate number of Canadians with disabilities is feeling the additional pressures of inflation. They are using food banks and losing their housing. How can we let this continue?

Advocates across the country are calling for action. When will the government finally prioritize people with disabilities and put in place a Canada disability benefit?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in fact, we had a wonderful meeting just this morning to discuss this very issue. Since 2015, we have made historic investments in disability inclusion. Just in this past budget 2022, we are investing almost \$300 million in an employment strategy for people with disabilities and alternate-format materials. Moving forward, we are committed to reintroducing Canada disability benefit legislation and of course Canada's first-ever disability inclusion action plan.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it meant so much to Davenport residents, and indeed to all Canadians, to see the Prime Minister in Kyiv on Sunday and to see him stand shoulder to shoulder with President Zelenskyy, as we have done since day one. Canada is an unwavering partner to Ukraine, and we have been providing comprehensive military support to our Ukrainian partners as they fight to defend their country. This weekend, the Prime Minister announced even more aid.

Can the Minister of National Defence update the members of this House and Canadians on this new military aid?

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our support for Ukraine remains unwavering. This past weekend, while the Prime Minister was in Kyiv, he announced \$50 million more in military aid, in addition to the \$131 million already committed since February. This includes 18 drone cameras, \$15 million in high-resolution satellite imagery, \$1 million in small arms and related ammunition and additional ammunition for the M777 Howitzers.

As Ukrainian heroes fight back to win this war, Canada stands shoulder to shoulder with them.

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PASSPORT CANADA

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in response to the passport delay crisis at Service Canada, Liberal after Liberal has stated it was “all hands on deck” and Service Canada was working 24-7 to address the issue to help Canadians, yet at a Service Canada office in Edmonton, there is a poster at the door that says they will only help people if they are travelling within five days due to reduced capability.

Only with the Liberal government could we spend more money and end up with less service to Canadians. When will the minister acknowledge it is Service Canada, as opposed to “not in service Canada”, and get back to serving Canadians?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have stated numerous times in the House, there is an unprecedented demand when it comes to passports, and the reason why Service Canada passport offices are only able to serve people with urgent travel is because of this unprecedented demand. That being said, the 303 Service Canada offices are open to receive passport applications for those who are travelling in a longer period of time.

Oral Questions

As I have said, Service Canada employees across the country are working overtime evenings and weekends to support Canadians to access their passports in a timely manner.

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is good to hear that the staff are working hard. It is too bad the government was not working as hard.

Kristen from Hinton mailed in her three sons' passports over two months ago and was still waiting for their passports to be renewed. After spending hours on the phone and taking two trips to Edmonton, which is three hours one way, she ended up having to pay for express service.

Will the NDP-Liberal government stop charging people more money to fix its backlogs, or does it need the money to pay for all the NDP-Liberal coalition promises?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said, there is an unprecedented demand right now when it comes to passports. However, if all required documents have been submitted and Service Canada is outside service standards, the client will not be charged for expedited or transfer fees. This is not something that should be happening and, of course, if it is, I invite either MPs or citizens to follow up with Service Canada because they should be receiving their services without having to pay those expedited fees.

● (1455)

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Mr. Speaker, constituents in my riding are complaining non-stop about delays at Service Canada, like Melody, whose child's passport did not arrive in the mail. She waited in line all day, only to be rudely told to go home. Michael stood in line for seven hours for a copy of his social insurance number in an office that had one employee, but usually has six. Now, Service Canada will not even talk to people unless they have an appointment. In fact, even if they do, they are told to wait outside until their scheduled appointments.

Does the minister have any plans to put the “service” back in Service Canada?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in fact, as of this week, all wickets in Service Canada offices across the country are open. They are also opening to ensure that clients can wait inside. There are both by-appointment and walk-in services.

Oral Questions

As I have said, we are experiencing a huge surge in demand when it comes to passports. We understand that Canadians, over the past few years, stayed home and followed public health guidance and now want to travel. That being said, while we have taken additional measures to respond to this unprecedented demand, we will continue to maintain these extra services so that we can respond to Canadians.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): There is unprecedented demand, Mr. Speaker. Yes, it is very hard to calculate when a five-year or 10-year passport expires. The only person, and the only government, that would be confused by this unprecedented demand is this incoherent, incompetent government. What is truly unprecedented is the staggering incompetence that is putting so many Canadians in an absolutely untenable situation. We have heard about the maybe 500 new employees. It is not fixing anything.

Will the minister and the government actually do something to fix this unprecedented disaster?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said, over the past two years a number of passports have expired, and Canadians now want to travel again. That being said, two years ago Passport Canada processed 300,000 applications. Last year, it was 1.2 million. In April alone, we had 300,000 passports processed. There is an unprecedented demand, in terms of getting passports processed. We are responding in kind to serve Canadians as quickly as possible. There are additional measures that have been taken, and we will continue to keep these measures in place as long as needed.

* * *

[Translation]

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the federal fiasco in the temporary foreign worker program is making many Quebec businesses angry.

The Conseil du patronat du Québec and restaurant owners, among others, want Ottawa to stop requiring labour market impact assessments from businesses, which are duplicating something Quebec already does. In the middle of the labour shortage, Ottawa is unnecessarily delaying the arrival of temporary foreign workers for months on end.

Why is the government continuing to demand that businesses do labour market impact assessments when Quebec has already done them?

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know that immigration is critical if we want to address labour shortages.

IRCC is fast-tracking work permits for occupations in demand, such as health care, agriculture, food and seafood production. In the last quarter, we processed over 100,000 work permit applications, nearly double the number processed in the same period last year.

We will continue to ensure that Canadian and Quebec employers have access to the workers they need to secure our economic recovery in Canada.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, last year, as I recall, there was COVID-19, so there were fewer applications.

While Ottawa is asleep at the wheel when it comes to temporary foreign workers, our small and medium-sized businesses are being clobbered by the labour shortage.

While the government tells us that everything is fine, 15% of Quebec's SMEs are outsourcing their operations because they do not have anyone to work at the plant, and 62% of them are losing contracts because they do not have any workers, because they have to raise their prices, and because they have to deliver their products late.

When will the government realize that they need to do everything they can to expedite and streamline the arrival of temporary foreign workers for our SMEs?

• (1500)

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we recognize that, once again, temporary foreign workers are vital to the Canadian economy.

That is why as part of the workforce solutions road map, we will eliminate the limit on low-wage positions for seasonal employers, extend LMIA validity for low-wage occupations, and extend the maximum duration of employment for the high-wage and global talent streams from two years to three years.

* * *

[English]

SMALL BUSINESS

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during pandemic restrictions, we saw small businesses become more reliant on debit and credit card transactions. This forced them to shoulder more costs in interchange fees at a time when inflation was hitting them hard. The Liberals have been making commitments to lower credit card fees since 2017. Australia has done it and EU countries have done it. A year ago, the Minister of Finance committed again in budget 2021, yet we have seen no results.

Can Canadian small businesses trust the minister to lower credit card fees, or is this more misinformation?

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what I can share with the House and the hon. member is that this government has always stood behind small businesses throughout the pandemic to support them and get them through the pandemic. Do members know what we did in budget 2022? We cut their taxes, so that we could help businesses and small businesses grow. We are going to keep working for small businesses and entrepreneurs as a country to help them start up, scale up and access those new markets.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that sounded like another load of disinformation.

Tourism operators, restaurants and other small businesses in Alberta are ready to be back at full capacity, but there is something holding them back: severe labour shortages. In many cases, these shortages are forcing them to cut back their business hours. They cannot even turn to the temporary foreign worker program, because the Liberal government is drowning small businesses in red tape and is failing to process LMIA's and work permits.

Does the Liberal government not understand the massive economic cost of businesses being closed because they cannot find enough workers, or does it just not care?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I know that the incredibly low unemployment rate, in fact, the lowest unemployment rate in the history of our country since we have been recording this data, is putting a burden on employers to find workers. That is why we are taking an all-of-government approach to addressing labour shortages, whether it is welcoming talent from around the world, investing in the workers of the future, looking to transition workers through skills and training opportunities, or investing in specific sectors that are transitioning.

We are not leaving anything to chance and are making sure we address these labour shortages across government.

* * *

[Translation]

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is quite vague.

Small businesses suffered enormously during the pandemic. As everyone knows, many of them had to temporarily close. Now they are dealing with serious labour shortages and unacceptable delays thanks to Immigration Canada.

A landscaping company in my riding has to wait 10 to 12 weeks to get a work permit for temporary foreign workers. In 12 weeks, summer will be over. It will be pointless. What does this government intend to do to solve this issue?

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada's economic recovery is well under way. As of

Oral Questions

March 2022, 73,000 jobs have been created, lowering the unemployment rate to 5.3%. In fact, Canada's economic recovery is outpacing many employers' ability to find workers, resulting in labour shortages across the country.

That is why we have announced changes to the foreign worker program to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the Canadian workforce. We will continue to work with the provinces, territories and our other partners to ensure that Canada's successful economic recovery continues.

* * *

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Minister of Canadian Heritage organized a summit on culture in Ottawa. One of the main subjects was the modernization of legislation to support our online culture. Passing Bill C-11 is key to achieving that.

However, the Conservatives would rather play politics and are doing everything they can to block this bill. Can the Minister of Canadian Heritage tell us why the cultural sector strongly supports Bill C-11?

• (1505)

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her remarkable work. I want to tell her that our culture needs a level playing field for web giants, and that is exactly what Bill C-11, the online streaming act, does.

This is essential for all of our artists, creators and cultural workers, but the Conservatives keep abandoning them again and again. They would rather play politics when Canada and the cultural sector need this legislation. It is time to move forward.

* * *

[English]

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Mr. Dan Mazier (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we know that the Liberals' environmental policies are hurting Canadian farmers. Whether it is the carbon tax or fertilizer restrictions, the list goes on and on.

However, last week, Canadian farmers received shocking news. The Minister of the Environment admitted he has never visited a Canadian farm since he was appointed. If the minister is willing to walk all over Canadian farmers, why will he not walk on a family farm?

*Oral Questions**[Translation]*

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that is strange because I visited a farm in Montérégie about a month ago with the Minister of Environment.

It was quite impressive to see the new energy-efficient grain dryers. Our visit to this highly automated dairy farm was extremely interesting for me and the Minister of Environment.

* * *

*[English]***RAIL TRANSPORTATION**

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Mr. Speaker, stakeholders are calling out the Liberals on their failure to ensure adequate and reliable rail service for western agriculture products destined for markets around the world.

According to the executive director of the Western Grain Elevator Association, “We’re right back to the same quagmire we were in before Bill C-49 was passed.”

Instead of wasting his energy maintaining vindictive travel bans for Canadians, when will the minister tackle actual transportation issues here in Canada?

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the issue of rail traffic is of incredible importance to our government. We have been there for businesses, for shippers, for farmers and for producers, to ensure that they have the services they need so that they can sell internally, domestically and around the world.

I have written to CN and CP to express the frustrations I have been hearing from shippers and farmers, to ensure that they know that the government cares about an excellent delivery record and safety record. We will be there supporting our farmers as they deliver their products to market.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it appears to be more disinformation while Canadians are suffering.

In my riding, people are very concerned about the cost of living and the out-of-control inflation. My constituents have asked me to confirm with the finance minister that she understands that printing money, borrowing and out-of-control spending are the actual problem.

Does the finance minister not realize that if she keeps printing, borrowing and spending, whether to buy votes or to secure alliances with the NDP, she is the single largest factor driving up inflation for Canadian families?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yet again, the Conservatives seem to be criticizing a budget that they imagined rather than the budget we actually delivered. I would urge them to maybe read the National Post, which described the budget we delivered as “prudent

and responsible” and pointed out that “the efforts to expand Canada’s productive capacity and hold the line on spending are welcome, as are the new commitments to defence spending.”

* * *

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the ongoing crisis in Syria has triggered one of the worst humanitarian crises of the modern era. Millions of Syrians have been displaced, seeking refuge in Canada and in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. The situation is dire.

Could the Minister of International Development inform the House on what the government is doing to help Syrians in neighbouring countries?

● (1510)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of International Development and Minister responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Willowdale for his strong advocacy.

Since 2015, our government has been present for the Syrian people, with over \$4 billion in funding, which includes significant humanitarian development and stabilization assistance.

Today, I announced that we will continue to be there for them, with additional funding of over \$229 million to Syria and the surrounding region. This funding will help the crisis-affected people to meet their basic needs, such as food, sanitation and health services, and empower women and girls in advancing gender rights.

* * *

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today the media reported that Afghan interpreters who helped the Canadian military are being tortured and beaten by the Taliban while they wait for the government to get them to safety.

Yesterday, our committee was told that 3,800 Afghans had their identities verified by National Defence, but only 900 of those have had their applications processed. No one knew or could advise what happened to the other 2,900 applications. Meanwhile, IRCC is in complete chaos and is asking GAC to resubmit those cases.

Can the minister confirm if IRCC has lost those urgent applications?

Government Orders

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, so far, more than 12,600 Afghan refugees have arrived in Canada, and more than half of those arrived through our special immigration measures for Afghans who assisted in Canada's mission in Afghanistan. Another two flights are arriving later this week. We will not stop until we reach our goal to welcome at least 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada.

* * *

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): *Uqaqtittiji*, I rise to bring awareness to Bear Witness Day. We must do everything to ensure that first nations children receive fair public services and funding. How long must we hear stories of indigenous children and families who cannot access services to ensure good health and well-being?

The injustice must end. The Liberals must fully comply with the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal and fully implement Jordan's principle. Will this government finally end the discriminatory funding of the first nations child and family services program?

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services and Minister responsible for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for her ongoing advocacy for equity and fairness for first nations children. In fact, the government has been fully complying with Jordan's principle. We will continue to do that.

Not only that, but the parties are negotiating on a final agreement. As the House knows, we have an agreement in principle that we are working with all the parties to finalize. Rest assured we will work tirelessly to ensure that first nations children have every opportunity to succeed.

The Deputy Speaker: That is all the time we have for question period today.

I believe we have a point of order from the hon. member for Port Moody—Coquitlam.

* * *

DISABILITY BENEFIT

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there have been consultations, and I believe that if you seek it, you will find consent for the following motion. I move:

That, given that the disability community has disproportionately been negatively impacted by the pandemic, the rising cost of goods and food, and the skyrocketing cost of housing, the House call on the government to put into place a Canada Disability Benefit without delay.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed to the hon. member's moving the motion will please say nay. It is agreed.

The House has heard the terms of the motion. All those opposed to the motion will please say nay.

(Motion agreed to)

● (1515)

[English]

BUDGET IMPLEMENTATION ACT, 2022, NO. 1

The House resumed from May 9 consideration of the motion that Bill C-19, An Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on April 7, 2022 and other measures, be read the second time and referred to a committee, of the amendment and of the amendment to the amendment.

The Deputy Speaker: It being 3:15 p.m., pursuant to order made on Thursday, November 25, 2021, the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the amendment to the amendment on the motion at second reading of Bill C-19.

May I dispense?

Some hon. members: No.

[Chair read text of amendment to the amendment to House]

● (1525)

(The House divided on the amendment to the amendment, which was negatived on the following division:)

(Division No. 80)

YEAS

Members

Aboultair

Albas

Arnold

Barlow

Benzen

Berthold

Block

Brassard

Calkins

Carrie

Chong

Dancho

Doherty

Dreeshen

Ellis

Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster)

Fast

Findlay

Généreux

Gladu

Goodridge

Gray

Hoback

Kelly

Kmieć

Kramp-Neuman

Kusie

Lantsman

Lehoux

Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk)

Lloyd

MacKenzie

Martel

McCauley (Edmonton West)

Melillo

Morantz

Mutz

Aitchison

Allison

Baldinelli

Barrett

Bergen

Bezan

Bragdon

Brock

Caputo

Chambers

Cooper

Davidson

Dowdall

Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry)

Epp

Falk (Provencher)

Ferreri

Gallant

Genuis

Godin

Gourde

Hallan

Jeneroux

Kitchen

Kram

Kurek

Lake

Lawrence

Lewis (Essex)

Liepert

Lobb

Maguire

Mazier

McLean

Moore

Morrison

Muys

Government Orders

Nater
Patzner
Perkins
Redekopp
Richards
Rood
Scheer
Seebach
Shipley
Soroka
Stewart
Stubbs
Tochor
Uppal
Vecchio
Vien
Vis
Wagantall
Waugh
Williams
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O'Toole
Paul-Hus
Rays
Reid
Roberts
Ruff
Schmale
Shields
Small
Steinley
Strahl
Thomas
Tolmie
Van Popta
Vidal
Viersen
Vuong
Warkentin
Webber
Williamson

Hughes
Hutchings
Idlout
Jaczek
Jowhari
Kayabaga
Khalid
Koutrakis
Kwan
Lambropoulos
Lamoureux
Larouche
Lauzon
Lebouthillier
Lightbound
Longfield
MacAulay (Cardigan)
MacGregor
Maloney
Masse
May (Cambridge)
McDonald (Avalon)
McKay
McLeod
Mendès
Miao
Miller
Morrissey
Naqvi
Noormohamed
O'Connell
Pauzé
Petipas Taylor
Powlowski
Robillard
Rogers
Sahota
Saks
Sarai
Scarpaleggia
Serré
Shanahan
Sidhu (Brampton East)
Simard
Singh
Spengemann
St-Onge
Tassi
Thériault
Thompson
Trudel
Valdez
van Koeverden
Vandenbeld
Villemure
Wilkinson
Zahid
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Hussen
Iacono
Ien
Johns
Julian
Kelloway
Khera
Kusmierczyk
Lalonde
Lametti
Lapointe
Lattanzio
LeBlanc
Lemire
Long
Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga)
MacDonald (Malpeque)
MacKinnon (Gatineau)
Martinez Ferrada
Mathysen
May (Saenich—Gulf Islands)
McGuinty
McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)
McPherson
Mendicino
Michaud
Morrice
Murray
Ng
Normandin
O'Regan
Perron
Plamondon
Qualtrough
Rodriguez
Romanado
Sajjan
Samson
Savard-Tremblay
Schieffe
Sgro
Sheehan
Sidhu (Brampton South)
Sinclair-Desgagné
Sorbara
Ste-Marie
Sudds
Taylor Roy
Therrien
Trudeau
Turnbull
Van Bynen
Vandal
Vignola
Weiler
Yip
Zarrillo

NAYS**Members**

Aldag
Ali
Anandasangaree
Arseneault
Ashton
Bachrach
Bains
Barron
Battiste
Beech
Bennett
Bérubé
Bittle
Blair
Blanchette-Joncas
Blois
Boulerice
Brière
Cannings
Casey
Chagger
Champoux
Chen
Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek)
Cormier
Dabrusin
Davies
Desbiens
Desjarlais
Dhillon
Dong
Dubourg
Duguid
Dzerowicz
El-Khoury
Fergus
Fisher
Fortier
Fragiskatos
Freeland
Gaheer
Garon
Gaudreau
Gerretsen
Gould
Guilbeault
Hardie
Holland

Alghabra
Anand
Angus
Arya
Atwin
Badawey
Baker
Barsalou-Duval
Beaulieu
Bendayan
Bergeron
Bibeau
Blaikie
Blanchet
Blaney
Boissonnault
Bradford
Brunelle-Duceppe
Carr
Chabot
Chahal
Chatel
Chiang
Collins (Victoria)
Coteau
Damoff
DeBellefeuille
Desilets
Dhaliwal
Diab
Drouin
Duclos
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Ehsassi
Erskine-Smith
Fillmore
Fonseca
Fortin
Fraser
Fry
Garneau
Garrison
Gazan
Gill
Green
Hajdu
Hepfner
Housefather

Nil

PAIRED

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the amendment to the amendment defeated.

The next question is on the amendment.

May I dispense?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

[Chair read text of amendment to House]

• (1530)

The Deputy Speaker: If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the amendment be adopted on division, I invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Mr. Speaker, I would like to request a recorded division.

• (1540)

(The House divided on the amendment, which was negatived on the following division:)

(Division No. 81)

YEAS

Members

Aboultaif	Aitchison
Albas	Allison
Arnold	Baldinelli
Barlow	Barrett
Benzen	Bergen
Berthold	Bezan
Block	Bragdon
Brassard	Brock
Calkins	Caputo
Carrie	Chambers
Chong	Cooper
Dancho	Davidson
Doherty	Dowdall
Dreeshen	Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry)
Ellis	Epp
Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster)	Falk (Provencher)
Fast	Ferreri
Findlay	Gallant
Généreux	Genuis
Gladu	Godin
Goodridge	Gourde
Gray	Hallan
Hoback	Jeneroux
Kelly	Kitchen
Kmiec	Kram
Kramp-Neuman	Kurek
Kusie	Lake
Lantsman	Lawrence
Lehoux	Lewis (Essex)
Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Liepert
Lloyd	Lobb
MacKenzie	Maguire
Martel	Mazier
McCauley (Edmonton West)	McLean
Melillo	Moore
Morantz	Morrison
Motz	Muys
Nater	O'Toole
Patzer	Paul-Hus
Perkins	Rayes
Redekopp	Reid
Richards	Roberts
Rood	Ruff
Scheer	Schmale
Seebach	Shields
Shipley	Small
Soroka	Steinley
Stewart	Strahl
Stubbs	Thomas
Tochor	Tolmie
Uppal	Van Popta
Vecchio	Vidal

Vien
Vis
Wagantall
Waugh
Williams
Zimmer— 115

Government Orders

Viersen
Vuong
Warkentin
Webber
Williamson

NAYS

Members

Aldag	Alghabra
Ali	Anand
Anandasangaree	Angus
Arseneault	Arya
Ashton	Atwin
Bachrach	Badawey
Bains	Baker
Barron	Barsalou-Duval
Battiste	Beaulieu
Beech	Bendayan
Bennett	Bergeron
Bérubé	Bibeau
Bittle	Blaikie
Blair	Blanchet
Blanchette-Joncas	Blaney
Blois	Boissonnault
Boulerice	Bradford
Brière	Brunelle-Duceppe
Cannings	Carr
Casey	Chabot
Chagger	Chahal
Champoux	Chatel
Chen	Chiang
Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek)	Collins (Victoria)
Cornier	Coteau
Dabrusin	Damoff
Davies	DeBellefeuille
Desbiens	Desilets
Desjarlais	Dhaliwal
Dhillon	Diab
Dong	Drouin
Dubourg	Duclos
Duguid	Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dzerowicz	Ehsassi
El-Khoury	Erskine-Smith
Fergus	Fillmore
Fisher	Fonseca
Fortier	Fortin
Fragiskatos	Fraser
Freeland	Fry
Gaheer	Garneau
Garon	Garrison
Gaudreau	Gazan
Gerretsen	Gill
Gould	Green
Guilbeault	Hajdu
Hardie	Hepfner
Holland	Housefather
Hughes	Hussen
Hutchings	Iacono
Idlout	Ien
Jaczek	Johns
Jowhari	Julian
Kayabaga	Kelloway
Khalid	Khera
Koutrakis	Kusmierczyk
Kwan	Lalonde
Lambropoulos	Lametti
Lamoureux	Lapointe
Larouche	Lattanzio
Lauson	LeBlanc
Lebouthillier	Lemire
Lightbound	Long

Government Orders

Longfield	Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga)	Bachrach	Badawey
MacAulay (Cardigan)	MacDonald (Malpeque)	Bains	Barron
MacGregor	MacKinnon (Gatineau)	Barsalou-Duval	Battiste
Maloney	Martinez Ferrada	Beaulieu	Beech
Masse	Mathysen	Bendayan	Bennett
May (Cambridge)	May (Saanich—Gulf Islands)	Bergeron	Bérubé
McDonald (Avalon)	McGuinty	Bibeau	Bittle
McKay	McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)	Blaikie	Blair
McLeod	McPherson	Blanchet	Blanchette-Joncas
Mendès	Mendicino	Blaney	Blois
Miao	Michaud	Boissonnault	Boulerice
Miller	Morrice	Bradford	Brière
Morrissey	Murray	Brunelle-Duceppe	Cannings
Naqvi	Ng	Carr	Casey
Noormohamed	Normandin	Chabot	Chagger
O'Connell	O'Regan	Chahal	Champoux
Pauzé	Perron	Chatel	Chen
Petitpas Taylor	Plamondon	Chiang	Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek)
Powlowski	Qualtrough	Collins (Victoria)	Cornier
Robillard	Rodriguez	Coteau	Dabrusin
Rogers	Romanado	Damoff	Davies
Sahota	Sajjan	DeBellefeuille	Desbiens
Saks	Samson	Desilets	Desjarlais
Sarai	Savard-Tremblay	Dhaliwal	Dhillon
Scarpaleggia	Schiefke	Diab	Dong
Serré	Sgro	Drouin	Dubourg
Shanahan	Sheehan	Duclos	Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Sidhu (Brampton East)	Sidhu (Brampton South)	Dzerowicz	Ehsassi
Simard	Sinclair-Desgagné	El-Khoury	Erskine-Smith
Singh	Sorbara	Fergus	Fillmore
Spengemann	Ste-Marie	Fisher	Fonseca
St-Onge	Sudds	Fortier	Fortin
Tassi	Taylor Roy	Fragiskatos	Fraser
Thériault	Therrien	Freeland	Fry
Thompson	Trudeau	Gaheer	Garneau
Trudel	Turnbull	Garon	Garrison
Valdez	Van Bynen	Gaudreau	Gazan
van Koevorden	Vandal	Gerretsen	Gill
Vandenbeld	Vignola	Gould	Green
Villemure	Weiler	Guilbeault	Hajdu
Wilkinson	Yip	Hardie	Hepfner
Zahid	Zarrillo	Holland	Housefather
Zuberi — 211		Hughes	Hussen
		Hutchings	Iacono
		Idlout	Ien
		Jaczek	Johns
		Jowhari	Julian
		Kayabaga	Kelloway
		Khalid	Khera
		Koutrakis	Kusmierczyk
		Kwan	Lalonde
		Lambropoulos	Lametti
		Lamoureux	Lapointe
		Larouche	Lattanzio
		Lauzon	LeBlanc
		Lebouthillier	Lemire
		Lightbound	Long
		Longfield	Louis (Kitchener—Conestoga)
		MacAulay (Cardigan)	MacDonald (Malpeque)
		MacGregor	MacKinnon (Gatineau)
		Maloney	Martinez Ferrada
		Masse	Mathysen
		May (Cambridge)	McDonald (Avalon)
		McGuinty	McKay
		McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam)	McLeod
		McPherson	Mendès
		Mendicino	Miao
		Michaud	Miller
		Morrissey	Murray
		Naqvi	Ng
		Noormohamed	Normandin
		O'Connell	O'Regan
		Pauzé	Perron

PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the amendment defeated.

The next question is on the main motion.

If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the motion be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

The hon. member for Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame.

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Speaker, I request a recorded division.

• (1550)

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(Division No. 82)

YEAS

Members

Aldag	Alghabra
Ali	Anand
Anandasangaree	Angus
Arseneault	Arya
Ashton	Atwin

Petitpas Taylor
 Powlowski
 Robillard
 Rogers
 Sahota
 Saks
 Sarai
 Scarpaleggia
 Serré
 Shanahan
 Sidhu (Brampton East)
 Simard
 Singh
 Spengemann
 St-Onge
 Tassi
 Thériault
 Thompson
 Trudel
 Valdez
 van Koeverden
 Vandenbeld
 Villemure
 Wilkinson
 Zahid
 Zuberi— 207

Plamondon
 Qualtrough
 Rodriguez
 Romanado
 Sajjan
 Samson
 Savard-Tremblay
 Schiefke
 Sgro
 Sheehan
 Sidhu (Brampton South)
 Sinclair-Desgagné
 Sorbara
 Ste-Marie
 Sudds
 Taylor Roy
 Therrien
 Trudeau
 Turnbull
 Van Bynen
 Vandal
 Vignola
 Weiler
 Yip
 Zarrillo

Rood
 Scheer
 Seebach
 Shipley
 Soroka
 Stewart
 Stubbs
 Tochor
 Uppal
 Vecchio
 Vien
 Vis
 Wagantall
 Waugh
 Williams
 Zimmer— 117

Ruff
 Schmale
 Shields
 Small
 Steinley
 Strahl
 Thomas
 Tolmie
 Van Popta
 Vidal
 Viersen
 Vuong
 Warkentin
 Webber
 Williamson

Business of Supply

PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Finance.

(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

* * *

● (1555)

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CHANGE TO STANDING ORDER 30 REGARDING THE PRAYER

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform the House that because of the deferred recorded divisions, Government Orders will be extended by 39 minutes.

When we left off, we had five minutes of questions and comments for the Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons.

The hon. member for Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is on this rare occasion that I agree with the member across the way from the Liberal Party. I am baffled that the Bloc would bring forward a motion to remove prayer from this chamber.

Being the former chair of the National Prayer Breakfast, I understand the value of prayer. It means a lot to a lot of Canadians, to millions of us across Canada, yet the Bloc has brought forward a very divisive motion in the House. I would add that the House is already non-partisan in terms of faiths. It recognizes faiths in the prayer and also recognizes persons who do not support a faith.

Why would members of the Bloc seek to remove this key aspect of freedom of religion from this place?

NAYS

Members

Aboultiaf
 Albas
 Arnold
 Barlow
 Benzen
 Berthold
 Block
 Brassard
 Calkins
 Carrie
 Chong
 Dancho
 Doherty
 Dreeshen
 Ellis
 Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster)
 Fast
 Findlay
 Gagné
 Gladu
 Goodridge
 Gray
 Hoback
 Kelly
 Kmiec
 Kramp-Neuman
 Kusie
 Lantsman
 Lehoux
 Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk)
 Lloyd
 MacKenzie
 Martel
 Mazier
 McLean
 Melillo
 Moore
 Morrice
 Motz
 Nater
 Patzer
 Perkins
 Redekopp
 Richards

Aitchison
 Allison
 Baldinelli
 Barrett
 Bergen
 Bezan
 Bragdon
 Brock
 Caputo
 Chambers
 Cooper
 Davidson
 Dowdall
 Duncan (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry)
 Epp
 Falk (Provencher)
 Ferreri
 Gallant
 Genuis
 Godin
 Gourde
 Hallan
 Jeneroux
 Kitchen
 Kram
 Kurek
 Lake
 Lawrence
 Lewis (Essex)
 Liepert
 Lobb
 Maguire
 May (Saanich—Gulf Islands)
 McCauley (Edmonton West)
 Melillo
 Morantz
 Morrison
 Muys
 O'Toole
 Paul-Hus
 Rayes
 Reid
 Roberts

Business of Supply

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, this goes to what I was saying during my speech, which is that not only has the prayer been part of our Standing Orders for a very long time, but it is very generic in nature. It can represent all faiths, depending on how it is interpreted. It is very generic in its terms, and that is good because it represents and respects all faiths.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, earlier in his speech, the member for Kingston and the Islands said there were a number of topics that the Bloc Québécois might have brought forward on an opposition day. I would certainly agree with the member for Kingston and the Islands that there are many ways in which the government has failed and is failing Canadians that would rightly be the subject of an opposition day motion.

I think of the Liberals' so-called climate plan, which is really based on a prayer. That is where a prayer should not be. We should have a much more concrete action plan with a far better hope of success.

I wonder if perhaps the member wants to speak to some of the ways the government has been failing Canada that might have been the proper object of an opposition day motion.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, the member and his party were in a much better position to advocate for what he is so passionate about when they entered into the supply and confidence agreement with the government. If he is so passionate about these things in particular, why were they not front and centre in that agreement? Perhaps the member can answer that later on.

The truth is that there are a lot of things the Bloc Québécois could have brought up today to discuss. The Bloc members only have two opposition days between January and June, yet they chose to bring this up, which absolutely baffles me. I do not even see the political wedge part to it, to be completely honest, if that is where the motivation came from.

At the end of the day, I am left perplexed in trying to figure out what exactly the strategy of the Bloc was. Member after member has stood up and asked, "Why this?" The Bloc's default reaction is to become extremely defensive and say that they are allowed to do whatever they want. Of course they can do whatever they want, but they could still try to muster up some kind of answer to the question of why this is more important than all the other issues.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Madam Speaker, tomorrow we will be voting on either accepting the status quo or moving to a moment of reflection. When it comes to the goal of inclusivity, though, there are other options, like, for example, allowing members, on each day of the week, to offer a prayer from their own faith tradition.

I wonder if the member would reflect on whether this would increase inclusivity in this place.

• (1600)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Madam Speaker, that is a very good point. The member brings up other options, and I think that is the whole point to having an issue like this go before a committee. This issue should go before PROC so it can determine if indeed there is

a better idea or not. I do not know. To be completely honest, this is not one of the issues I have been seized with in the almost seven years that I have been here. I have never felt we needed to invest a huge amount of time into this like the Bloc does.

I will mention that I noticed the Bloc members voted in favour of the last bill. That means they voted in favour of the budget, at least at this reading. It is a signal to me that the Bloc feels as though the budget is a good budget and deserves the support of the House. Maybe the Bloc ended up bringing this forward because it really had nothing else to complain about.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is great to see you in the chair this afternoon. I hope you and the rest of our hon. colleagues are having a productive week here on the Hill. It is nice to see the sun shining as well and the nice weather. It always brings hope. The Tulip Festival is happening here in the nation's capital in the coming days, so hopefully we will see Canadians come here from coast to coast to coast to visit our nation's capital.

I do not want to reiterate fully what my colleague from Kingston and the Islands said. I too have been here for three elections and am in the seventh year, if we calculate that numerically, and I do not think I have ever received a query or comment about removing references to God in anything, or anything to that effect, from any individual. I am therefore very surprised with regard to the motion brought forward by the member for Drummond.

I am also a little disappointed. I think we are seized with many issues in the world and in the country. Yes, we can walk and chew gum at the same time with the issues we are seized with, be it inflation, a need in our very strong and growing economy for additional labour supply in this country and for an increase in labour force participation rates or the war in Ukraine, an unprovoked, barbaric instigation of aggression by Putin's regime in Russia. We have issues that we need to grapple with. We need to focus on those issues.

This, to me, seems like an issue that is not, I would say, important. I will state that I am against this motion, full stop. I do not like the spirit of the motion. I also do not like the process by which it was brought forward. I am fully against it at this time and will state that at this moment.

I do wish to turn my attention to some prepared remarks I have for the remainder of my time.

[Translation]

Today, I rise to highlight the importance of staying the course in the fight against racism and discrimination in Canada.

Many Canadians believe that because we live in a multicultural society where diversity has become a fundamental element of the Canadian identity, racism and discrimination do not occur in Canada. That is not true.

For many, especially Black and indigenous people—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I am sorry to interrupt the member, but the hon. member for Trois-Rivières is rising on a point of order.

Business of Supply

Mr. René Villemure: Madam Speaker, the member's speech is not related to the motion.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Flexibility is necessary in speeches. That applies to all members of the House.

I am certain that the member will come back to the motion in due course.

The hon. member for Vaughan—Woodbridge.

[English]

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Madam Speaker, you have the latitude regarding whether what I say is appropriate or not. I believe it is. It speaks to particular issues that are relevant here in Canada that we must continue to deal with, and it pertains to the motion at hand.

[Translation]

For many, especially Black and indigenous people, this has been their everyday reality for generations.

• (1605)

[English]

These issues are especially felt by people from racialized, religious minority or indigenous backgrounds, and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Racism and discrimination in our society cause suffering, spread division and contribute to a climate of fear, intolerance and stigmatization that we cannot accept.

[Translation]

According to the 2021 Canadian legal problems survey conducted by Justice Canada and Statistics Canada, more than 38% of the respondents in Canada reported having experienced discrimination in the preceding five years, which includes the first year of the pandemic, in almost every context, from school to the bank to restaurants and more. This is a widespread problem that we cannot ignore.

[English]

During the pandemic, race and ethnicity were the most frequently cited factors for discrimination and the only ones that have increased. We should be strongly concerned, for example, that members of the Chinese population were 10 times more likely to face racial or ethnic discrimination than a person who was non-racialized.

[Translation]

Consequently, the number of hate crimes is on the rise. According to Statistics Canada—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Order. The hon. member for Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères on a point of order.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Madam Speaker, earlier my colleague rose on a point of order about the fact that the speech of the hon. member opposite did not deal with the motion at hand.

I understand that it is important to be open and try to see when the hon. member will get to the motion, but I still do not hear the hon. member opposite talking about the motion.

I think it is a matter of respect for people—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): There is really no room for censorship of the speeches that members choose to make.

I am sure that the hon. member for Vaughan—Woodbridge will get there at some point, but I strongly advise him to move in the direction of the motion.

The hon. member for Vaughan—Woodbridge may continue.

[English]

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Madam Speaker, as we continue to build a more inclusive Canada, we know that diversity is our strength in this beautiful country we are blessed to live in.

As we move to a more inclusive country and as we continue to do the work, it involves breaking down the barriers, systemic or non-systemic, that we need to face every day. To make it a more inclusive country, and continue that great work I just noted, we need to make sure that we identify problems that exist: racism, discrimination, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Any form of racism or discrimination prevents our country and individuals here from reaching our full potential.

When I read this motion that I have in front of me, I think that maybe the Bloc was trying to get to a more inclusive society: a more inclusive House of Commons. Then I take a step back and ask if this is the biggest issue that I am facing as a parliamentarian, whether here in Ottawa or in Parliament, as a person who is a Christian, a person of Catholic faith, whose children are attending Catholic school in the province of Ontario. We will be baptizing my youngest daughter of seven and a half months at the end of May. I ask myself what the most important issues are that we are facing as a family and as a society. I see the Bloc, and I have many dear friends, I would say, in that party. I ask myself if this is the most important issue. Is this how we build a more inclusive society?

I get to the answer quickly, and the answer is no. We build a more inclusive society by having people of all faiths in this country, and it is a beautiful thing. During the break in April, we had Holy Sunday, Easter, Passover and Ramadan all coinciding for the first time in 33 years. It really reminded me and Canadians from coast to coast to coast just how special a country we have when people of all faiths, including the three major or more prominent world religions, could all celebrate our faiths. I believe it is the Sons of Abraham, going back to my teachings from the Bible and religious studies. We could all participate in those faiths freely, peacefully and respectfully.

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In my riding of Vaughan—Woodbridge, I hosted an Eid dinner last week with the City of Vaughan and representatives of Muslim organizations and groups in my riding. It was a gathering of approximately 150 people. I have learned a lot from the Muslim community. I have learned a lot from the Jewish community. I continue to learn a lot about my faith, and how we try to live it in our daily lives.

I think about how to make Canada a more inclusive country and how to make it a better place to live. I think it is a pretty great place to live, and all Canadians would agree with that. When I think about that, I would not support this motion. I have already stated that. It would not make us more inclusive. In fact, for a lot of people, it would actually do the opposite. I do not think it reflects the priorities of Canadians.

As I have said, I have never had any individual come to me and say that we needed to change the national anthem and get rid of the reference to God, or that we needed to change the items in the House. This House does have some traditions that need changing to make it more inclusive for women and families: absolutely. At the same time, there are things, from what I have come to understand, that I do not think are important.

My focus, in being here from the riding of Vaughan—Woodbridge, is to always produce and advocate for a stronger economy for my three beautiful children and to make sure they have a bright future. I know you, Madam Speaker, have grandchildren, if I am not mistaken. That is why I ran: to make a stronger economy, because I did not like what I saw under the prior Conservative administration headed by Mr. Harper.

At the same time, I am here to make Canada a more inclusive country. I know our government has worked hard to do that and has put in many policies on the economic front, such as the Canada child benefit and the Canada workers benefit. There are also policies to help communities like the wonderful Black community here in Canada, which numbers over a million people. We have put in place certain policies to break down systemic barriers. That is truly creating an inclusive country, not bringing a motion that I think, more than anything, divides rather than making Canada more inclusive, and fundamentally making this place where we work, day in and day out, more inclusive.

• (1610)

I will stop there. I respect the Bloc and its members. As I said, I have many friends on that side. I am in disagreement with this motion that they have brought forward.

Mr. Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is an honour to rise in the House today. I would like to commend my colleague from across the way for his thoughtful remarks and comments in regard to this. I share his passion and his concern that we always value and appreciate the role that faith has played in our country's history and in our current context. I think it is so important that the House always take the time for pause and reflection, which is respectful and respectful of all backgrounds. People can pray according to their faiths individually.

I think what we have seen is an erosion. There is almost an attack going on towards people of faith around the world: internationally,

people of various faiths are being persecuted because of it. Even within our own country, there is a growing intolerance towards people of various faiths.

I hope the House will continue to maintain that wonderful tradition of honouring people's faiths and taking time to reflect and pray at the beginning of our sessions. Our country needs that.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Madam Speaker, I will say this. Whether they are Uighur Muslims in China who are being persecuted, or Christians in the Middle East, Chaldeans or Assyrians, who have been persecuted now for many years and who I gather with at church in Toronto, I will always be there to protect the rights of minorities and especially religious minorities, such as Baha'is in Iran who continue to face persecution from that government. We must always stand up for minority religious rights and acts of intolerance and hatred against those groups.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague across the way for his impassioned speech.

Faith is something important, there is no doubt about it. However, we believe that it is something personal. It is important not to confuse the way people like the Uighurs and Rohingyas are treated with what we are proposing here, which is that the prayer no longer be recited in the House because, simply put, it offends non-believers and those who believe in another god or in another religion.

Can my colleague across the way even admit that a moment of reflection is sufficient to replace the prayer?

• (1615)

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Madam Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question.

[English]

I will say that a moment of prayer is something that I look forward to when I come into the House. If members of Parliament wish to have a moment of reflection, they may choose to do so. I have never had a friend who was an atheist come to me and complain about such an issue here in the House or anywhere, so that is my answer on that front.

With reference to the treatment of minorities abroad, I was answering the question from the member from New Brunswick on how we must stand up for all religious rights around the world, for whatever group or entity is being persecuted by whichever totalitarian government that may be.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Madam Speaker, I agree with my colleague across the way that there are a number of very pressing issues facing Canada. I am not religious. I do not believe in God. I come in and I accept the prayer. I just let it go.

On the principle of today's motion, because my colleague was talking about inclusivity, if I had been an MP who was a very strong atheist and overly so, how is it inclusive to people who do not believe in God to stand in this place and hear a reference to an almighty God that they do not believe in? Surely, if we are talking about inclusivity, we should just make it a period of solemn reflection. Each person, in their own way and whatever religion or God they believe in, can make that reference on their own terms. I believe Parliament's role, in terms of protecting religion, is making laws in this place so that people can choose to believe the way they wish to without fear of any persecution or discrimination.

On the principle of the point, how is it inclusive to people who do not believe in God to make that reference to an almighty God when they are members of the people's House?

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Madam Speaker, I understand the member's position. In this House, traditions have been maintained for a very long time, and I could put the question in reverse to the member in terms of what they are asking and how they would feel on the opposite side of the House as well.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to rise today to speak to the Bloc Québécois motion today. What I propose to do is to start by addressing certain arguments that I heard from both sides about the purpose of our motion.

I heard more attacks that got rather gratuitous than comments that were really about the subject at hand, but I still would like to respond. I will start with something I heard quite recently from the member for Kingston and the Islands, who wanted to know why we would change something that has always been part of our practices and habits.

I want to take a few minutes to talk about certain things that have always been part of our habits, and to show that this does not mean that they are not outdated. I want to refer to the Criminal Code, which contains several peculiarities.

I am going to talk specifically about a few sections, including section 365, which prohibits the fraudulent practice of witchcraft. It says:

Every one who fraudulently (a) pretends to exercise or to use any kind of witchcraft, sorcery, enchantment or conjuration, (b) undertakes, for a consideration, to tell fortunes, or (c) pretends from his skill in or knowledge of an occult or crafty science to discover where or in what manner anything that is supposed to have been stolen or lost may be found, is guilty of an offence punishable on summary conviction.

Another example of something that is still in the Criminal Code is the offence of challenging someone to a duel. Section 71 provides as follows:

Every one who (a) challenges or attempts by any means to provoke another person to fight a duel, (b) attempts to provoke a person to challenge another person to fight a duel, or (c) accepts a challenge to fight a duel, is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years.

A final example is the section that makes the theft of oysters a specific offence. The Criminal Code already has fairly broad offences concerning theft, but it has a specific section that makes it illegal to steal oysters. This goes back to a time when fishers had

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their gear and shellfish stolen fairly regularly by people trying to steal the pearls, but this is not something that happens anymore.

The reason that I bring this up is simply to illustrate that some sections were much more relevant at one time, but that time is past and they no longer appear to be warranted these days. That is the main difference with what we are talking about today.

In the opinion of the Bloc Québécois, prayer is from another era. However, unlike those sections of the Criminal Code that are no longer used, except in very rare cases, the Bloc is calling for an amendment to a section of our internal code of procedure that is used every day. What we want to change today is part of something that is also much broader, namely the central principle of the separation of church and state.

We could unanimously agree to drop the sections of the Criminal Code I just mentioned, since they are not problematic and no one is using them.

However, what we are trying to do today seems to be causing a lot of friction. We are talking about the articulation of the principle of religious neutrality of the state.

One of the arguments we heard was that people do not bring this up to members when they run into them on the street. However, it is important to remember that the prayer is not broadcast on CPAC. No one knows about it, in fact, and it is quite curious that it is not broadcast.

When I talk about it with my constituents who ask me how I found my first day in the House of Commons—

• (1620)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member, but I would like to check what is going on outside, because it is very noisy and I am having a lot of trouble hearing the hon. member.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Speaker, I was saying that when people ask what my impressions were when I came to the House of Commons, I tell them that one of the things that surprised me the most is that there is a prayer every morning. I will not hide the fact that my constituents were surprised. This is not a personal attack on someone because they are religious. This is about the fact that the state and the church are bound together for all to see, and this enduring religious element that is cemented in our primary democratic institution is simply reinforcing that.

I would also say that when I hear my colleagues, particularly those from English Canada, say that people are not interested in this issue, I feel that perhaps they do not truly understand the reality in Quebec. Indeed, the Quiet Revolution demonstrates that our history was significantly marked by this particular desire to ensure that the government and religion are no longer bound together, as they were during Quebec's dark ages. Perhaps that is not a tangible reality for our colleagues. To me, that demonstrates that our reality is somewhat misunderstood.

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We were also told earlier that it might not be relevant to debate the substance of our motion. Why devote one of our two opposition days to removing prayer from the House?

What I have surmised from these questions we are being asked is that no one has explained to us why they want to keep or not keep prayer in the House. We are also being lectured by a party that only yesterday used a gag order to force us to quickly discuss a bill that is over 500 pages long. So when we hear about good or poor management of the House's time, I think that, given the circumstances, we should hardly be lectured.

We have also been told that, for our opposition day, we could have talked about seniors, health care or the environment. I just want to point out that we already had an opposition day about seniors. We also had an opposition day on health transfers. As for the environment, we recently inundated the government with questions about Bay du Nord. We introduced a bill to manage climate change and the role of the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development, a bill that the government voted against and that the NDP ripped apart in committee.

Basically, they are telling us to talk about important things but that they will ignore us anyway. They are telling us to talk to the hand. The government says we should manage our time wisely even though it does not really matter because it will not listen to us anyway. The message they are sending, and this is such shame, is that they could not care less about 300 years of study of Enlightenment thinking about things like secularism and the separation of church and state. They think none of that is important. Why are we spending an opposition day on this subject? Even though this is an issue that the greatest philosophers debated for years, they are dismissing it as irrelevant and certainly not a priority.

I think it is important to deal with this issue on an opposition day, considering that it is a proposal that we have already tried to have adopted in another way, particularly through a motion by my colleague, the hon. member for Manicouagan. Her motion, which required unanimous consent, was not adopted. It would indeed have been much simpler to take a different approach, as Nova Scotia did recently with proposals from both the government and the official opposition before unanimous consent was finally obtained. That is obviously something that will not happen here. It is therefore appropriate to have this debate.

Our goal today is to ensure that we finish the job of separating church and state with a view to being inclusive. I commend the work of my colleagues, who have been very positive and very thoughtful in their approach to the motion. They pointed out, for example, that leading the prayer every day can be a hindrance to someone who would like to occupy the position you hold today, Madam Speaker, but who is of a faith other than the Christian faith.

It is worth asking how inclusive it is to have a Christian and Catholic daily prayer, considering we may one day like to have a Sikh, Muslim or Jewish Speaker occupying the chair and leading the prayer.

• (1625)

The Bloc Québécois believes that the best way for the government to ensure religious neutrality is not to introduce every possible

form of belief into these institutions. The best way is to keep each person's religious convictions private and not to broadcast them ostentatiously in public institutions such as the House of Commons.

Those complaining that today was a wasted debate day are likely those who wasted the most time, since they did not debate the substance of the issue. Today, we could have had an intelligent debate and voted, and the matter would have been closed. Instead we were criticized for using an opposition day for this.

The surprising thing is not the topic of the Bloc Québécois motion. It is the fact that the prayer has not yet been replaced with a moment of reflection, which would be much more inclusive. The surprising thing is how reluctant our colleagues are to have this debate at all. The other thing that is surprising is that we are being criticized for having this debate here, when we are the first ones to feel the impact of this prayer. We are being criticized for having this debate when the Supreme Court took time, probably more than one day, to examine this issue with respect to a prayer at a municipal council. If members are accusing the Bloc Québécois of wasting time, then in a way, they are accusing the Supreme Court of wasting time too. I would suggest that those on the opposition benches wasted the most time today.

* * *

ONLINE STREAMING ACT

BILL C-11—NOTICE OF TIME ALLOCATION MOTION

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier (Minister of National Revenue, Lib.): Madam Speaker, since an agreement could not be reached under the provisions of Standing Orders 78(1) and 78(2) with respect to the second reading stage of Bill C-11, An Act to amend the Broadcasting Act and to make related and consequential amendments to other Acts, under the provisions of Standing Order 78(3), I give notice that a minister of the Crown will propose at the next sitting a motion to allot a specific number of days or hours for the consideration and disposal of proceedings at the said stage.

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CHANGE TO STANDING ORDER 30 REGARDING
THE PRAYER

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons (Senate), Lib.): Madam Speaker, I listened to what the member said in her intervention, and for me this is an issue we can have a discussion about. I think there is a place for that. I think that is within the procedure and House affairs committee; I do not think it needs to take up an entire day of deliberation in the House of Commons, but let us just say that I am listening and that I have heard her arguments. If I understand correctly, what the Bloc is proposing is that we should be eliminating the prayer in order to be more inclusive, because the prayer is based on faith.

Would the member then extend the same logic to saying we should be getting rid of all holidays that are based on faith, such as Christmas or Easter? Should those be eliminated too, and just be observed by those who choose to observe them? Should they no longer be statutory holidays?

• (1630)

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Speaker, I would say that the motion before us today is much more specifically about the separation of state and religion than it is about a holiday that people can celebrate as they wish at home, on a statutory holiday that we have all become accustomed to over time and that may affect people differently depending on how they decide to spend that day, which would have a much broader effect. If we were to really explore this, it would have to be done in a much broader sense, because statutory holidays affect a lot more people than just the 338 members of the House.

The separation of state and religion can hardly be more graphically illustrated than by a prayer in the very heart of what represents democracy. This is what our motion today is all about.

[English]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Madam Speaker, I just want to make a comment that the whole premise of separation of church and state is an American construct, and its purpose is to protect the church from the state, not the other way around, so suggesting that secularism is an outgrowth of this construct of the separation of church and state is actually misinformation. Our charter used to protect citizens from compelled belief from our government, but it is now being used by the government to deny fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of conscience and freedom of expression in the public square. Freedom of religion is afforded by the charter itself, so religion and the profession of faith are not a private matter.

I would ask the member, since the Bloc members are very comfortable not coming into the House until after the national anthem, *O Canada*, is sung, because they openly indicate that their purpose is to separate from Canada and they freely do not pledge allegiance to Canada, could they not find it in their hearts to simply do the

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same in regard to this prayer, which so many members have indicated today reflects all kinds of faiths within the House of Commons?

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Speaker, first, I would be quite surprised if it was confirmed that a concept developed during the Enlightenment in Europe was actually a typical American construct.

When the concept of separation of church and state was first introduced 300 years ago, I do not believe that the goal was to protect the church, because it did not really need protection, just as it did not when this work began during the Quiet Revolution in Quebec. The goal was the exact opposite.

Coming back to the many other points that the member raised about the national anthem and Quebec's desire for independence, that is all politics. We are not asking for the separation of state and politics, we are asking for the separation of state and religion. I believe that is what we must focus on when asking questions today.

[English]

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am inclined to support the motion before us, although not because I have anything against the idea of prayer. In fact, I have many constituents who pray for me, and I welcome those prayers in the spirit they are intended. I am sure there is always a good intention there.

I do believe in the idea of this place being neutral when it comes matters of religion, and I believe that is very much the thrust of this motion. I come from local government, as many people in this place do. The Supreme Court ruled in 2015 on a case involving prayer at municipal council meetings, so I was somewhat surprised when I arrived here just a few years ago and found a religious prayer at the beginning of our proceedings.

We brought forward an amendment regarding a land acknowledgement at the beginning of our proceedings and the Bloc Québécois did not accept this amendment. I wonder if my colleague could indicate why that amendment was not accepted and whether she supports the concept.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Madam Speaker, I have too little time left to speak about that.

As I just mentioned, this issue may be much more political than what we are trying to do, which is to separate church and state. I believe that these two issues are different enough to be treated separately. This does not make my colleague's proposal devoid of interest. On the contrary, I believe that it deserves to be debated, so I invite my colleague's party to bring it forward on an opposition day. In short, the concepts are different enough that I believe we are justified in debating them separately.

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Madam Speaker, it will be difficult to follow my colleague from Saint-Jean because I found her to be very eloquent.

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If, from the age of Saint Augustine to the modern period, the relationship between political and spiritual power was at the forefront, the challenges of the present era are of a different nature. The state must treat with equal respect all core beliefs and commitments compatible with the requirements of fair social co-operation. That is called inclusion. Moral and religious diversity is a structural and—as far as we can tell—permanent characteristic of our democratic societies.

It therefore seems to be consistent with these words to point out that state neutrality is ensured when it neither favours nor disfavors any religious conviction; in other words, when it respects every position with regard to religion, including the position of not having one, while taking into consideration, of course, the competing constitutional rights of the people involved.

Nova Scotia finally abandoned the daily prayer in October 2021, opting instead for a moment of solemn reflection. That is what the Bloc Québécois is proposing. It is good to be inclusive, and all three political parties in the Nova Scotia legislature, the Conservatives, the Liberals, and the NDP, were in favour of eliminating the prayer. I hope the same thing happens here at the federal level.

Is daily solemn prayer outside the role of the state? Does reciting a prayer come without any repercussions? Is it unworthy of the attention we are giving it today? Certainly not.

For example, when the Ontario legislature studied the issue of prayer in 2008, some 25,000 petitioners weighed in, and it was sent to an all-party commission for study. Even the Supreme Court of Canada was seized of the issue in 2015, so we are not completely off base in moving such a motion.

Simply put, does the prayer recited in this place reflect the beliefs of the population?

Far from promoting diversity, does this practice reflect a tendency to favour one particular religious tradition and give precedence to religious beliefs over non-religious ones? I think we can all agree that the prayer said here has a very strong Judeo-Christian leaning.

The Bloc Québécois believes that the best way to ensure state secularism is not to introduce as many different beliefs as possible, especially since there are so many. Instead, we believe that individual religious beliefs should be kept in the private realm and should not be on display within public institutions.

Between 2015 and 2019, my colleague moved a motion that the Conservatives and the Liberals voted against. In response, I gave interviews on the radio, and the Bloc Québécois's news release was widely reported in our local papers. Our constituents are very interested when this topic comes up.

Authors of an article who studied the more than 870 prayers read out in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia between 2003 and 2019 concluded that other legislatures would do well to adopt Quebec's approach to prayers. They said:

The prayers could be replaced with a time for silent reflection, similar to the practice in the Quebec National Assembly.

The most straightforward step would be to abolish the practice of legislative prayer completely.

We are being used as a model.

There is no question for Quebeckers and Canadians that elected officials are not chosen by a divine power but rather by a democratic process in which voters have their say.

The ideal of a free and democratic society requires the state to encourage everyone to participate in public life, because that is what democracy is all about.

Furthermore, in the process of recruiting and encouraging participation in active politics, all the parties represented here call upon citizens from all walks of life, and this clearly illustrates the progress made by society as a whole. This is very good.

• (1640)

The times have changed. Moreover, the Supreme Court ruled, in a unanimous judgment in favour of the Mouvement laïque québécois, that the “state's duty of religious neutrality results from an evolving interpretation of freedom of conscience and religion”. That is what the Supreme Court wrote.

What the Bloc Québécois finds strange is that Parliament, which presents itself as an institution that advocates for the preservation and promotion of multiculturalism in Canadian society, chooses to recite a prayer at the opening of each House sitting, and that it chooses a certain prayer rather than one from another religion. When it makes that choice, it does so at the expense of other religions or atheism. It fails to consider the rights of cultural minority religions and inclusion in Canadian society.

The Parliament of Canada is no place for proselytizing. No religious belief should be promoted in this place. We need this place to be a neutral public space, free of coercion, free of pressure and free of judgment. This is how, in matters of spirituality, we manage to protect everyone's freedom of religion and conscience.

A little further on in the same Supreme Court ruling, it states, and I quote, “the state must not interfere in religion and beliefs. The state must instead remain neutral in this regard, which means that it must neither favour nor hinder any particular belief, and the same holds true for non-belief.”

There are believers, but there are also non-believers. Notwithstanding what was just said, I also want to add that spirituality does exist, but it is specific to each individual. It is private. It should be experienced and expressed somewhat privately. That is what the Quebec National Assembly did in 1976. Every session begins with a moment of silent reflection. That is what the Bloc Québécois motion is proposing, nothing more and nothing less. It is a time to listen to one's conscience. It is an opportunity for members to collect their thoughts and harness their energy, to get in touch with their feelings about the challenges they face or to think about loved ones. It is personal.

I will now share a quote from Clément Richard, a former speaker of the Quebec National Assembly. On December 15, 1976, he confirmed the adoption of a new rule.

Out of respect for the members of this Assembly, who are not all necessarily of the same religious denomination, and out of respect for the Assembly, I have chosen to allow every member to pray as they see fit. During the moment of reflection, each member will have the opportunity to say a prayer to themselves, and it is out of respect for the Assembly that I have made this decision.

Our motion is quite simply about respect.

Spirituality is not a synonym for religion or even confession. The growing number of non-believers in Canada could speak at length about that. The separation of church and state is a fundamental principle that cannot be ignored. Secularism is a system for organizing and ensuring equality among the principles of freedom of conscience, the separation of church and state, and equality among citizens. These principles are absolutely essential parts of democracy, and we must not forget that.

• (1645)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I think there are a number of us who are a little confused as to why the Bloc has brought forward this issue.

When I talk to my colleagues from the Quebec Liberal caucus, they talk about issues such as health care, seniors and the aerospace industry in Quebec. There are so many different issues in Quebec, as there are in Canada. However, when I looked at the Order Paper, I saw that Bloc members were using one of the two opportunities they get this session to talk about something I have not heard a constituent in Winnipeg North raise in the last 10 years raise. I am a bit confused.

We just went through a pandemic, and we are not quite through it yet. The mandate is still there for masking in the province of Quebec today. We also have issues with the war in Europe. Is this really the most important issue, from the Bloc's perspective, in Quebec today?

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Winnipeg North for his question.

There is just one thing: Could we try to debate the substance? From what I understood, my colleagues' interventions today never dealt with the substance of the issue. They always asked why we had chosen this over something else. The Bloc Québécois talks about respect, democracy and inclusion.

In a speech he gave earlier, a government member talked about breaking down barriers and being inclusive. That is what we are talking about. Why are the people asking the questions not dealing with the substance of the matter, rather than saying that we could have done something else?

Yes, we could have done something else. We only get two days, but I would be in favour of changing the Standing Orders so that there are more opposition days.

[English]

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Madam Speaker, usually the legislation, motions or bills before the House are to benefit Canadians. I am puzzled as to what the motion is go-

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ing to do to benefit Canadians, other than just wasting this day to discuss it.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his question.

We could have wrapped this up quickly. It could have been resolved back in 1976, when Quebec's National Assembly rectified the problem. It could have been resolved when my colleague from Manicouagan put forward a similar motion and all that was needed was a yes or no. It could have been resolved in just over two minutes, and we could have moved on. However, that is not what happened.

Let me come back to the matter at hand. No, I do not think that a day spent talking about respect and inclusion is a wasted day, at least not for the Bloc Québécois. Let us vote for the motion.

In 2021, in Nova Scotia, all of the parties voted unanimously in support of a similar motion. How interesting. Change is in the air. This is the 21st century.

No, I do not think that this was a waste of time. If everyone votes in favour of the motion, it will be resolved once and for all.

[English]

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will respond to the substance of the motion. I agree with the principle of the separation of church and state, and I agree that references to religious concepts are also not appropriate in public sector proceedings, so I will support the motion.

Equally, I know that the climate crisis threatens our planet. The housing crisis means millions of Canadians are right now living with insecurity and worry, and our health care system is under serious strain, if not a crisis. I think it is a fair question to ask the Bloc, with all of these serious, pressing, existential issues facing Québécois, Canadians and our world, why they decided that the opening prayer of Parliament is a more important issue to debate in the House.

[Translation]

Ms. Monique Pauzé: Madam Speaker, once again, the Bloc Québécois opted to talk about an issue that relates to respect for people and how we can include everyone, even non-believers. That is what we chose.

I would respond to the member's comment by saying that the Bloc Québécois does not talk about climate change or any other issue on just one day a year. Let us look at last Sunday: 10% of the Bloc Québécois members were in Quebec City at a demonstration for the environment. There are other ways to do things and to work on other issues. For example, petitions about seniors garnered thousands of signatures. I will stop at that, but I could give plenty of other examples.

• (1650)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Order.

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It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Vancouver East, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship; the hon. member for Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, Health; the hon. member for Kenora, Housing.

[English]

Hon. Bardish Chagger (Waterloo, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Mount Royal.

I will start my speech by prefacing that the rules of the House of Commons provide for a day of debate on the Standing Orders and procedures each Parliament, and we understand this debate will happen in June. I recognize that there have been comments that it is a single day, but it is a day that is devoted to actually debating Standing Orders and how we can improve the way we are to—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I am sorry to interrupt, but one of the hon. members has a phone near the mike. It is creating a lot of interference, as it is vibrating.

The hon. member for Waterloo.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Madam Speaker, I apologize to the interpreters because I know the important work they do.

We know there is a day devoted to debating Standing Orders in this chamber. We know that debate will take place in June, and it would be the appropriate place to discuss any changes, such as those to the non-denominational prayer at the beginning of each day.

We have heard today, during this session, that there are eight opposition days. These are opportunities for opposition members to come forward and challenge the government to do even better for their constituents and to do even better for Canadians. We know that the Bloc has two days when it is able to bring issues forward. I find it interesting that they are choosing to use their debate time for Standing Order changes, rather than the issues that are actually being addressed by their constituents.

This is the House of Commons, where there are 338 members of Parliament, elected from coast to coast to coast. My priority, since being elected, has always been the constituents of the riding of Waterloo. They are the reason I am here. They are the reason I was elected. They are who I serve every single day.

They may be concerned with the Standing Orders, the rules that govern this chamber, but I know that, more so, they are impacted by the challenges they are facing every single day. There are many other important issues the Bloc could have chosen to debate today. There are those I am sure Quebeckers would have appreciated, and that all MPs would have liked to have debated, including how the COVID-19 pandemic has shed a light on long-standing issues and gaps within our society, how global inflationary pressures are further exacerbated by Putin's illegal war on Ukraine and how climate change continues to be an existential threat for Canada and the world, as well as a woman's right to her body and the fundamental right for a woman to choose.

MPs were elected on behalf of all Canadians to address the most important social, health, financial and economic issues of our time

in the House of Commons. Of all the pressing issues facing our country, I find it surprising that the Bloc Québécois has chosen this issue instead of offering constructive ideas about how we address the challenges that Canadians and Quebeckers face.

That is why I will address the pressing issues we could be debating in my speech, such as the Canadian economy. I will address issues that constituents within the riding of Waterloo have brought forward to me. I get to hear a diversity of perspectives and experiences. Some agree with the government. Some challenge the government. Some push the government to do more, and I believe this is an appropriate time to be debating and discussing what constituents would like us to do.

There are more Canadians working now than at any other time in the history of our country, and 19.6 million Canadians currently have a job. This is almost 3.5 million more than at the height of the pandemic and about a half million more than before COVID struck. We have the strongest unemployment rate recovery in the G7, and the national unemployment rate is 5.2%.

The last time it was that low, John Diefenbaker was still a member of the House of Commons. There were also around 265 MPs in this place, and fewer than 10 were women elected to the House of Commons. The Bloc Québécois did not even exist as a party then.

The point is that it is an impressive recovery, and we have so much more to do. Canada has come roaring back, thanks in large part to the extraordinary and innovative programs the federal government has put in place to support Canadians, businesses and the economy. That said, we know that challenges remain, such as, for example, the current elevated inflation.

It is a global phenomenon, and it is making things more expensive in Canada as well. Supply chain disruptions continue to hurt everyone, and now Putin's war is making food and gas even more expensive. Inflation in Canada is lower than in many countries around the world, but we know that it still hurts many Canadians. I am hearing about it from my constituents in the riding of Waterloo.

That is why we, as a government, are focused on Canadians. We are focused on proposing measures that will help make life more affordable for Canadians.

• (1655)

The official opposition, the Conservatives, continue to focus on personal attacks and disinformation, and clearly, the Bloc Québécois is focusing on the Standing Orders. I will repeat that, as a government, we are focused on Canadians. We are focused on proposing measures that will help make life more affordable for Canadians.

Let us take housing, for example. It is a basic human need and an economic imperative. However, Canada does not have enough homes. We need more of them. Over the next 10 years, we will put Canada on track to double the number of new homes being built in this country.

Budget 2022, tabled by the Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, includes measures to make it easier to build more housing. It also includes measures that would remove barriers that prevent homes from being built. Budget 2022 would also make it easier for young people to get the keys of their first home.

Of course, tackling housing affordability will be a challenge that will require a great national effort and a new spirit of collaboration between the federal government, provinces and territories, regions and municipalities, the private sector, and non-profit groups. Rest assured the federal government will do its part.

In fact, we already are doing our part, because to make life more affordable for Canadians, we need to make the housing market fairer for Canadians. We will ban foreign investment, which has fuelled speculation on pricing and has made housing less affordable for Canadians. We will curb prices on property flipping, which makes housing more expensive for Canadians.

Earlier this year, the government also announced an investment of up to \$750 million to help cities deal with operating deficits in public transit. To respect jurisdiction and to increase the impact of this investment, funding will be considered on provincial and territorial governments matching this federal contribution and also on accelerating their effort to improve housing supply in collaboration with municipalities. These are the issues I am hearing about from constituents in my riding.

Our government is focused on Canadians and measures that will provide them with the support they need. The reality is these measures will help those struggling to find a safe and affordable place to live in our cities.

I have been talking about budget 2022, but let me also remind the House of budget 2021. In budget 2021, the government laid out an ambitious plan to provide Canadian parents with, on average, \$10-a-day regulated child care spaces for children under the age of six. It was unfortunate the Province of Ontario, my home province, was the last one to join, but in less than a year, we reached agreements with all provinces and territories.

By the end of this year, families will have seen their child care fees reduced by an average of 50%. That is an average of \$6,000 per child for families in British Columbia and Ontario. This is not in five years, and it is not in 10 years. I am talking about savings by the end of December. By 2025-26, our plan will have child care fees at an average of \$10-a-day for all regulated child care spaces across Canada, which will mean thousands of dollars in savings for families across Canada.

An hon. member: Oh, oh!

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Madam Speaker, I am hearing some comments about whether we are going to talk about the Standing Orders. There will be a day in this House when we will get to talk about the Standing Orders, a day devoted to the Standing Orders

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that govern the people in this chamber, the House of Commons, the place I was elected to by the good people of the riding of Waterloo.

They elected me to put their needs first. They elected me to represent the diversity of their experiences and needs. My focus in this chamber will be the constituents of the riding of Waterloo, and how I work with the government to deliver better outcomes. Unfortunately, the Bloc's focus is on the Standing Orders. It is unfortunate, because usually the Bloc brings out really important topics. That is why I am surprised with the topic of today.

I know I am running out of time, but I wanted to talk about seniors because we know seniors are vulnerable. I wanted to talk about youth, and I wanted to talk about the environment, but I will extend the floor back to the Speaker so I can get into questions and comments. I am thankful for this opportunity.

● (1700)

Mr. Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would be interested in getting my colleague's perspective in this regard. Obviously, this institution is founded so much on our history and background. What went into the history of this Parliament is quite incredible, and the fingerprints of faith are throughout the institutions on this very Hill. Over the windows of Parliament, we will find engraved scriptures from the past: "Without a vision, the people will perish". We find, in the Canadian Coat of Arms, no fewer than two scriptural references, including "from sea to sea", which is part of our national motto, and "they desire a better country", which is based on the ancient writing of Hebrews.

The vital role that faith has played in the founding of our country, and continues to play for millions of Canadians from coast to coast to coast from various backgrounds, should not only be respected but recognized. Could the hon. member make some comments in that regard?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Madam Speaker, I will remind the member that when the rules governing this chamber were made, people like me did not have the right to vote. People like me did not have the right to put their names on the ballot, let alone be elected. This chamber, once upon a time, probably had many men who resembled the member, but I was not reflected.

Our history is important and relevant, but in this chamber debating Standing Orders will happen on a day in June. I would like to actually debate issues that are important to my constituents. I would like to debate how we ensure that more people can enter the economy, how we can create more jobs and the conditions for growth for businesses, how we fight climate change and how we ensure more Canadians can succeed and have better outcomes.

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[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault (Montcalm, BQ): Madam Speaker, I have been listening to the debates since this morning, and we are perpetuating the fact that we discuss form, opportunity and relevance rather than substance.

One thing is clear to me today. When a political institution—Parliament—institutionalizes a denomination, such as prayer in a particular denomination, we should not talk about it. No one here wants to debate it. We introduced a unanimous consent motion. We were told no.

Why were we told no?

No one wants to discuss it. We say we will talk about it another day, perhaps. However, now is the time to discuss it. We understood our colleagues' objections. Do they want to discuss the substance or not?

Why make a discussion on the separation of church and state taboo? How does that contribute to diversity of voices and respect for it?

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Madam Speaker, we know that the Bloc can choose what they want to debate today. I just want to share with the House the issues that are important to my constituents in Waterloo. That is what I have done today.

[English]

Standing Orders, and this debate, are definitely important, and it will happen on a day in June, but Standing Orders impact the members who are elected in this chamber. I am in this chamber to represent the constituents of the riding of Waterloo, and that is my focus and priority.

• (1705)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, I do not mean this to sound tongue-in-cheek, but I think sometimes many Canadians believe this place does not have a prayer. I wonder if we really want to move to a place where we do not even have quiet prayers before the House begins.

Honestly, with the war in Ukraine and the galloping climate emergency, I am pretty much in a state of constant prayer. That does not need to be public, but I wonder if we can concentrate on the issues that really matter right now. I know it is a Bloc Québécois opposition day and the member for Waterloo wants to get to June to talk about the Standing Orders, but I think we need, in our own ways, to work miracles so that our kids have a livable world.

Hon. Bardish Chagger: Madam Speaker, there are so many matters at the forefront for Canadians. I am a constituency MP, in the sense that I am in my inbox reading emails about people's hardships. When I receive an email at three o'clock in the morning because someone might not have a place to call home, or someone is concerned about how they are going to feed their children, I think about what we can do to provide better supports. That is why I spoke about the Canada child benefit. That is why I talked about our national housing strategy, and that is why I think it is important that we have discussions that actually impact Canadians—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): We have to resume debate.

[Translation]

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is an honour for me to rise in the House to speak to the motion put forward by my good friend from Drummond.

He texted me this morning, asking for my thoughts on his motion. I told him that I was still thinking about it because it is a grey area for me. It is not black and white. As a non-practising member of a minority religion, I fully understand that the member for Drummond has good intentions, wanting to make this place more pluralistic so that everyone feels more comfortable. However, I also understand that these traditions have been part of the House for 150 years. I think the best way to explain why I see this as a grey area is to explain how I view secularism and religious freedom.

[English]

One of the things that I think is fundamental is that we, as a society, have to confront two different themes. In one, section 2 of our Charter guarantees us the right to freedom of religion. This is subject to section 1, which allows the state to place reasonable limits on freedom of religion.

I look for inspiration not to continental Europe, but to the United States. The United States on our continent was one of the first countries to have a Bill of Rights that guaranteed two very different themes. Article 1 of the Bill of Rights says that Congress shall make no law to establish a religion. It also says that Congress shall make no law to abridge freedom of religion. Those two concepts need to go hand in hand.

Canada should have no law that favours one religion over another, or favours religion over atheism or agnosticism or anything else.

[Translation]

To me, it is very clear that crosses do not belong in the House of Commons, because it is a symbol of only one religion. When I was mayor of Côte-Saint-Luc in the greater Montreal area, there was a big cross hanging on the wall of Montreal City Hall. I voted in favour of the motion to remove it, because to me, the government obviously cannot favour one religion over another. There may be a way to hang the symbols of 50 different religions on the walls of the House, but that is probably not the best option. That is very obvious to me.

One other thing is very clear to me, and unfortunately, I somewhat disagree with my colleagues in the Bloc Québécois. In my view, they are confusing freedom of religion with an individual's freedom to practise a religion.

• (1710)

[English]

That is why I was so against Bill 21 in Quebec. Bill 21 in Quebec says to individuals that they no longer have the right to work in certain jobs because of their beliefs. I do not agree with that whatsoever.

[Translation]

I am a member from Quebec, so I can speak as a Quebecker. In my riding, Mount Royal, many people wear the kippah, the hijab or other religious symbols. These religiously active individuals do not have the right to remove them, according to their religion.

[English]

Let me be clear about that. There are religions where people who are practising wear symbols. Orthodox Jewish men wear a kippah, religious Muslim women who believe in wearing the hijab choose to wear a hijab, and Sikh men wear turbans if they are religious.

They do not have the right to just take those symbols off. When there is a law saying people cannot work in certain jobs if they wear these symbols, that is creating an inequality of religions. It is saying to the people who practise religions that do not force them to wear those symbols that they can work in those jobs, but if they practise a different religion that requires them to wear a symbol, they cannot work in those jobs.

There is actually a violation of the liberty of all religions and the equality of all religions. That, to me, is a clear point.

[Translation]

I should also mention that I am well aware that there is diversity in society, and that many people believe the opposite of what I just said. A philosophy of secularism predominates in France and Belgium. I will choose my words carefully, but it is not necessarily a bad thing. It is a philosophy.

I personally do not believe in that philosophy at all. I think it creates discrimination.

I would hate to have to tell a little girl in my riding who wears the hijab that she can never be a teacher in a public school in Quebec, but that she can be one anywhere else in Canada or the United States. I would also hate to have to tell a little boy wearing the kippah that he cannot be an attorney. I personally have a problem with that. It is not the right way to distinguish between freedom of religion and secularism. Where secularism is important is when we talk about the state.

[English]

As a symbol of the state, I will now get to the question of prayer.

In general, I agree that if a person is agnostic and has to be part of a prayer, or is pushed into being part of a prayer that the person may not otherwise want to be part of, it is unfair to the person who is agnostic. It would be obvious to me that, if the prayer we had before us was a Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh prayer, it would be totally unacceptable in the House of Commons, because we cannot prefer one religion over the other. However, I am in a grey zone, because while I equally see the problem for a person who does not believe in any religion to have to hear a prayer every single day, I also understand that there are traditions that exist not only here but in the United States.

In the United States Congress, members have a prayer before every session, despite the fact that, constitutionally in the United States, the separation of church and state is much stronger than it is in Canada. I then look at the question of how this is done in other

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parliaments that are similar to ours. The U.K. Parliament has a prayer before Parliament opens, and in Australia there is a prayer before Parliament opens. In both of those parliaments, the same as in Canada's, non-denominational prayers are followed by a moment of reflection. In New Zealand, they have a prayer. That prayer was a Christian prayer that talked about Jesus Christ until five years ago in 2017. That was in a diverse country like New Zealand.

As well, there is tradition. I respect traditions of prayer, so I am kind of torn. I believe there must be a better way than what we do now. I agree that what we do now definitely is not necessarily fair to some MPs. I also think it is lacking in recognizing the indigenous traditions of this country.

I guess what I am saying is that I feel very strongly about certain things, and I feel very strongly that we have gone too far in many cases in this country by saying that religion has no place in public. I do believe that religion has a place in public. Individual people can be guided by their conscience, and they are allowed to practise their religion in full public view. I had no problem, as mayor, with having a Christmas tree and a menorah on the lawn of our city hall. However, I also understand that when it comes to the state, the state absolutely must be completely neutral. I believe that is a hard balance to find, which is why I say that, although it is easy for politicians to take a stand on a lot of things, this one is harder for me, because I am really torn. I will have to decide before tomorrow.

• (1715)

[Translation]

I am very grateful for the opportunity to talk about the fact that I am still a bit confused about the issue, and I am not sure which way I am going to lean.

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am delighted. Unfortunately, I missed part of the speech by my colleague from Mount Royal because I was busy doing other, less interesting things.

With my colleague's speech, we finally got a speech about the motion being debated today. We have heard more criticism about the relevance of the motion than about the content of the motion itself, so I very much appreciate the speech by my colleague and friend from Mount Royal.

I also heard that his speech referenced Quebec laws, including Bill 21, which bans or abolishes the wearing of religious symbols in certain professions. It is not at all a ban on wearing religious symbols in public. It is important to make that distinction.

That being said, that has nothing to do with the motion moved today since we are talking, obviously, as he did when he eventually came back to the topic at hand, about the prayer and the symbolism of the prayer before we begin our work here in the House of Commons.

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I want to thank my colleague. I hope he will sleep on this and see that this motion is about openness. We want to make this motion, moved by the Bloc Québécois, about inclusion. We want everyone to feel respected in the House and we think that having a moment of reflection during which everyone can choose to pray or meditate would be the best way to satisfy everyone.

That was a comment, but I congratulate—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): The hon. member for Mount Royal

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague and good friend from Drummond.

I started by explaining why I did this. As I told my friend this morning, I was reflecting because I was a little confused. I used my speech to explain why I am confused about state secularism and freedom of religion, which are two different yet very important concepts. I spoke about some things that are clear in my own thoughts and beliefs, but I am a little more confused about this issue.

[*English*]

Mr. Gerald Soroka (Yellowhead, CPC): Madam Speaker, I like how the member clearly stated that he is right on the fence and not prepared to make a decision. I am very appreciative. He talked about how people are going to be offended one way or the other on various issues in his speech. If people are going to question whether they will find an offensive nature in whatever they say or do, they will never do anything because they are always going to offend somebody in some form or another.

Would the member agree that no matter what people decide, they would always find offence in somebody else's opinion?

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Madam Speaker, I do not think I used the word “offensive” or referred to people finding offence at all in my speech. I was trying to explain that sometimes in our society there are two intertwining concepts. One is freedom of religion, and I entirely agree with some of the things that some Conservative members have said today. There is an attempt to bury religion in our society that I do not agree with. I think individuals in our society have every right to bring their faith into public view, but I also believe that the state itself has to be neutral and secular. Therefore, there is confusion.

I could not care less in this case if we offend or do not offend somebody. I want to do what I think is the right thing, and I have to be honest and admit that because of those two intertwined themes, I am not 100% sure what the right thing to do here is.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, the member made a thoughtful speech. He is clearly thinking about how he should proceed here. With that being said, he raised the issue around tradition versus what should be done to ensure inclusive approaches in the House of Commons. This is a really important issue here from my perspective. I think inclusivity should absolutely be the way to go forward.

I was dismayed that the Bloc rejected the NDP amendment to ensure that we include indigenous people and we recognize them, recognize that this is their land that we do our work in. All of us who are non-indigenous people are settlers in this country. We should, in

fact, recognize that. It is not about politics. In fact, this is our history and we must own it.

To that end, I would like to ask the member if he would agree that the proceedings should be changed to ensure that indigenous peoples are recognized in this very chamber.

• (1720)

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Madam Speaker, as I mentioned in my speech, yes, I believe that we should find a way to include the recognition of indigenous title within the way we open the House of Commons. I do believe in respecting traditions. I do not believe in throwing out traditions, but I believe we have to find a more inclusive way of continuing with traditions and modifying them to be respectful, which is, again, why I am not 100% sure how I am going to vote.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Speaker, as I often do, I will start by making the topic accessible to those watching.

In Lac-Saint-Jean, I have a youth council, and we have a small Messenger group. We sometimes send each other stuff. Whenever I have a speech to make, I ask them if they have anything to say, and they really like that. I asked these young people in my riding, who are of different faiths, by the way, to read the following text. I assure the House that I will never repeat it again after I finish reading it:

Almighty God, we give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Canada and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity and peace that we enjoy. We pray for our Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, and the Governor General. Guide us in our deliberations as Members of Parliament, and strengthen us in our awareness of our duties and responsibilities as Members. Grant us wisdom, knowledge, and understanding to preserve the blessings of this country for the benefit of all and to make good laws and wise decisions. Amen.

I know that the Chair reads this prayer better than I do, but I tried anyway.

The House will not be surprised to learn that these young people were surprised. In fact, their reaction was fairly unanimous on one point: Parliament belongs to everyone, but to no particular religion. They all even insisted, and I share their opinion, that they respected everyone's faith.

After all, the freedom to believe or not to believe is a foundation of our democracy. It is something that is agreed upon.

To paraphrase two well-known authors in Quebec who explain this in more detail than I can, moral and religious diversity is a structuring and permanent characteristic of democratic societies.

Today's debate is not about anyone's personal beliefs. On the contrary, it is about our institution showing a preference for religion, and even for one religion in particular. Our motion is not emotionally charged, it is not disrespectful of anyone and it is certainly not dogmatic.

Our motion is directed at the growing cultural diversity that has become part of the fabric of our society and is expressed directly in this Parliament. As anyone can see, regardless of the parties represented here, the cultural and spiritual diversity among the members of this House is evident and significant.

Setting aside the beliefs of the members, there is also an evident and significant spiritual diversity among the people we represent, whether in Quebec or in the rest of Canada. Given all this spiritual diversity, it is worth questioning the neutrality of the state in light of the various religions and the growing number of people who do not believe in a god.

Societies change, and so has ours. We need to make changes to our institutions from time to time, which is fine and even necessary, since things are no longer the way they were in 1877.

For almost 150 years, the Speaker and his predecessors—most of them men, everyone will agree—have said a prayer in the House before each sitting, the one that I just read or a similar version. Some say that this is tradition, and that is fine.

However, if we were to rely solely on this argument, the Speaker would still be wearing a two cornered hat, such as the one worn by Napoleon, with a wig underneath. I must admit that I would be willing to revive this tradition if only so I could take a selfie with you, Madam Speaker.

All kidding aside, the fact remains that other than the attire, a lot has changed in Canada since then. This is obvious to me, as it is to the young people to whom I read the prayer and told about its existence.

The time has come to do something about it, quite simply, by adopting this motion that will give us the opportunity to pray, meditate, take a moment or recharge, as we see fit, in the way that best suits our values. That is why we propose two minutes of silence.

We believe that the best way to ensure the religious neutrality of the state is to keep the expression of one's religious beliefs a private matter, not an ostentatious display in public institutions.

I use the word “ostentatious” because I can already see people wanting to introduce all possible forms of belief into our institutions. This is a small aside, but I think that this would necessarily end up crowding out certain cultures and spiritualities, including indigenous ones, and I would find it dangerous to start judging practices one by one.

If we want to give real value to prayer or any religious demonstration of gratitude or reflection, it must be done in silence, peacefully, between the members and what they individually find meaningful.

Basically, what we are saying, and what half the world is thinking, is that the best approach to state spirituality is “one size fits all”, if I may say so. This would mean two minutes of silence, for everyone. That ends my aside.

• (1725)

Quite frankly, I believe that we are all equal here in Parliament. This way, each person can do as they wish in silence, without being ostentatious. It seems to me that elected officials are not chosen by

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or at the service of a supreme being. They are chosen by Quebecers, or by Canadians, for my friends who live in other provinces.

I believe in the people who chose us to represent them. Every morning I get up and perform my little ritual. I look at the Post-it note on which I have written, “Who do you work for?”

Today, in this debate, I will answer the same way I always do: I work for the people of Lac-Saint-Jean, Quebecers in all the splendour of their diversity. I believe that our role as MPs begins with representing the entire population and its diversity, with respect for everyone's beliefs. My ritual, if that is what it is, helps me do a better job, and it is my own. The Bloc Québécois and I find it rather odd that Parliament calls itself an institution that promotes the preservation and promotion of multiculturalism in Canadian society, yet it chooses to recite one prayer rather than another at the beginning of its sittings. It is a bit of a paradox, and I believe it comes at the expense of other religions or belief systems.

That is not a gesture of inclusion. We feel that it affects the participation of certain believers and non-believers in public life, to the detriment of others. Maintaining such traditions locks us into a way of thought that excludes certain communities. By stripping this moment of reflection of its one-dimensional religious character, we will be showing all believers and non-believers the basic respect that we owe them. I do not mean to muddle the debates, as this is not the purpose of the motion, but I must point out that we pray for the Queen, the head of the Anglican church, completely ignoring all other spiritual leaders.

The young people I showed the prayer to noticed it. We have a society that wants neutral institutions and more inclusive practices, but we continue to focus on the representative of one particular religion every day. We have to take a good look in the mirror.

Fortunately, there are examples we can draw on. Since December 15, 1976, the Quebec National Assembly no longer says a prayer, but instead meditates at the opening of each sitting. Its Speaker made this decision unilaterally at the time, saying he had made the change “[o]ut of respect for the members of this Assembly, who are not all necessarily of the same religious denomination”.

The idea may have been revolutionary at the time. I was not born yet. Today, it is a given, and it is not questioned anymore. In Nova Scotia, members observe a moment of silence and reflection before the Speaker opens the sitting. The government and the opposition even came to an agreement in Canada's oldest legislature, where the prayer had been said since 1758, back when New France still existed. That is no small thing.

In Saguenay, close to where I live, the practice of reciting a prayer in a place of power was scrutinized by our highest court. In 2015, the Supreme Court handed down a unanimous decision stating that reciting the prayer impaired the plaintiff's freedom of conscience and religion. The Supreme Court said that the recitation of the prayer at city council was “a use by the council of public powers to manifest and profess one religion to the exclusion of all others”.

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Of course, the decision does not apply to the House because of parliamentary privilege. Nevertheless, it does have a significant impact on our debate about this practice in a place of power like this one.

I know the clock is ticking. I will conclude my speech with the following observations, many of them inspired by the ruling I quoted. First, I believe that, in light of everything I said and of the law, the state must be neutral on religion. Canadian and Quebec society have evolved to view that neutrality as meaning that the state should not interfere in matters of religion and belief. That means neither favouring nor hindering any particular belief or unbelief.

The pursuit of the ideal of a free and democratic society requires the government to encourage the free participation of everyone in public life, regardless of their beliefs. By saying that we must maintain the prayer in Parliament because we think it is important and we believe in it, we are admitting that it is not neutral and is charged with a specific spirituality. Alternatively, if we say that the prayer is not so bad because it is just a tradition that does not mean much of anything, we are admitting that the words are not really important and everyone would be more than fine if we prayed in silence for what we want to pray for.

The prayer traps us in something we no longer are as a society, in other words, a colony under the yoke of religion and a city governed by a group of men, not so pious themselves, who concealed their actions in the shadow of God and a Queen, who actually have no role in our democratic responsibilities.

• (1730)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to reinforce something I said earlier today. At the end of the day, there are other opportunities to do this, whether it is through the Standing Orders changes that will be coming up in June or bringing up the issue before the procedure and House affairs committee, which I understand the Bloc has not done.

As I pointed out, when I think of Quebec members of Parliament in the Liberal caucus, I often hear about issues in the province of Quebec that have been raised. I have never heard this issue raised. In fact, in my 20-plus years as a parliamentarian, I have never heard of this issue being raised.

With everything going on in our communities, in Quebec or Manitoba or wherever it might be, why would the Bloc members see this as the most important issue? We have a pandemic, a war and so many other issues that could have been discussed.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Speaker, I am going to make something clear: They will not have me believe that an opposition day is important to them.

The proof is that, in January 2020, the Bloc Québécois moved a motion to increase EI sickness benefits for serious illnesses from 16 weeks to 50 weeks. There was a vote on this motion. The motion was adopted. Only the Liberals voted against it.

Because there was a minority government, the Conservatives, the NDP and the Bloc passed the motion. Two years later, this government still has not honoured that vote. They cannot make me believe that they think an opposition day is important. The only reason they do not want to debate this today is because they are too chicken to do so.

Mr. Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Madam Speaker, my question is simple: What will it be the next time?

[English]

Today, we are discussing removing a custom that has taken place within this chamber for over 100 years. It has been here from the time of our founding. What is next? Is it our national anthem, because it says, “God keep our land”? What is next? Is it the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which talks about the “supremacy of God”? What is next?

There has been an absolute rise in secular fundamentalism to the point of excluding people of faith from public discourse. Let us be respectful of one another, and in that time of reflection, those who choose not to participate need not, or they can sit in silence. Those who choose to express their faith through prayer during that moment of silence should be able to do so freely and be embraced.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Speaker, what is next? What is next? In light of what I have heard, what is next is an independent Quebec.

[English]

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, I do not know why the member would object to praying for the Queen. He might want to use the prayer from *Fiddler on the Roof*: “May God bless and keep the czar far away from us.” That might be the kind of prayer the member would prefer.

In seriousness, he made a general argument against tradition, saying that some things have changed and other things can change too. Of course things can change and some changes have been good changes. However, that does not absolve us of the responsibility to critically evaluate the reasons that a tradition might have been in place previously and if there are downsides to removing that tradition.

In this case, we have a brief prayer followed by an opportunity for reflection, and that seems to be an inclusive formula. People have an opportunity to engage in secular reflection as they may wish, and there is also a very open-ended monotheistic prayer that really anybody from a monotheistic religious tradition can buy into.

Does the member at least accept that making this dramatic change to tradition in one opposition day is not the best way to proceed?

• (1735)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Speaker, the member spoke about traditions.

If no one ever updated anything, we would be stuck in the past. The speaker used to wear a bicorn with a wig, and that was changed because society changed. You will not see anyone walking down the street today wearing a bicorn, except maybe if it is Halloween.

Logically, we need to be as inclusive as possible, and my colleague spoke about that. Right now, the prayer that is read before each sitting is not inclusive.

I am not baptized, but that is not my fault, since I was raised by a communist. He changed, turned to democracy and even sat here in the House. What I am saying is that I do not feel included during the prayer read before the sitting.

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Madam Speaker, it falls to me to be the Bloc Québécois's final speaker on our opposition day. I will savour the irony because this is also the last time I am addressing the House at the same age as Christ; tomorrow is my birthday.

An hon. member: Happy birthday!

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Madam Speaker, I thank the member, but he should save it for tomorrow.

Let me point out that the Bloc Québécois motion would abolish the prayer that opens each sitting of the federal Parliament in favour of a moment of reflection. Let me also point out that the prayer includes a blatantly monarchist passage glorifying Queen Elizabeth and the Governor General.

That comes as a surprise to many Quebecers. Many of my compatriots got in touch with me after this morning's announcement about the subject of our opposition day, and they told me how surprised they were. Let me reassure them that I, personally, never participate in the prayer. I wait until it is over, and then I take my seat. There are two reasons for this.

First, faith is personal.

Second, I represent thousands of citizens of all faiths and non-beliefs. When I am here, I am not here to promote my personal identity and my personal beliefs. Of course, I am here to defend my political beliefs, because I am an elected official, and I have been given a mandate associated with those beliefs. However, I am not here to defend my personal religious beliefs, because I hold an office. Moreover, I do not have the right to designate myself or any of my colleagues by anything other than the position, the title.

For the same reason, I will never answer the question when asked if I believe in God. I may answer it in private. My friends and family may ask me privately, but publicly, as a member of Parliament, I will never answer that question.

Throughout the day, there seems to have been a consensus among the other parties to criticize our choice to bring this motion forward today on one of our opposition days. We are being told that

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we could have spent our day on real issues such as the economy, housing, health, the environment or the decline of the French language. These are examples we have heard today.

I can understand hearing that criticism at 10:30 a.m. when the debate first began, but we have to wonder at the fact that it is now after 5 p.m. and that is the only compelling argument we have heard.

We call this type of argument a “whataboutism”, which is the practice of deflecting criticism by raising other real or alleged grievances. We are talking about a problem, but members are responding by saying that some other problem also exists and we are not talking about that.

Obviously, members are trying to avoid commenting on the substance of the issue. Let us be clear. We will not take any lessons on what we decide to do with our opposition days. I want to make that clear from the start.

We will also not take any lessons with regard to our political and parliamentary action. We have a good track record in that regard. We speak regularly on every issue, whether it be social, economic or environmental. Whether an issue is being discussed in committee, in the House or in the media, we are there.

The René Lévesque government did away with the prayer in the National Assembly in 1976. Even though the decision to stop that practice was made prior to that, it was implemented in 1976. I think we can all agree that the Lévesque government was proactive to say the least. Doing away with the prayer did not prevent the Lévesque government from being what was likely one of the most proactive governments in the history of Quebec.

This secular moment of reflection is the best way to respect freedom of conscience. Seven members of Parliament are former members of the National Assembly: four from the Bloc, two Conservatives and one Liberal. I am not interested in what they were thinking about or what inspired them when they stood up for the moment of reflection in the National Assembly. I do not want to know. I do not want to know their faith or lack thereof.

Now let me dig into the substance. What is secularism? There are many seminal texts about secularism, but I am feeling a bit mischievous, so I would like to start by quoting the Bible: “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” In other words, separate the two.

We have to get back to the basics of secularism to understand it properly. Decision-makers like us can gather to discuss the best future for their community, but there is one subject we will never agree on because no rational argument can be put forward, and that subject is religion.

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● (1740)

Since a consensus cannot be reached, and since we cannot prove anything about religion by saying that one plus one equals two, the issue is taken out of the public discourse and off the decision-making table. The matter is set aside. This is the very basis of secularism.

If a question such as which God to honour cannot be decided by reason, there is only one solution: Removing the question from the political debate and returning it to the private domain, where everyone has the inalienable right to believe what they want and to express it. However, no religion can be imposed on the political system.

To put it in contemporary terms, this means that elected officials, like all citizens, are free to worship whatever God they want, be it Allah, Buddha or Yahweh. Conversely, they are also free to dislike a particular religion, certain religions or all religions. This is also freedom of conscience. Everyone is free to pray as many times a day as they want and to read the holy books they want.

However, a Parliament is not the place to express it or discuss it. Faith does not have to be expressed ostentatiously or publicly by policy-makers, who, by definition, represent people of all faiths.

If we follow this logic, we need to dismiss the idea that secularism is a thing of the past. It may have worked back then, but we are now a multi-faith society. I would say that secularism is even more relevant in such a society, since it is the only way for people from all religious backgrounds to coexist within the same state. The idea behind the Enlightenment was that political decisions must only be arrived at through reason. Voltaire said that discord is the greatest ill of mankind and that tolerance is the only remedy for it.

Many important people from my riding in Quebec have been at the forefront of the secularization of our society. Take, for example, Louis-Antoine Dessaulles, the seigneur of Saint-Hyacinthe in the 19th century, or mayor and minister Télesphore-Damien Bouchard in the 20th century, who fought against the excesses of clericalism. Another 20th-century example is Yves Michaud, who, as editor of the *Clairon*, a newspaper in Saint-Hyacinthe, was one of the hardest-hitting opposition voices during the Duplessis era.

Quebec recognizes that religion is a big part of its history and that it will always, in some way, be a defining part of its culture. We do, however, know where religion has no place.

In 1960, the Quiet Revolution marked the beginning of a major process of secularization of services, including schools. Secularization is a constant and ongoing process. More recently, there has been debate over the issue of visible religious symbols worn by certain government representatives, those in positions of authority—basically any government representative. Opinions differ, which is fine, because it is a healthy debate.

The crucifix that used to hang over the Speaker's chair in Quebec's National Assembly was not removed until 2018. It was hung there in 1936, by Maurice Duplessis's government, with the specific and explicit intention of formalizing the connection between church and state.

I want to be clear: Crosses and crucifixes are not an issue when they are used in private spaces, or in a public space as a heritage piece. The same is true for the numerous “saints” who appear in the names of many institutions, such as the name of my riding. The names of 19 of the 25 municipalities I represent begin with “Saint” and this should simply be seen as a tribute to what we once were.

The problem with the crucifix in the blue room was its location. It was set above the members who vote on legislation, in the house of democracy. That is why the prayer was no longer recited starting in the 1970s.

In Canada, it is more complex. God's supremacy is in the preamble to the Constitution and the head of state is also the head of the Anglican Church. We therefore have a longer way to go, but we could take an important step by adopting the Bloc Québécois motion.

I invite the House one last time to decide in favour of a little more secularism and ensure that the House stop this proselytization practice. In closing, I will paraphrase the great French orator Jean Jaurès by saying that secularism and social progress are two indivisible processes and that we will fight for both.

● (1745)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I find that what this motion does is amplify the irrelevancy of the Bloc today. Since 1993, we have had presence from the Bloc party here in the House of Commons, and today is the day when the Bloc members want to designate, in the last 20 years, a debate on this particular issue. Speaker after speaker outside of the Bloc has gotten up and talked about the importance of issues that Canada is facing today, such as health care, housing, seniors, the economy in general and so much more, yet the Bloc is so focused on this particular issue.

Why today? What is the urgency today? Do Bloc members have nothing else that they believe the people of Quebec are concerned about so that they raise this issue? Not one person in 10 years has raised the issue with me.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Madam Speaker, earlier I was talking about “whataboutism”. There is that, but we must not talk about such a thing. Talking about such a thing is what we do every day, and we never get an answer from the government. On health, on the environment, on housing and on everything that is given as an example, we never get an answer.

I would like to make one small point. The Bloc Québécois has been in the House since 1990, even though its representatives were first elected in 1993. At that time, it took the best Liberal members. The Liberals have been here since 1867. How is it that they have not dealt with these issues? The member asks why we are doing this today. I say to him, why not do it today? It should have been done a long time ago. If not now, when will it be the right time?

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Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Madam Speaker, for those watching this important debate tonight, it really brings in some of our traditions that I previously spoke to, which started in 1877 in this place and were codified in 1927. It has been around in this place for a long time, and tradition matters to Canadians.

I do not know if Canadians out there know that the Bloc does not come into the chamber until after the anthem is sung and after the prayers have been prayed. I think the question that is begging to be answered is, what about the national anthem, which recognizes God? Are Bloc members saying they want that struck from the national anthem? Are they saying they want it struck from our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which recognizes the supremacy of God and the rule of law?

I guess the question, which was asked by a member of my party previously, is this: What is next?

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Madam Speaker, I would like to remind the House that Canada's national anthem is a French-Canadian anthem that was stolen from us, much like the name "Canadian". I want to point that out.

That being said, it is important to remember that we also do not sing the national anthem. Canada appropriated it. That is a perfect example of cultural appropriation, so we no longer participate in the singing of the anthem. That makes sense, because we were elected as sovereignists. That is not the case for the other members of the House. I do not have a problem with them singing it.

That being said, in answer to the question, for me, the next step would be independence for Quebec, of course. We will continue to fight for that. We still think it is the best solution. I get the feeling that members assume that because we do not participate, it does not bother us.

We are here to engage in politics. We are not doing this to indulge our personal whims. We are doing this because we think that prayers have no place in Parliament.

• (1750)

[English]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am a non-religious person, and I have let the daily prayer continue as it is, but on the principle of it, I do have to ask this question: If I am a non-believer, as a duly elected representative of this House, why do I have to accept that I have to endure a reference to an "almighty God" that I do not believe in? I think the principle is a valid one, and I am going to vote for this motion.

However, I would ask the member about the reference that we attempted to make to Canada's relationship with indigenous peoples, because we have a very long colonial history, and I believe it is a secular acknowledgement of the way the Canadian state has harmed indigenous people. I am just wondering why the Bloc was not prepared to accept our amendment to its motion today.

[Translation]

Mr. Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for the question.

At first I thought that his speech was in support of mine, when he said that he, as a non-believer, should not have to endure this. In fact, we should not even be in a position to know whether he is a believer or a non-believer in today's Parliament. This should not be at the centre of political debate.

He is right about the place of indigenous people. In fact, I am a member of a first nation, the Huron-Wendat nation. I am absolutely on board with having that debate. That said, it should be completely separate from this one. These are two different things, and that is the only reason we rejected the amendment.

For the rest, it is legitimate and we will debate it. I have no problem with—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I am sorry to interrupt the member, but time is running out and we still need to hear from a few speakers.

[English]

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Perth—Wellington.

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is an honour to rise in the House today to discuss this Bloc Québécois opposition day motion. I must admit that I have been pleasantly surprised by the debate today. It has been a meaningful debate of an important issue. I would argue that this might not be the right time and place to debate this matter, but it has nonetheless been an informative debate.

One of the great advantages of the parliamentary system is that we can honour our traditions while also adapting and modernizing with the times, but that adaptation and modernization must be done together as a House of Commons and, ideally, with a consensus approach to the House of Commons. Indeed, if we look at examples of our provincial colleagues, British Columbia and Ontario both undertook changes to their daily prayers. In Ontario and British Columbia, it was done with the unanimous consent of both of those provincial legislatures. In Ontario, the very first non-Christian prayer that was delivered was an Ojibwa prayer recognizing the importance of indigenous peoples in Canada and in Ontario's history.

When it comes time in June for a review of the Standing Orders, we have an entire day in this House to debate them. It is a day I like to refer to as Christmas morning, which I am sure the member for Winnipeg North would agree with because it is an opportunity to discuss these matters and have them referred to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs to have a meaningful, in-depth conversation about this issue. It includes the opportunity, as the NDP mentioned earlier, to have a land acknowledgement and look at the opportunities and potential to have other non-Christian, even secular, opportunities within this place.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): It being 5:54 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forth with every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

*Private Members' Business**[Translation]*

The question is on the motion.

Shall I dispense?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the motion be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

The hon. member for Drummond.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Madam Speaker, we request a recorded division.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Pursuant to order made on Thursday, November 25, 2021, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, May 11, at the expiry of the time provided for Oral Questions.

• (1755)

[English]

The hon. parliamentary secretary to the government House leader has a point of order.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, I suspect if you were to canvass the House, you would find unanimous consent to see the clock at 6:10 p.m.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): All those opposed to the hon. parliamentary secretary moving this motion will please say nay.

[Translation]

The House has heard the terms of the motion.

All those opposed will please say nay.

[English]

It being 6:10 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of Private Members' Business as listed on today's Order Paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

PERMANENT RESIDENCY FOR TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS

The House resumed from February 28 consideration of the motion, and of the amendment.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Madam Speaker, it certainly has been an interesting day in the House of Commons, with the Bloc Québécois defending the idea of freedom of religion and conscience. I never thought I would see the day. Members were saying it was an offence that they had to spend 30 seconds listening to something they did not agree with. Imagine all the time I spend in this House hearing things I do not agree with.

Nonetheless, we are now on to debating something else, which is Motion No. 44. Just as, rhetorically at least, Bloc members were adopting the idea of freedom of religion or conscience, which is normally something we hear championed by Conservatives, we have a motion from a Liberal member that borrows considerably from the Conservative platform in the last election. On that basis, I am pleased to support it.

I would generally like to encourage members of the government, when they have private members' bills, to consider putting forward legislation that fixes the problems that are in place. Motions are a good way for the House to express itself on general issues. Implicit in this motion is an acknowledgement by the member of the government of the failure of the Liberal cabinet to actually move forward on addressing these issues in the seven years the Liberals have had up until now. There are significant problems that persist in our immigration system that have not been resolved.

Nonetheless, the ideas behind this motion are good ideas and ones that Conservatives are pleased to support. My understanding is that this motion will have the support of all members in the House, and I hope that it will then light a fire under the government to really confront some of the big and persistent challenges in the immigration system.

In particular, this motion calls on the government to put forward a plan that seeks to support a pathway to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers, recognizing, first of all, that people who come as temporary foreign workers often establish attachments here in Canada and develop Canadian connections and experience. Often, those who come here in temporary work positions are filling jobs that are not temporary jobs; they are filling jobs that are permanent. It does not make much sense, even from the perspective of the interest of Canadian employers or the Canadian economy, to have people come here temporarily to fill jobs that are in reality permanent jobs, and then perhaps get the benefit of Canadian connections and training, but then be forced to go back and be replaced in an ongoing way.

I mentioned the synergy, so to speak, between this motion and things that Conservatives put forward in the last platform. I want to note that our platform said we would:

...create pathways to permanence for those already living and working in Canada, so long as they are prepared to work hard, contribute to the growth and productivity of Canada, and strengthen our democracy. It does not make sense to attract the best and brightest, provide them training and knowledge, and then force these people—with all their potential—to leave.

I am very pleased that we were able to put that forward. I want to add as well that when Conservative parties put forward ideas in a general election, very often those ideas do not just come through the platform development process but come from our member-driven policy declaration, and our Conservative policy declaration calls on the party in government to “examine ways to facilitate the transition of foreign workers from temporary to permanent status”.

These are ideas that really came from the membership of the Conservative Party in terms of supporting these pathways to permanence. They were supported in our platform, and now they are in a private member's motion proposed by a Liberal member. Clearly, there is no monopoly on good ideas.

More broadly, we need to recognize that there are some significant challenges in our immigration system. The biggest challenges I hear about in my office are the challenges around backlogs and the significant delays that people have to deal with in making applications for things that are so fundamental for themselves, their lives and their families. The delays cause increased hardship, increased cost and all kinds of different challenges.

I want to use this opportunity as well today to call on the government to do more and to work with us to address the issue of backlogs in our immigration system. One example is that those seeking to privately sponsor vulnerable refugees must often wait up to three years. I know of community groups, faith groups and others that are looking to sponsor vulnerable refugees and are stuck providing financial support to people who are in another country, perhaps in a refugee camp or in a vulnerable situation. They are providing financial support to them overseas while they are in that vulnerable situation for three years, until they are able to come to Canada and begin the transition to a permanent life here in Canada.

● (1800)

It is only because of the backlog. It is only because of bureaucratic delays. If only they could come here right away, begin a life here in Canada and begin that transition, it would actually be less costly for those involved in private sponsorship, and it would be so much more beneficial, from a safety and security perspective, for the family. We have people waiting very long periods of time to be reunited with family members. It is hard for me to imagine needing to be away from my spouse for months and months on end simply because of bureaucratic delays.

We also have delays, by the way, in people's access to citizenship. This is important because it impacts people's ability to participate in our democratic life. Someone might have been in Canada for long enough to be eligible for citizenship. One of the Liberals' first acts with respect to immigration was reducing the amount of time that a person has to be in Canada before they apply for citizenship, yet they have extended the amount of time, in the form of this backlog, that it takes for people to actually get that citizenship.

We have an election campaign here in Ontario right now, and a motion was put forward on this issue at the immigration committee by the member for Dufferin—Caledon, recognizing that the significant delays in citizenship processing applications are effectively disenfranchising people. These are people who might want to vote in this election and might have applied. They are in a queue waiting for the processing of their application.

Given the significant impacts of delays and backlogs, we put forward some ideas in the last election on how to address these. One of them, for instance, was to allow people to pay money for expedited processing, effectively allowing the process to speed up by increasing capacity. We need to see an expansion of capacity in processing, and people who are waiting a long time for a spouse or family member to come might be willing to invest in that system of processing. It is one possible solution that we had put forward. We also proposed other solutions to make the system more efficient, such as doing efficiency reviews of how that process happens.

Here is another way we could address the problem of backlogs: Let the people who are on unpaid leave because of their personal

vaccination choices come back to work. It does not seem that difficult. If the government says it is putting people on unpaid leave because of their personal vaccination status, even if they are working from home, it would be absurd to assume that this does not have some effect on government services. Unless some of these folks were doing absolutely nothing, putting them on leave has an impact on the government services that are available.

That will have an impact across the board. It will impact the various services that Canadians receive, and one of them is immigration. We have this huge demand for passports. We also have this huge demand from people who want applications for family sponsorship, refugee sponsorship and other things processed. However, it is so important, for an ideological reason, for the government to put people on unpaid leave, take them out of the workforce when they are working on those issues and force them not to participate in this work even if they are at home. This is another issue of the backlog.

We need an immigration system that works well and works efficiently. I know in general that the Liberals have this philosophy of big government. They want government to be doing more and more things and to be involved in more and more areas of our economy. However, even in areas that are core to government responsibility, they do not do very well. Immigration is a core government responsibility. No one is suggesting that anyone but government should do the processing part of immigration applications, yet it is not able to do this well. As we have seen in many cases, such as the situation in Afghanistan and in some of the other aspects of immigration, the government is not able to deliver.

One of the other issues that we have taken up at the immigration committee is the situation in Ukraine. The Conservatives have been united with the other opposition parties in calling for the government to have visa-free travel for people coming from Ukraine. We put forward a motion on that and it passed at committee and passed in the House. The government opposed it and has not acted on it.

I commend the member for Surrey Centre for having adopted one Conservative idea in this motion. I want to encourage him to adopt more Conservative ideas on immigration. Members of this party have put forward so many good ideas.

Motion No. 44 is a great start. I am proud to support it, and I would invite other members of the Liberal caucus to take up more of these great Conservative solutions that we are putting forward.

● (1805)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Speaker, last week, my colleagues were nodding off because we were discussing Bill C-8 so late at night, so this week, I want to keep things a little lighter.

There is no need for my colleagues to worry. I will not upset them too much this evening. In fact, I am even going to be optimistic.

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Motion No. 44, which was moved by my hon. colleague from Surrey Centre, is very timely. The good weather is returning and Quebecers are already dreaming of summer and starting to plan their vacations. Lac-Saint-Jean is preparing for a wonderful, sunny season, or so we hope, when it will welcome visitors from all over Quebec, Canada and the world.

Do members know what makes us famous the world over?

Other than our many kilometres of gorgeous beaches, our breathtaking scenery and our wide-open spaces, Lac-Saint-Jean's claim to fame is most definitely our blueberries, haskap berries and strawberries. If members ever get their hands on a quart of these berries, they will understand why Quebecers are so proud of their regional products. Many like to pick them themselves, but most wait patiently only to make a mad dash for the fruit stands or grocery stores around the world that sell them.

All these things, and many others, are possible because of temporary foreign workers. As everyone knows, the labour shortage is causing problems for our farmers. Year after year, the complexity and cost of bringing new workers into the regions is an endless challenge for our agri-food business owners.

Of course, the lack of employees is not specific to the agricultural sector. No sector seems to be spared, but immigration is part of the solution. That is why I understand the motivations of the member for Surrey Centre in moving his motion, since I share his eagerness to facilitate access to permanent residency for foreign workers.

Companies in the vast agriculture and agri-food sector are having serious problems and are constantly grappling with the complicated and costly process of bringing in temporary foreign workers. Under the circumstances, giving weight to in-Canada work experience is not a crazy idea. Making it easier for these workers to obtain permanent resident status could even help keep these workers in the regions.

Motion No. 44 gives some hope to businesses in the rest of Canada that are impatiently waiting for an easy way to bring in workers to fill the labour shortage affecting their operations.

In my opinion, it is certainly not a bad idea to amend the criteria for switching from a temporary visa to a permanent visa given the needs and realities of Quebec and Canada. This must be done if we want the sector to recover from COVID-19, among other things.

That said, at the risk of repeating myself, the Bloc will oppose any decision that tramples on Quebec's jurisdictions. That is why I want to remind my colleagues that the Bloc Québécois will agree to the motion on one simple condition: The motion must respect the Canada-Quebec accord. It is as simple as that.

I realize that the wording is, on the whole, quite general. The motion calls on the government to examine the evidence, incorporate data on labour shortages, identify mechanisms and consider certain occupations in economic immigration programs. That is no big deal. In terms of the more binding elements, we just need some reassurance. Point (a) of the motion calls for "amending eligibility criteria under economic immigration programs".

It is vital to remember that Quebec is solely responsible for selecting economic immigrants and, therefore, for the various criteria

and programs that determine whether a temporary foreign worker is eligible to obtain permanent status in Quebec. In other words, it is not up to the federal government to determine the eligibility criteria for permanent status in Quebec.

Assuming that the division of immigration responsibilities between the federal government and Quebec will be respected, my interpretation is that the motion would not apply to Quebec. As I mentioned a minute ago, immigration is, and I want to stress this, one part of the solution.

The two major challenges facing the Quebec and Canadian labour markets are labour shortages and skills shortages.

That makes immigration attractive, of course. Temporary immigration often enables employers to fill positions that Canadians are typically not interested in anymore, whereas permanent immigration enables employers to fill these positions and recruit talent internationally. This is not the miracle cure either, though. It will come as no surprise to anyone that immigrants are human beings, not production line inputs. They are exactly like the people who elected us and who want us to ensure decent working conditions.

● (1810)

Often we fall into the trap of taking the easy way out. That is only natural. It is human. Having a real discussion about the working conditions for less valued jobs is much longer and more difficult than turning to immigration. Reviewing all of our business assistance policies and modernizing the funding criteria is also a long process. Promoting training and environmental protection is not always simple. We have a long way to go in terms of fast-tracking the digital shift and business automation when we ourselves are still using fax machines.

In short, immigration is necessary because we need a quick, easy solution, but that does not change the fact that it is a band-aid solution. I would encourage all my colleagues to elevate the discussion in the long term.

Speaking of the long term, I want to come back to the Canada-Quebec accord for a moment. If the motion before us today simply seeks to facilitate access to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers and will not impact immigration levels, then I would like to talk for a minute about the implications of the immigration levels.

The increase in immigration levels announced in early February 2022 by the Minister of Immigration is worrisome for the future of Quebec, particularly its cultural and linguistic future. Facilitating access to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers should not result in an increase in Canadian immigration levels, which are already too high. We agree that the process should be faster and easier, but we do not agree with higher levels.

The plan to further increase immigration volumes from 184,606 in 2020 to 431,000 new permanent residents in 2022 and 451,000 in 2024 means admitting 1.33 million permanent immigrants in just three years. This is an 80% increase from the immigration thresholds that existed before the Liberal Party of Canada took power in 2015. On a per capita basis, Canada is already one of the western countries with the highest number of immigrants. These figures apply only to permanent immigrants, in other words, those who obtain permanent residence.

Section 2 of the Canada-Quebec accord establishes an important objective for Quebec: preserving Quebec's demographic weight within Canada and ensuring that the integration of immigrants into the province is respectful of its distinct identity. This accord requires Ottawa to take into consideration Quebec's advice on the number of immigrants that it wishes to receive, when setting immigration thresholds for the country as a whole.

Was Quebec consulted before these targets were set?

It would be surprising. The federal government is not fulfilling the terms of the Canada-Quebec accord with respect to increasing its threshold. The influx of such a large number of immigrants in such a short amount of time has several consequences for Quebec. First, it is one of the causes of the accelerated decline of French, which we have been seeing for 15 years. What is more, exceeding our capacity to accommodate people contributes to the housing crisis and the rising price of real estate. The first victims of the housing crisis are the poor, who often include newcomers. That may not bother the Liberals, but it bothers me. Ottawa also discriminates against francophone immigrants who want to live or study in French in Quebec.

As Frédéric Lacroix said, wilfully or not, Canada is actively sabotaging Quebec's efforts to attract francophones. As a result, Quebec's relative weight in Canada declined for the 11th census in a row from 28.9% in 1966 to 23% in 2021. That decline will pick up speed.

I expect we will be told to accept X number of immigrants as though, once again, they were just numbers, not human beings. The decline of French throughout the greater Montreal area, the housing crisis and harmonious integration will take a back seat.

[English]

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to speak to this motion and its proposal to strengthen support for a pathway to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers and international students. I want to thank the member for Surrey Centre for bringing this motion forward and for helping to shine more light on such important issues in my home province of British Columbia as well as across Canada.

I will start my speech with a quote from Alex, a constituent in my riding of Nanaimo—Ladysmith who came to Canada from Zimbabwe. Alex recently wrote to me, seeking support for his application for permanent residency. He said, “It has been six months since IRCC received my application and I’m still waiting. I would love to get back to work as soon as possible, mostly so I can provide for my family but also because I see how desperate employers

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are getting to find people and I want to do my part.” He continues, “I’m unsure if you have ever been in a position like this, but as a parent yourself I’m sure you can understand the stress I feel being unable to provide.” This is heartbreaking, and Alex is not alone in this experience.

New Democrats have recognized for years that individuals who are qualified to work or study in Canada should have an opportunity to stay here. We know that workers who are identified by the government to have what it determines to be low or medium skills are still making real and meaningful contributions to Canada. The value of the important roles being taken on by those entering Canada as temporary foreign workers became very evident to us all during the pandemic. From their roles in agriculture to their work in the care economy, it is clear that the skills temporary foreign workers bring with them to Canada are not only valuable, but essential to each of us.

When we talk about the temporary foreign worker program, we often ignore the human stories of these workers. When speaking to this motion, I think of Vrenalyn: a constituent who recently wrote to my office looking for assistance with her permanent residency application. Vrenalyn has been in Canada for 10 years. She first arrived in Canada as a temporary foreign worker. She is currently working three jobs in my riding of Nanaimo—Ladysmith to support her family that she had to leave behind. Her daughter was 14 when she first applied for permanent residency. Her daughter is now 21. When Vrenalyn wrote to my office, she had just finished her 13th day in a row of working almost 16-hour days. To ensure that she could continue her path toward permanent residency, she has only been able to return home once in the past 10 years to visit her sick husband. Tragically, she was not even able to get home when he passed away.

Vrenalyn is someone who has worked tirelessly since she arrived in Canada. She has done everything right to create a life here, but instead of supporting that dream and recognizing her years of hard work, she has faced every delay and setback imaginable. We need to fundamentally rethink our approach to supporting hard-working individuals such as Vrenalyn who are committed to contributing to Canada and making Canada their home.

There are important reasons why all individuals who come to Canada to work should have access to a clear and timely pathway to permanent residency. For years, we have seen systemic abuses of the temporary foreign worker program. We have denied temporary foreign workers basic rights that should be afforded to anyone working and living in Canada. This has allowed predatory employers to exploit and abuse workers, with little fear of recourse.

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Successive Liberal and Conservative governments have created a vacuum in the Canadian economy. It is one where jobs filled by the temporary foreign worker program are often filled by those most desperate and vulnerable to exploitation. Unsurprisingly, once these highly exploitable jobs are created, there is a vicious cycle that continues over and over. This is shameful in a country as wealthy as Canada. Canadians expect better, and the temporary foreign worker program needs to be designed to ensure that those working in Canada are treated with dignity and respect.

I think back to the Auditor General's report in 2021 on health and safety of agricultural temporary foreign workers in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report highlighted that Canada's inspections under the program provided little assurance of protection for workers during the pandemic. This was despite the current Liberal government's promise to address the blatant violations of workers' rights we saw during the beginning of the pandemic. Instead of ensuring that temporary workers were protected the next year, the government taxed the system even more without improving the inspection system. This under-resourced inspection system got even worse, and vulnerable foreign workers were the ones who suffered because of it.

• (1815)

The agriculture sector is not the only area where we have routinely seen abuses in Canada's foreign worker system. That is why I fully support my colleague from Vancouver East's amendment to this motion to include caregivers in this plan. Ensuring that individuals working in domestic spaces have access to the same level of protection from harassment and violence is vital. I am happy to hear that the mover of this motion supports this important addition.

Canada's system to facilitate the transition from temporary to permanent status is also broken, unfortunately, for companies trying to do right by their workers. I think about Maria, the owner of Pro Stitch Alterations in my constituency of Nanaimo—Ladysmith, who recently reached out to my office to get assistance for one of her staff members.

Maria has a qualified seamstress working with her, but because the seamstress is still working on her language skills, she cannot secure permanent residency. Moreover, because this profession is not considered a priority of the government, the path to permanent residency is lengthy and unclear. Maria's only solution to keep her valuable employee is to apply through the temporary foreign worker program over and over again.

One of the great ironies of Maria's situation is that she herself is a proud immigrant, having moved from Romania to Canada many years ago. It speaks volumes that someone who was able to move to Canada and start a successful small business is unable to pass along those opportunities to others because of Canada's broken immigration system.

I also want to give a special mention to the Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society, also known as CVIMS, in my riding of Nanaimo—Ladysmith, which does incredible work to support new Canadians and temporary foreign workers.

Last year, CVIMS provided services to over 300 temporary foreign workers and international students, helping to make

Nanaimo—Ladysmith a more welcoming and supportive place for newcomers to Canada.

Every day, CVIMS is working to help individuals, but its work is made so much harder because of the systemic challenges built into our temporary foreign worker program.

Individuals it is working with struggle to meet language goals for permanent residency because they are being forced to work impossibly long hours. CVIMS also struggles to help report abuse, because temporary foreign workers are often too fearful to come forward with stories of mistreatment. These workers understand that any misstep could mean no longer having an opportunity to stay and work in Canada.

I have seen first-hand the incredible work that CVIMS is doing, and I truly believe that we need to create a system in which groups like CVIMS can focus on the work of welcoming and supporting individuals who are new to Canada with less concern that the people they are trying to help are being exploited.

Canada is facing a labour shortage. Welcoming people to Canada to help meet the full range of our labour needs is vital. As we move forward, it is also important that we have a compassionate approach that takes into consideration the unique stories of people like Alex, Vrenalyn and Maria.

We need to make sure that jobs filled by temporary foreign workers are not excuses for abuse and exploitation. As we move forward, we need to make sure that people are excited to work in Canada and that they have a clear pathway set out for them. We all benefit when Canada is welcoming and supportive.

* * *

• (1820)

[Translation]

MESSAGE FROM THE SENATE

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I have the honour to inform the House that a message has been received from the Senate informing this House that the Senate has passed the following bill, to which the concurrence of the House is desired: S-219, an act respecting a national ribbon skirt day.

[English]

PERMANENT RESIDENCY FOR TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS

The House resumed consideration of the motion, and of the amendment.

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I know I speak for hundreds of thousands of temporary foreign workers, students, families, employers, communities and hard-working industrious community-minded people who long to be a part of our magnificent country of Canada. My friend and colleague, the hard-working member for Surrey Centre, with Motion No. 44, is the hope that all of these great people need, that our economy needs and that our country needs.

We have an economy that is leading the G7. With a strong plan to continue that growth, budget 2022 is all about economic growth, jobs, community and country building. That is why Motion No. 44 is vital at this time.

Every week at my office in Mississauga East—Cooksville, I have employers coming to let me know how much they are growing, how they are scaling up and how they need more workers. These employers are from all sectors: manufacturing, transportation, logistics, hospitality, health care, construction and trades. I could go on.

Statistics Canada shows us that our unemployment rate is the lowest we have seen ever. Since we started measuring unemployment in 1976, our unemployment is the lowest today, at 5.2%.

Canada has always been a beacon of hope for people fleeing from wars, persecution, fascism, dictatorships and totalitarian states. Waves of immigrants have come to Canada for its democracy, peace and freedom.

I have a Ukrainian intern, Olha Louise Boleyn, who just arrived here in Canada a couple of weeks ago. She is working in my office. She is a courageous young woman of 22 years old. On February 24, when Putin started the illegal, illegitimate war against Ukraine, a sovereign state, this woman's world changed. All of a sudden her family had to flee. Her home and her building were hit by a missile and they lost power. She knew she had to move her family. Her mother and three siblings have gone to Poland to find refuge, her father is still in Ukraine and she has come here to Canada, having helped her family find safe haven. This young woman speaks English, French and Ukrainian.

I thank our Minister of Immigration, our Prime Minister, our Deputy Prime Minister and all parliamentarians here, because I know we all stand together strong for Ukraine. We are here to help Ukrainians find safety, find help and build a better life.

There is a legacy of Ukrainians coming to Canada, and they have farms right across our Prairies. My wife Christina Yaremczuk's family is from Ukraine. Her parents had to flee World War II. They went to a displaced persons camp and then were brought here to Canada. Her grandfather worked at a factory and her mother worked in health care, helping to build our country. Her father went to school here and became a citizen and dentist.

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Let us consider stories like the story of my wife's parents. I could tell colleagues a bit about my story and my parents. This is about Portuguese people, Italians, Filipinos, Polish people, Ukrainians, Asians, South Asians and the entire world, because outside of our indigenous people, Canada has been built on immigration. We have brought people here from all over the world and given hard-working industrious people an opportunity to succeed.

This is all true for our temporary foreign workers and our foreign students. Many of them have come to my office, as I am sure they have visited many of my colleagues' offices. They love their adopted community and country, and want to stay here.

● (1825)

Their employers want them to stay, but they have barriers in front of them. They are looking for, and need, a pathway to permanent residency. That is what Motion No. 44, brought forward by my colleague from Surrey Centre, is about. Permanent residency for temporary foreign workers is a comprehensive plan to address many of our labour shortages. It would continue to build our country, to build Canada.

Motion No. 44 builds on the success of our Atlantic immigration program, our temporary resident to permanent resident pathway program, rural and northern immigration programs, agri-food immigration pilot and provincial nominee programs. We have learned a lot from all of these programs, including what works and what does not and how to best address our labour shortages, all while working with our partners, provinces, employers, businesses, stakeholders and communities.

Temporary foreign workers know our culture, our work environment, our standards, and our health and safety standards. They have enough language proficiency to do their job, whether driving a truck, understanding our rules of the road or being able to get the licences they require. They also have to be proficient when working at construction sites, in terms of health and safety, or working in food processing or agriculture, and understanding how to work on a farm.

They have settled, and they have already contributed. They pay taxes. They want an opportunity to grow deep roots, to raise their families and become a part of the Canadian family, not just temporarily for the season, and not just for a couple of years, or four or six years, while having to renew their temporary foreign status year over year. They want to stay here permanently, and we want them to be here. Motion No. 44 is the road map to that.

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I have spoken to so many temporary foreign workers. Tears come to their eyes because they want to be here to be a part of Canada and to grow their families here. However, there are barriers when it comes to language proficiency and formal education, be it high school or higher education. Some may say that those are low-skilled jobs. I would suggest that those with Ph.D.s, and there may be some in the chamber, try to frame a home, put a brick wall together through masonry, or put up a piece of Sheetrock or drywall. These are skilled professions. They take a lot of work and a lot of skill. All of these workers are able to do these jobs so well, and we need them.

We talk about what we are achieving here in Canada. As we continue to grow with our population, people need a place to live, a place to call home. It takes these construction workers and those transporting all of those construction materials to make that happen. As we build, over these next three or four years, 100,000 more new homes, we will do it through our many temporary foreign workers. Why would we not want to keep them here permanently? This is what Motion No. 44 is all about.

It is about continuing to grow our country the way it has from its inception, through waves of immigration, and with people who roll up their sleeves, who are here to work hard and who have the spirit of Canada, of building our country. I thank my parents, Maria Fonseca and Joaquim Fonseca for coming here. Mom worked in health care while Dad worked in a factory after they had left a fascist dictatorship in Portugal. I am so proud that they worked hard.

Unless Motion No. 44 gets done, people like my parents would not be able to come to Canada. Let us all support Motion No. 44 and make sure we help our great country and those who want to be part of it.

• (1830)

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to rise today on Motion No. 44, which seeks to force the government to:

...develop and publicly release within 120 days following the adoption of this motion a comprehensive plan to expand pathways to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers, including international students, with significant Canadian work experience in sectors with persistent labour shortages...

Furthermore, we are debating the amendment put forward by my colleague, the member for Vancouver East, with whom I sit on the immigration committee. It seeks to strengthen this motion.

Let me start by saying that this is my first opportunity in this Parliament to speak during Private Members' Business. I have had the chance to speak to multiple government bills and budgets since my re-election by the good folks of Saskatoon West, but it is always a pleasure to discuss ideas that originated from MPs outside of the Prime Minister's inner circle.

I would remind my Liberal colleagues across the way that they have the actual power to implement these things right now. I am glad to hear them talking positively about the motion, and I encourage them to actually implement it.

In Saskatoon West, as in all parts of Canada, our economy is driven through job growth. As our population ages and the boomers

retire, we need people to fill those jobs and continue to grow our economy.

Like many western nations, Canada's demographics play against our economic survival. Birth rates in Canada are at a historic low of 1.47 children for every woman. An economy needs a replacement of 2.1 births just to keep the population stable, and that assumes that all people want a job and want to work.

Unfortunately, as we now know, some people, for one reason or another, would rather take a government cheque than work. Members should not kid themselves: I get emails from constituents demanding that what they and the NDP term as a "universal basic income" get implemented. This social experiment replaces working with a government paycheque, allowing people to stay home and watch Netflix all day. Not only are we short citizens, but not all able-bodied citizens want to work.

How do we fix this problem? Well, for the past 20 years or so, the answer has been immigration: bringing in people to do the work the so-called old-stock Canadians no longer want to do. They pick our vegetables, drive our taxis, serve our coffee, drill our oil, mine our lithium for electric cars, drive our big-rig trucks, take care of our children and elders, perform our surgeries, fly our planes, become our members of Parliament and so on. There is actually no limit to the skills that immigrants bring to our country.

Many of my constituents in Saskatoon West know that I support immigration. Conservatives are proponents of immigration. I sit on the immigration committee, and I believe in the value and hard work of our immigrants.

I take the opportunity when I am back in the riding to meet with Canadians of all backgrounds. Two of the main complaints I hear about are the issue of backlogs and the pathways to permanent residency. Both of these systems are broken.

Let me start with backlogs.

On Sunday, the latest figures reported by the government put the immigration backlog at two million people. These are Afghans and Ukrainians who are waiting. They are fearing for their lives. These are wives, husbands, children, brothers, sisters and parents who are waiting patiently to join their families already in Canada. They are waiting for IRCC to shuffle through paperwork.

Our citizenship backlog sits at almost half a million people. These are people who are now in Canada: They have gone through the immigration backlog, and have successfully applied and been accepted for Canadian citizenship. They are waiting for the day to give that simple oath that will give them the rights and privileges of being a Canadian citizen. Can members believe that? There are two and a half million people waiting for the nod of approval from the Liberal minister.

Clearly, there are major problems in the systems we use to manage immigration in our country. We have highlighted some ideas, such as having the entire process online, complete with notes and reasons for decisions to allow for complete transparency. Our system badly needs to be modernized and updated, and Conservatives will continue pushing for that.

It is the folks on temporary visas who are the most vulnerable to the whims of the minister and his backlogs. Immigrants come to Canada on a wide variety of temporary visas, such as study and work visas. Imagine that we have just spent four years educating someone as a doctor, engineer, accountant or something else, or a company invests months to train and provide experience to a worker, and then we send them home. Now, sometimes these folks want to return home, and that is just fine, but very often these people want to stay in Canada. When we send them home, Canada loses out on their talent and skills just when they are blossoming into productive workers.

In our last Conservative election platform, we promised to:

create pathways to permanence for those already living and working in Canada, so long as they are prepared to work hard, contribute to the growth and productivity of Canada, and strengthen our democracy. It does not make sense to attract the best and brightest, provide them training and knowledge, and then force these people—with all their potential—to leave.

● (1835)

Permanent residency is the best way to achieve this. Yes, the Liberals have played around the margins of many immigration programs, such as the temporary resident to permanent resident pathway, the Atlantic immigration program, etc., but what have they accomplished? I do not know.

Hopefully, this motion will pass and force the government to report back and tell us, but here is an easier answer: permanent residency. The question is, which classes of immigrants will it be for? Let us tackle that one.

Many immigrants come to Canada with credentials in their country of origin that allow them to practice medicine, be a nurse or a lawyer, drive a big truck, fly a plane, engineer a road or be a plumber, electrician or a boilermaker. When they come to Canada, either the federal or provincial regulatory body that controls their licensing says that they do not meet the standards. Sometimes that is fair, as when someone is a lawyer coming from India who speaks English. If the person expects to move to the Gaspé to practice law in French, he or she needs to meet certain requirements specific to that province's law association.

In other areas, training is training. An easy example to understand is aviation. If people are qualified to fly a Boeing 737 in Indonesia, they are equally qualified to fly that same plane in Canada. It is substantially the same. Therefore, a pilot coming from Indonesia should be able to pick up roots, move to Saskatoon and start flying for WestJet or Air Canada with very minimal training requirements.

In cases when there is some Canadian-specific training required, we need to simplify the process to achieve that education. Indeed, in our election platform, we promised to launch a credential recognition task force to develop new, timely and appropriate credential recognition strategies. I will be introducing in the House my own

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private member's legislation soon enough to accomplish this very task, so I encourage all members to look out for that.

Let me touch on the amendment from my colleague for Vancouver East. Her amendment would add the caregiver program to the list of programs that needs to be examined. In the past two studies we have done in the committee, I have asked multiple witnesses about this very program and about caregivers. Many of these folks come from the Philippines and settle in Saskatoon West. What I hear is unsettling. There was no pun intended.

MD Shorifuzzaman, who is an immigration consultant from my riding of Saskatoon West, appeared at our committee and said, "Let me focus a little bit about the caregiver program, which can be an example of mistreatment of those foreign workers who work hard to protect the vulnerable in our communities. This program was offered in 2018, but unfortunately, what happened was the priority of the IRCC shifted to the other programs."

Mr. Gurpratap Kalas, another Immigration Consultant from Saskatoon West, also commented on the caregiver program and said, "The processing time has been an extensive amount and, because of the lengthy processing, the majority of the applicants' relationship stresses are often causing breakdowns in their relationships, with marriages falling apart, children reaching the age of majority and other areas. In some cases, employers have either already passed away, or the person to be cared for has already reached the age of majority, as is the case with child care providers."

These immigration consultants are on the ground dealing with the failed caregiver program. I point this out, because I had asked the associate deputy minister of Immigration Canada, when she was at committee, about her thoughts on the caregiver program. She told me that "the caregiver program is one that is a priority for the department." If a program that is a priority for her as deputy minister is such an abysmal failure, I hate to imagine what a non-priority program would be doing.

I want to conclude my remarks by reflecting on the need for compassionate immigration: our refugee program. The wars in Afghanistan and Ukraine have driven home the fact to many Canadians that we can and should be there to welcome people displaced by war. This is a role our country has taken on time and again.

Many immigrants came to Canada in the wake of the First and Second World Wars. We know that Hungarians fled here in 1956, and Eastern Europeans did throughout the Cold War. Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese people all fled conflicts. People from Hong Kong, Chinese citizens and practitioners of Falun Gong escaped China's basic dictatorship. Stephen Harper brought boatloads of Lebanese people over during their war with Israel, and the Syrians were after that.

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Canada must continue to be open for refugees, but for that to happen, we must fix our immigration system, eliminate backlogs, implement new technologies and modernize our bureaucracy.

Let us get this motion passed and see what the government says in response. Hopefully, we can get on our way.

• (1840)

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to speak to this motion, which outlines ways to increase avenues for temporary foreign workers to obtain permanent residence. This motion focuses on occupations in key sectors that are under-represented in existing economic immigration programs.

I am sure many members in the House are wondering if there is a way to compel a department like Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, to provide timely and predictable services to small- and medium-sized businesses.

I am also convinced that the immigration process needs to be streamlined to help mitigate the devastating effects of this labour shortage. There are steps the government can take to make immigration to Canada attractive for employment in sectors that are vital to our economy.

I want to give the credit to Richard Kurland, a lawyer and policy analyst with Lexbase, who appeared last week before the Standing Committee on Industry and Technology.

As a first step, he stated that the issuance of work permits should be subject to the Service Fees Act, and IRCC should be responsible not only for delivering work permits within the set processing times but also for refunding applicants if it misses the deadline.

The second item is something called the labour market impact assessment, or LMIA. There is no need for this in the province of Quebec, as Quebec is already doing it. We have an ecosystem that is doing it. This is a classic example of government duplication and waste. Where Quebec is already providing the service, why do it again? Quebec has paved the road once, so why do it twice? The LMIA's are a useless duplication.

With today's technologies, we have the means to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses do not duplicate their time and effort by sending the same information to two levels of government, and that governments do not simultaneously share information common to both levels of government.

The IRCC has always been reluctant to relinquish power and control over its processing times. It is therefore time it was held responsible for upholding service standards that meet businesses' needs, particularly in the context of a labour shortage. There is no reason why the processing times for applications from Quebec should be different than those coming from other places in Canada.

The federal government needs to modernize the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act to reflect the labour needs, objectives and strategies established by the provinces, such as the regionalization of immigration in Quebec. There is no reason why we cannot think

outside the box and take risks, particularly when it comes to immigration.

There is so much global competition for the same people, so I do not understand why we need to make it so difficult for the candidates selected by Quebec to come to the country. Qualified young workers will want to immigrate to countries that require less paperwork. It is time to be effective because many communities in the various regions of Quebec depend on these workers coming here.

The motion moved by the member for Surrey Centre is perfectly legitimate and humane. It proposes a pathway to permanent residency for these workers and supports their integration in the communities where they came to work.

The temporary foreign worker program is a very costly and complex solution to the labour shortage at this point, but small and medium-sized businesses have no choice but to go with this time-consuming immigration program. We need a better solution fast.

I would like to share part of an April 29 article by Romain Schué on Radio-Canada:

Right now, a skilled worker selected by the Government of Quebec has to wait an average of 31 months for permanent residence. That wait time used to be six months in the branch serving other Canadian provinces, but it recently rose to 27 months according to data on immigration Canada's website.

That is a huge disparity. Do you know the difference between my riding and yours, Madam Speaker? A worker in my riding has to wait 25 to 30 months, but a worker in yours, which is just a few kilometres away from mine, might get through the process in a year. That disparity is unacceptable.

Also, there is a backlog of more than 29,000 files. In a brief submitted to the Federal Court on April 19 and obtained by Radio-Canada, IRCC discloses that there are currently more than 29,000 permanent resident applications from skilled workers in Quebec waiting to be processed. Nearly 10,000 of these files were sent to Ottawa before 2020. Some of these workers have been waiting for a federal decision for more than 10 years.

The department says that the delays could be due to a security or criminal risk or a lack of co-operation. This is unacceptable. The real cause is the lack of consistency from the federal government and perhaps a lack of resources. This may be a result of the labour shortage that is hitting Service Canada so hard.

• (1845)

Another way that our regions have shown creativity in attracting workers and addressing the labour shortage by hiring foreign workers is through universities and colleges. An article by Lisa-Marie Gervais published in the February 18, 2022, edition of *Le Devoir* indicated that the regions are most affected by the rejection of international students, and the data are rather shocking.

For example, the rejection rate at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières is 79%. At the college level, international students are being rejected because they come from Africa, because they are francophone students, or for other reasons. It may simply be because they want to settle here in the long term and that goes against the current mandate of the international student program. That has to change. There is also the Chinook system, which Minister Fraser already talked about.

The rejection rate is 73% at the Université du Québec en Outaouais, 71% at the Université du Québec à Rimouski and 68% at the École nationale de l'administration publique. That is not working. It is the same thing for CEGEPs, such as the Cégep de l'Abitibi—Témiscamingue, which has a rejection rate of 75%.

These are all educational institutions that want to take matters into their own hands and that are spending large amounts of money to attract students from all over the world, only for those students to be systematically turned down. This is a problem, because part of our strategy for combatting the labour shortage in Abitibi—Témiscamingue is to attract people with the promise of good living conditions and training programs that meet the needs of our business owners and businesses.

Motion No. 44 can go much further. It would be interesting to consider, but Ottawa must act quickly.

• (1850)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I think that the hon. member named the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, which he must not do.

[*English*]

Resuming debate with the right of reply, the hon. member for Surrey Centre has five minutes.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I want to thank all the members who have spoken to this today, including the Conservative member for Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, Bloc members, the NDP member for Nanaimo—Ladysmith and many others. I also want to thank my colleague, the member of Parliament for Vancouver Kingsway, who moved an amendment that I am very supportive of. Hopefully it goes as planned very shortly.

I am very pleased to be here to speak for the second hour of debate on my private member's motion, Motion No. 44, for permanent residency for temporary foreign workers. I would like, again, to extend my sincere gratitude for all the support I received from my colleagues for this motion, and I thank all the individuals, the organizations and industry groups whom I have met with or who have corresponded with me and voiced their support for Motion No. 44. A group of constituents in Surrey Centre have even started an e-pe-

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tition to show their support for the motion. In fact, because of them, I want this motion to be referred to as the “new hope motion”, as it gives new hope to those who have little.

I chose to bring this motion forward for Private Members' Business to address ongoing challenges with our immigration system and to help find ways to fill critical gaps in our labour market by creating more accessible pathways for permanent residency for temporary foreign workers. This includes important sectors like agriculture, transportation, manufacturing, trades, health services and many others that are desperately trying to fill persistent gaps in the labour market.

The implementation is even more important and vital today as we deal with inflation and acute labour shortages resulting from the pandemic, a retiring and aging labour force and low birth rates. Not a day goes by that I do not receive a call or an email from an employer stating that they cannot find workers for their businesses. From restaurant owners, produce packers and logistics companies to IT groups, everyone needs workers. In fact, the labour shortage is so drastic that the Quebec government is looking for 170,000 workers and is losing over \$18 billion over the next two years because of sales losses due to the lack of a workforce. No one wants temporary foreign workers; they want permanent workers.

While the temporary foreign worker program has evolved over the years in order to address the challenging demands of the labour market, we must continue to update Canada's immigration system to be more flexible. As we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, things can change very quickly, and the work that temporary foreign workers do to support our economy is vital to Canada's success. Despite the delays that temporary foreign workers have experienced and continue to experience in renewing their permits, the uncertainty of their status and their sometimes precarious employment, their hard work keeps our country functioning.

According to a 2020 research publication from the Library of Parliament on temporary foreign workers in Canada, temporary foreign workers face exclusion from society and experience a lack of access to important settlement services and other services because of a common viewpoint that their work is for the short term and they will not be in Canada long, despite the fact that many work, live and contribute to the communities they live in over many years. This leaves many temporary foreign workers in a vulnerable position, as they are not eligible for federal settlement services and must rely on individual employers to support those needs. This motion would address some of these vulnerabilities faced by temporary foreign workers by giving them more access to resources, safeguards and pathways to PR for their contribution to our country.

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As I mentioned in the first debate back in February, with an aging population and a low domestic birth rate, Canada is seeing a decrease in population. Some estimate that by 2030 our population growth will come exclusively from immigration. Fortunately, Canada has a great recipe for growth and to fulfill that labour shortage. That is immigration. Therefore, I urge members in this chamber to remember that and commit to always keeping a healthy discourse on this topic.

Immigration already accounts for almost 100% of Canada's labour-force growth and 75% of Canada's population growth, mostly in the economic category. Since 2016, we have seen a continuous increase in the number of labour market impact assessments approved as Canada's unemployment rate fell. LMIA's ensure that there is a need to hire TFWs in positions where there are not Canadians or permanent residents available to fill those positions. Last month, we saw the lowest unemployment rate on record.

● (1855)

I was pleased to see budget 2022 introduce proposed investments to support temporary foreign worker programs. While we have a great pathway for many TFWs, we do not have pathways for those who do not possess the prescribed education and language skills required for permanent residency, despite having the prerequisites to fulfill the job they have been hired for. Therefore, we must—

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Unfortunately, the hon. member's time is up.

It being 5:56, the time provided for debate has expired. Accordingly, the question is on the amendment.

[Translation]

If a member of a recognized party present in the House wishes to request a recorded division or that the amendment be adopted on division, I would invite them to rise and indicate it to the Chair.

[English]

The hon. member for Surrey Centre.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I request a recorded vote, please.

[Translation]

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Pursuant to order made on Thursday, November 25, 2021, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, May 11, at the expiry of the time provided for Oral Questions.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[English]

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Madam Speaker, I rise today to follow up on the questions that I had brought to the government's attention and my concerns with its lack of action in ensuring that Afghans who are fleeing and hiding from the Taliban would be able to get to safety. I also raised with the government

during this period that there are over 300 former Afghan interpreters whose families have been left behind. They have made an application and done a tremendous amount of work in guiding the government in bringing forward the necessary immigration measures to support their loved ones so that they can get to safety. Unfortunately, even with all of that guidance, the government has not been able to move forward in bringing their loved ones to Canada.

The problem rests with the government's inability to process these applications in an effective and efficient manner. The government is requiring individuals to provide documents that many of them would not have because they have had to burn them, because if they are found to have documentation that they are supporting or working with the Canadian military or have any links to the west, the minute the Taliban finds such documentation on them or in their residence, they would be targeted. This cannot be allowed to happen.

The Afghan interpreters have made these applications following the government's rules, and of those 300 applications, only 35% have been processed and 65% have yet to receive a G number. They have not received acknowledgement from the government. This is the reality. The urgency is getting grave. In fact, we found out yesterday at the Special Committee on Afghanistan that the Department of National Defence has submitted 3,800 applications that it has approved and vetted to Immigration, yet of those 3,800, only 900 have been processed. Some 2,900 are sitting somewhere and nobody knows where they are or what is happening with them.

In the meantime, we are getting media reports that Afghans who have supported the Canadian military are being hunted down by the Taliban. They have been tortured by the Taliban. That is the reality. There is such urgency in this situation that I really do not get what the government is doing. Liberals can get up every day and say what a great job they are doing, but the reality is that they are not doing a great job. There are so many family members who have been left behind and their lives are in danger every minute of the day as we speak. This cannot be allowed to happen.

I want to know from the Minister of Immigration what is happening to those files. Why can IRCC not find them in the system? Global Affairs Canada has also made referrals to IRCC, and I am learning that those referrals that have been sent to IRCC have also vanished into thin air. In fact, IRCC is now asking the families of the representatives here in Canada to go back to GAC and ask it to resubmit those referrals. What on earth is going on with IRCC? Has it lost these files? Does it not realize that every minute of the day matters in the lives of these individuals and that we as Canadians owe these families to bring them to safety?

● (1900)

Mr. Adam van Koevorden (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health and to the Minister of Sport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, let me start by thanking the member for her deep concern about the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and for the people who are affected there.

We in Canada, as a country, remain deeply concerned about the ongoing crisis. We take this very seriously and remain committed to do all that we can to support the Afghan people. Canada is also unwavering in our commitment to defend the fundamental rights of all Afghans, and this is an important part of who we are as Canadians. This is a personal thing for me, actually. My mother arrived here as a refugee in 1956. It is an important part of how we engage with allies and how we contribute to global stability around the world.

Since the Taliban forcefully took over Afghanistan, the world has witnessed the steady deterioration of social and economic systems in the country, leading to the largest humanitarian crisis around the world. We have also seen violence and the erosion of fundamental rights, including those of women and girls in religious and ethnic minorities.

[Translation]

That is why Canada has no intention of recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. That being said, Canada is also aware of what this crisis could mean for regional stability and global security.

[English]

We understand our role and our obligations. We have committed to welcoming at least 40,000 Afghans to Canada under our special immigration measures and humanitarian immigration programs. We are doing everything we can to help the many who supported Canada's efforts over the years but still remain in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. We are helping them resettle in Canada.

I would say that a couple of former Canadian Armed Forces members in my riding of Milton have been in touch with my office, and we have successfully resettled a couple of dozen in Milton. I am proud of that work.

We have also responded quickly and expeditiously to bring Afghan citizens and their families safely to their new homes. We are ensuring that, as we bring in new arrivals, they are being managed in a way that sets them up for success and that communities and service providers have the capacity to integrate those individuals and families successfully.

In addition to our immigration programs, in 2022 we have allocated \$143 million in humanitarian assistance to support the humanitarian response inside Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries. Canada is doing this through the United Nations agencies which prioritize the provision of life-saving food and nutrition assistance. It is essential that humanitarian support remains principled, needs-based and separate from political and security objectives.

Canada, along with other like-minded donors, is also carefully weighing how to address basic needs beyond humanitarian needs, while following closely the Taliban's actions towards protecting the fundamental rights of all of its citizens. This includes maintaining an inclusive and representative government and the rule of law. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has made it more complex to carry out activities in the country without risk of contravening Canada's Criminal Code. The Taliban remains a listed terrorist entity. Departments from across the government are seized with this issue and are actively working to identify a solution.

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● (1905)

[Translation]

In closing, Canada's commitment to Afghanistan and the Afghan people is clear. We are working closely with our international partners to provide support that gets results.

[English]

As we work together to explore mechanisms for assistance beyond humanitarian means to support basic human rights, we will be guided by our long-standing values. It will not include a course of action that deliberately or inadvertently legitimizes the Taliban regime.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Speaker, the Liberal government just does not get it.

It is not acting with the level of urgency that is required. It is not waiving the burdensome red tape that has been foisted on the families, asking them to fill out application forms, only to layer more application forms on them, even though all of that has been done. Even though the Department of National Defence has verified that these individuals have an enduring relationship with Canada, are at risk and have serviced Canada, the government cannot find the files that have been referred by the Department of National Defence or from GAC. How is this even possible?

Does the government not realize that, when it delays the processing and delays acting, it is putting lives at risk?

I am calling on the government to waive the documentation requirements and to immediately issue single travel journey documents so these Afghans could get to safety now.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Madam Speaker, Canada is committed to Afghanistan and the Afghan people.

Tonight I have outlined a series of concrete actions taken in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the Taliban regime. We recognize that there remains vulnerable people in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries, and we are doing what we can to assist them. The only viable way to improve the situation in Afghanistan is through continued collaboration with our international partners.

[Translation]

We will continue to call for the safe passage of vulnerable people and the provision of humanitarian aid.

[English]

We will also continue to call for inclusive and representative government and the protection of fundamental rights, including the rights of women and girls and religious and ethnic minorities.

Let there be no doubt that Canada's commitment is demonstrably clear. We have allocated financial resources and have taken concrete action through a whole-of-government approach, and we are changing lives every single day.

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HEALTH

Mr. Michael Barrett (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise this evening to take the opportunity, on behalf of Canadians who are wondering, to ask the government when it will end the mandates.

I have asked this question a few times in here, and I knew that my remarks this evening would draw a big crowd in the government benches, and rightly so. There should be a lot of attention on this from government members and from backbenchers of the governing party, because we are two years into this pandemic and we know an awful lot more about COVID now than we did in March 2020.

What we are looking for from the government is the same thing that we have been calling for, which we have formalized in motions in this place: the benchmarks that need to be hit for federal COVID mandates to be lifted. This was an entirely reasonable position for us to take several months ago. However, the government has failed to provide them, so now our position is for the government to catch up to the science and end the mandates.

The opportunity to furnish Canadians with the information that the government is using to keep the mandates in place has come and gone. Now the government needs to catch up. It needs to catch up with the chief medical officers of health in the provinces across the country, who have put in place plans and lifted mandates. It needs to catch up with our allies, such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, and the list goes on.

Some of the mandates that we have in place here were never put in place elsewhere, but they remain in place. They are extremely restrictive and include domestic requirements for taking flights and trains in this country and for continuing work in a federally regulated job or in the public service.

The vaccine mandates that the government put in place, as we have heard from the minister on more than one occasion, have served their purpose. They drove vaccine rates up. If that was the *raison d'être* and it has been successful, then let us hang up the “mission accomplished” banner and end the mandates.

This is what we have been looking for. What are the epidemiological factors that the government has been relying on to keep the mandates in place? Are they based on waste-water surveillance? Are they based on vaccination rates? Are they based on regional or provincial case counts? We do not know and when we have asked, the government does not seem to know. We have even heard from the top doctor at the Public Health Agency of Canada that it is not her decision when to lift the mandates.

I therefore have a couple of questions, and I expect that my hon. friend, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, is going to offer a response. My questions are as follows. Whose decision is it to lift the mandates? What are the benchmarks that are being evaluated for them to arrive at their decision to end the mandates? On what day or date does he reasonably expect that the mandates will be lifted? Canadians deserve to know.

• (1910)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health and to the Minister of Sport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, before I start, I would like to thank my friend and colleague for his ongoing engagement and collaboration on the health committee. I would also like to thank him for the opportunity to talk about what the government is doing to protect Canadians' transportation systems, their employees and their users.

[Translation]

Throughout the pandemic, the Government of Canada has taken clear and decisive actions to ensure the safety and security of Canada's transportation system, its employees and its users.

The Public Health Agency of Canada continues to examine short- and long-term vaccination strategies, including opportunities to promote confidence in vaccines and reduce barriers.

[English]

The agency needs to take several factors into consideration when considering vaccine mandates. It considers global and domestic epidemiological situations, vaccine effectiveness against circulating variants and the benefits and longer-term consequences of these measures.

In the fall of 2021, vaccine mandates were implemented for federally regulated air, rail and marine transportation sectors to pursue key objectives. The first was to ensure the safety and security of the transportation system, passengers and transportation employees and the public, delivering protection from infection and severity of illnesses in workplaces and for travellers. The second was to increase uptake to provide broader societal protection, and to play a leadership role in protecting the health and safety of our workplaces, our communities and all Canadians.

Vaccination is one of the most effective tools we have to protect our transportation system and to combat the pandemic. Vaccination is also an important layer of protection. Even though it does not give us full immunity from infection, it can prevent us from getting very sick and having unfortunate outcomes. In addition to that, it can reduce the potential need for hospitalization.

The incentive for vaccines is evident, as data from recent weeks shows. Across the country, the most recent data indicates that unvaccinated individuals are still four times more likely to be hospitalized than individuals who have been vaccinated with the primary series. Also, unvaccinated individuals are six times more likely to be hospitalized than those who have received a third or a booster dose. We will continue to monitor the spread and impact of COVID-19 in Canada, and will continue to take the emerging evidence around the vaccine effectiveness into account and to inform our vaccine strategy.

Adjournment Proceedings

HOUSING

[Translation]

In the meantime, we know that multiple layers of protection, including vaccination, protect against severe health outcomes from COVID-19. Getting as many Canadians as possible vaccinated and boosted and continuing to adhere to individual public health measures is expected to help us get through this phase of uncertainty and support Canada in managing COVID-19.

[English]

I would also add that I was recently looking at some numbers with respect to deaths in this country. In 2020, approximately 15,000 Canadians died from COVID-19. In 2021, it was 15,000 and up until now, in 2022, a little more than three months into the year, it is almost 10,000. This looks like it is going to be the worst year yet for deaths from COVID-19. It is not time to lift all of the mandates, unfortunately. It is time to look for new ways to protect each other, and the lives of Canadians, from COVID-19. I hope that Conservative members start offering some specific ways that we can continue to support each other.

● (1915)

Mr. Michael Barrett: Madam Speaker, Canadians are looking for some certainty. I appreciate that there was uncertainty two years ago, when we did not know, but now we know an awful lot. We also know, and the parliamentary secretary knows, that I come from a community that has a higher vaccination rate than nearly any other place in the country. The people in my community are looking for some certainty from the government.

Is it reading the tea leaves or is it reading the numbers? Is one of the factors that it is using to keep these measures in place the number of fatalities that it is attributing to COVID-19? If that is the case, it should be transparent and tell Canadians. Is there a set number of booster doses that needs to be administered before it is going to lift the mandates? It needs to tell Canadians that. In the absence of that, it looks like it is just throwing darts at a dartboard and guessing at what it is going to do next, or worse, making decisions based on political factors instead of on scientific factors.

Again, I will ask the parliamentary secretary, and I am genuinely looking for an answer here: When does he think that they are going to lift the mandates?

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Madam Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his ongoing advocacy and also congratulate him on the high vaccination rate in his riding. That is excellent. I have to presume that he is advocating for a very small number of individuals in his riding, then, because no federal mandates apply to people who are vaccinated, even with just two doses. I have three doses, and I know some members of the House have received a fourth. They are incrementally safer from COVID-19. It is worth pointing out that none of these mandates applies to those who have received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

I have also heard from members of my community who cannot receive a vaccine, or who are allergic. It is important that we take them into consideration. It is important for Canadians to stay up to date on all the vaccination requirements for which they are eligible: This means a COVID-19 booster for all adults over 18. Doing this will help protect them and others against severe infection.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am rising this evening to once again talk about the important issue of housing, which is something all members are aware of in their own ridings. It is something we are seeing as a crisis across the country.

Today, over 80% of young Canadians do not believe they will ever be able to afford a home. That is something I do not really blame them for, considering it will take young Canadians, on average now, 13 years to save up enough for a down payment. That is comparable to the only five years it took for folks to save up back in 1976. Of course, that is only if they are able to actually save up enough money after paying all their bills and having other expenses.

This housing crisis is something that is touching a lot of people in a lot of different situations and from different walks of life, but it is hitting young Canadians disproportionately harder. There are many in my generation who have completely given up, frankly, on their dream of home ownership.

In advance of the recent federal budget, the government promised to release a plan to address this crisis. With my respect to the parliamentary secretary and the government, they have unveiled a plan that really just contains more of the same failed policies that have exacerbated the housing crisis to date over the last seven years of their government.

To put it into perspective, the finance minister noted in the budget that the government was going to double the number of housing units it has built. When our finance critic, the hon. member for Abbotsford, rose to ask the minister how many units had been built, she could not answer the question. Therefore, the government is going to double a number it does not know, which is definitely concerning. It shows the government is great at making announcements and allocating funding, but when it comes to delivering results, there is certainly a gap there.

The fact we are seeing this housing crisis today just shows the government has failed to incentivize enough development. It has failed to build enough units and adequately address this.

The government has announced a new special savings account and, I believe, a \$500 benefit to help Canadians, but with my respect to the parliamentary secretary, my friend and colleague from Milton, the fact that housing prices are now five times the average household income shows these boutique policies are missing the mark. They are not addressing the root issues, particularly around the supply of housing.

Adjournment Proceedings

I would like to ask the parliamentary secretary if he can explain why his government refuses to admit its policies to date have failed on this file and why it refuses to change course to bring forward a real plan to address this housing crisis, particularly around the lack of housing supply.

• (1920)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health and to the Minister of Sport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my friend, the member for Kenora, for his question and for his continued advocacy for young people, particularly those who would like to buy houses.

The member is correct that buying a house is indeed out of reach for too many Canadians, but fortunately he is wrong to say that our government's policies are not having an impact. He mentioned that this government is good at making announcements. We are also good at building houses. Since 2015, we have invested over \$30 billion with real results for Canadians. These investments have created and repaired nearly 440,000 units across this country. That is a big number. That is 440,000 places to call home, especially for the most vulnerable Canadians. Many of these homes have been created through our 10-year national housing strategy. Programs that make up this strategy are making a huge difference to families across the country, including in my colleague's riding of Kenora and in my riding of Milton as well, where we just finished a new housing project for vulnerable seniors. For example, in Kenora, our rapid housing initiative is quickly creating 85 permanent affordable housing units for first nations people in Kenora, and much more is coming with budget 2022.

As the member acknowledged, budget 2022 is a housing budget, and we are proposing even more measures to make housing more affordable for Canadians. These measures are designed specifically to get keys into the hands of first-time homebuyers. It is not only for homebuyers, and I will get to that in just a moment. For example, we are proposing a tax-free first-home savings account. As home prices climb, so does the cost of a down payment. With this program, first-time homebuyers can save up to \$40,000. As in RRSPs, contributions would be tax deductible and withdrawals to purchase a first home, including investment income, would be non-taxable, just like a TFSA. In other words, it is tax-free in and tax-free out. We are also proposing to double the existing first-time homebuyers' tax credit to \$10,000. This enhanced credit would provide up to \$1,500 in direct support to homebuyers.

On the other side of the House, members simply do not believe there is a role for the federal government to play. In fact, prominent members of the Conservative opposition are on record as saying that the federal government should do less and pull back from investments in housing, and that we should simply leave it to the provinces to do it on their own. This is a disastrous approach that we simply do not agree with.

Finally, we know that buying a home is often the most significant financial decision that young Canadians will make in their lives, and our proposed homebuyers' bill of rights would help curb unfair real estate practices such as blind bidding and asking prices, and asking buyers to waive their right to a home inspection, which make buying a home more stressful.

Our housing plan does not stop there. We are also addressing head-on the single most important issue affecting housing affordability, which is a lack of supply. It just has not kept pace with our growing population. Budget 2022 proposes measures that would put Canada on the path to double our construction of new housing to meet Canada's housing needs. These measures would help make a difference for Canadians who are looking to buy a home, but not just those who are looking to buy a home. In addition to that, we are also proposing \$1.5 billion in the budget for the rapid housing initiative, which has been fantastically successful. In addition to that, there would be \$1.5 billion for 6,000 new co-op units.

I have spoken often in the House on co-op housing. I am a proud co-op kid. I would not have had access to a lot of the things that I did as a young person if not for co-op housing. When we take a market problem, such as the lack of available supply, and the fact that people's wages just have not kept up to the rising costs of homes, we cannot always just rely on a market solution. Housing co-ops and non-market housing are non-market solutions to the housing strategy. That is something that we could never count on the Conservatives to propose. They do not believe in things like co-operatives. They do not believe in non-ownership. They do not believe in non-market solutions. Canadians know that they can count on the Liberal government on our side of the House for support: 440,000 people in this country have a place to live because of the national housing strategy. We are going to double that number in the coming years.

• (1925)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Madam Speaker, I was pleased that my colleague across the way was actually able to provide some figures in terms of housing units built. That is relatively new for the current government. It is something that we have not heard quite yet. The fact of the matter is that since the government took office, housing prices have doubled. The member mentioned a number of programs that the government has brought forward and a lot of dollars that it wants to spend, and that is important. Absolutely, the government has a role to play in co-op housing and in direct affordable housing, but it also has a role to play in helping the market and helping create a situation where we can incentivize more development.

It is clear that many regions are different and a one-size-fits-all solution is not going to work. We need all hands on deck here. Respectfully, could the member comment further on what his government is going to do to help incentivize private development of housing? That is also a very important aspect of this, and I would just like to get his thoughts on that.

Adjournment Proceedings

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Madam Speaker, specifically, I think my friend and colleague was referencing the housing accelerator fund, which we will incentivize municipalities and regions to build more homes. I am not an expert on that, but I am sure somebody from our government can get back to him on it.

Young Canadians deserve the same opportunities as the generations before them. The member is a couple of years, or many years, younger than me, but I think we have a similar sort of outlook when it comes to our mutual generation, and we know that we have to do more.

Our government is here to help them. We are here to ensure that Canada continues to be the best place in the world to live, work and to raise a family, and we are truly making it easier for Canadians to save for a down payment. We are proposing to get rid of unfair real

estate practices that would make the home-buying process more stressful and onerous than it should be, and we are building more supply to bring down housing costs across the board.

In closing, my friend for Kenora said that it is an “all hands on deck” situation, and I could not agree more. That is why I would ask the member opposite and his colleagues to provide solutions rather than just the blame game we have been hearing from across the floor with respect to the housing crisis.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 7:27 p.m.)

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