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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, February 25, 2016

—

Speaker: The Honourable Geoff Regan

CONTENTS

(Table of Contents appears at back of this issue.)

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, February 25, 2016

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayer

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT'S 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), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to one petition.

* * *

[*Translation*]

TRANSPORTATION

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to section 53 of the Canada Transportation Act, I am pleased to table the report on the Canada Transportation Act review this morning.

[*English*]

I wish to thank the hon. David Emerson and his team for their valuable examination of how we can maximize our transportation system's contribution to Canada's economic growth.

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CITIZENSHIP ACT

Hon. John McCallum (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Lib.) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-6, An Act to amend the Citizenship Act and to make consequential amendments to another Act.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

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INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. Gordon Brown (Leeds—Grenville—Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1), I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, two reports of the Canadian delegation of the Canada-

United States Inter-parliamentary Group. The first report concerns the Canadian/American Border Trade Alliance Conference that was held in Washington, D.C., United States of America, from October 4 to 6, 2015. The second report concerns the annual meeting of the Southern Governors' Association that was held in St. Louis, Missouri, United States of America, from October 15 to 6, 2015.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. member for Malpeque upon his election as the House co-chair of the Canada-United States Inter-parliamentary Group.

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED DYING

Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the first report of the Special Joint Committee on Physician-Assisted Dying entitled “Medical Assistance in Dying: A Patient-Centred Approach”.

I would like to take just a moment to thank the members of the committee—members of Parliament and senators—who worked both diligently and extremely faithfully on this difficult and rewarding study. We were unable to reach consensus. However, the majority of the committee members, representing both parties, were able to agree with the vast majority of the report.

I will acknowledge the dissenting report with disappointment that some members of the committee were unable to reach consensus with us. They fundamentally had a flawed understanding of a paragraph of the Supreme Court of Canada—

The Speaker: Just a minute please. Members will know that the presentation of reports from committees is not a time for debate. It is simply a time to describe in a few words the report that is being presented. If the member has a last couple of words to finish up without entering into a debate, that would be appreciated.

Mr. Robert Oliphant: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to present the report. I thank all members of the committee for their very diligent work.

LIAISON

Hon. Judy Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the first report of the Liaison Committee regarding committee activities and expenditures.

Routine Proceedings

TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITIES

Hon. Judy Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the first report of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities in relation to the Supplementary Estimates 2015-16.

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EXCISE ACT, 2001

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-232, An Act to amend the Excise Act, 2001 (spirits).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce my private member's bill, seconded by the hon. member for Brantford—Brant, to reduce the excise tax on spirits.

Canadian spirits are world renowned, and our nation produces premium products that represent nearly \$1 billion in exports each year. Lowering the excise tax rate would allow the Canadian spirits industry to invest and be more competitive in the global market. Canadian agriculture and tourism industries would also benefit from a more competitive spirits sector.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

●(1010)

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND OTHER DEMENTIAS ACT

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-233, An Act respecting a national strategy for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

He said: Mr. Speaker, first I want to thank the member for Don Valley West for seconding the bill. Also, I want to acknowledge a previous member, Claude Gravelle, who also raised this matter.

The bill has a number of changes that I support, of course. It calls on the provinces and all stakeholders to develop a plan to co-operate in finding a cure and dealing with the challenges of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias.

There is probably no family in the country that can say it has not in some way been hurt by these particular diseases. We know they are increasing. There are more than 700,000 Canadians currently suffering from Alzheimer's and other related dementias. As we know, as the population increases, the word is that this is going to increase.

The bill has the support of a number of stakeholders, particularly the Alzheimer Society of Canada.

I would appreciate if all members could revisit this area, have a look at it; and I hope it gets the support of everyone when it comes up for second reading.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

[*Translation*]**CANADA LABOUR CODE**

Ms. Karine Trudel (Jonquière, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-234, An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code (replacement workers).

She said: Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour to present my bill to amend the Canada Labour Code. I thank my colleague from Saskatoon West for seconding this bill.

As a progressive opposition party, we care about advocating for the rights of workers in Canada. That is why I tabled a bill this morning to prohibit the hiring of replacement workers, also known as "scabs", during strikes and lockouts under federal jurisdiction.

Passing this bill will send a strong message to workers across the country about the right to collectively negotiate working conditions as equals.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

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[*English*]**CRIMINAL CODE**

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-235, An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (fetal alcohol disorder).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce an act to amend the Criminal Code and the Corrections and Conditional Release Act with respect to fetal alcohol disorder, seconded by the member for Humber River—Black Creek.

I want to first give credit to the Canadian Bar Association and former president Rod Snow, whose recommendations form the basis of this bill, and the member for Charlottetown, who first tabled the identical bill on March 10, 2015. When the precursor to this bill was debated in this House, every member of every party who spoke were in favour to it.

It causes me great emotion to introduce this private member's bill to amend the Criminal Code to establish a procedure for the assessment of individuals who are involved in the criminal justice system and who may suffer from fetal alcohol disorder. It requires the court to consider a determination that the offender suffers from fetal alcohol disorder as a mitigating factor in sentencing.

The bill also requires Correctional Service Canada to recognize the existence of fetal alcohol disorder as a disability within that system.

This bill could alleviate so much human suffering of innocents, and I commend it into the hands of my colleagues, MPs and senators.

Routine Proceedings

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

• (1015)

[*Translation*]

PAYMENT CARD NETWORKS ACT

Ms. Linda Lapointe (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Lib.) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-236, An Act to amend the Payment Card Networks Act (credit card acceptance fees).

She said: Mr. Speaker, it is my great honour and pleasure to rise in the House to introduce my first bill. I thank the member for Thérèse-De Blainville, Ramez Ayoub, for seconding the bill.

The bill amends the Payment Card Networks Act to give the Governor in Council the power to limit the fees that the participants in a payment card network require from merchants who accept payments by credit card.

The aim is to reduce transaction fees, interchange fees, and the cost of credit cards for merchants. It is important to note that small businesses need some wiggle room, and we are the party for the middle class.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

The Speaker: I would remind hon. members not to mention other members' names, but rather their ridings.

* * *

[*English*]

CANDIDATE GENDER EQUITY ACT

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby South, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-237, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (gender equity).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am proud to stand today and table the candidate gender equity act. This act seeks to amend the Canada Elections Act to create financial incentives for political parties to nominate more women, and to move toward gender parity in the list of candidates put forward in elections.

The Prime Minister voluntarily put in place this country's first gender-balanced cabinet. However, we need to make laws that reinforce the idea that men and women are intrinsically equal and that, because we are equal, the entire membership of this place should also be gender balanced. A record 88 women MPs were elected in the 2015 election, but women still hold only 26% of the seats in the House of Commons, which places us 53rd in the world when compared to other countries. This is unacceptable.

The bill I submit here today is based on successful measures found in other countries, such as France and Ireland. It has been drafted with the aid of a dozen international experts, including my wife, Dr. Jeanette Ashe.

We need real action to move toward gender parity in this place because, to paraphrase the Prime Minister, it is 2016.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR SAFE DISPOSAL OF LAMPS CONTAINING MERCURY ACT

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): moved for leave to introduce Bill C-238, an act respecting the development of a national strategy for the safe disposal of lamps containing mercury.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise today to introduce my private member's bill, an act respecting the development of a national strategy for the safe disposal of lamps containing mercury. I would like to thank the hon. member for Central Nova for being my seconder.

In my riding of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, we have a one of a kind facility called Dan-X Recycling. Dan-X is a company that completely breaks down and recycles spent mercury-bearing light bulbs, creating value and reducing dangerous waste in our landfills. I am proud to have such a facility in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour recycling these light bulbs every day.

We tell consumers to step out of the room if they break a CFL light bulb, to worry about mercury vapour in the air, but we do not protect our land and our waterways from toxic mercury by ensuring the safe disposal of these bulbs.

I believe that with a national strategy we can provide real, environmental leadership and protect our waterways, our lands, and our future. I hope the bill will receive support from all members of this House.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

• (1020)

FAIRNESS IN CHARITABLE GIFTS ACT

Mr. Ted Falk (Provencher, CPC): moved for leave to introduce Bill C-239, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (charitable gifts).

He said: Mr. Speaker, my private member's bill is short-titled "fairness in charitable gifts act". I am very honoured to have the seconder contribute to this. My seconder is the member for Perth—Wellington, and I thank him for that.

The bill recognizes the value and the good work that registered Canadian charities are doing, both secular and faith-based. It celebrates the work that is happening in the area of health care through hospital foundations, and through organizations that do health research like cancer, heart and stroke, and the Alzheimer's Society. It celebrates the good work that charities are doing in education, promoting higher education. It celebrates areas where charities are contributing to our social services, like food banks, homeless shelters, addictions counselling, and refugee resettlement.

Routine Proceedings

The bill would better enable registered Canadian charities to attract donations by providing the same favourable percentage of federal tax credits that a political donation would receive.

I believe, I think all members in this House believe, and I think Canadians believe that feeding a politician should be no more important than feeding the hungry. I look forward to speaking further to the bill.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

* * *

INCOME TAX ACT

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): moved for leave to introduce Bill C-240, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (tax credit — first aid).

He said: Mr. Speaker, today I am excited to rise in this House to introduce my private member's bill, a bill that would save lives and improve the quality of life for all Canadians.

Students across this country benefit from a federal tuition tax credit, helping to make post-secondary education more affordable. The bill proposes a similar, non-refundable tax credit for anyone who takes life-saving first aid, CPR, or AED training.

Canadians with skills and knowledge in first aid and CPR are able to help others in emergency medical situations. The value of a life saved or injury prevented, and the knowledge of what to do in an emergency is a skill that we should all have.

The rate of survival for those suffering from cardiac arrest is increased by 50% to 500% if a bystander has CPR training. With the bill we can show that Parliament recognizes the life-saving power of first aid and CPR and show Canadians that we value that training.

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed)

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CANADA LABOUR CODE

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions among the parties and if you seek it I think you will find unanimous consent for the following motion.

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practice of the House, on Friday, February 26, 2016, the House shall consider Bill C-4, An Act to amend the Canada Labour Code, the Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act, the Public Service Labour Relations Act and the Income Tax Act, at second reading, and, when no member rises to speak or at the expiry of the time provided for Government Orders, whichever is earlier, all questions necessary to dispose of the second reading stage of the Bill shall be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Monday, March 7, 2016, at the ordinary hour of daily adjournment.

• (1025)

The Speaker: Does the hon. parliamentary secretary have unanimous consent of the House to move the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Speaker: The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

PETITIONS

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to table a petition signed by constituents in my riding of Perth—Wellington regarding potential changes to the Elections Act.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to stand today in the House to present a petition from voters in my area who want to ensure that Canadians have a fair electoral system.

The petitioners recognize that our current system produces false majorities and that the seat count of each party in the House does not reflect the vote count that they received in the 2015 election.

Therefore, the petitioners call upon the House of Commons to amend the Canada Elections Act to ensure voters can cast an equal and effective vote, are governed by a fairly elected Parliament, and live under legitimate laws approved by a majority of elected parliamentarians who represent a majority of the voters. They call upon the House to introduce a form of proportional representation.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to present a petition from Yukoners who note that the number of MPs a party achieves is not reflective of the number of voters who had cast votes for that party, and where a fair voting system would give each community fair and accountable representation.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to immediately undertake public consultations across Canada, to amend the Canada Elections Act to ensure that Canadians live under legitimate laws approved by a majority of elected parliamentarians representing a majority voters.

GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present two petitions today.

The first petition, I have to say, shocked me when I received it from petitioners. Because February is Black History Month, I was particularly disturbed by this petition, that I do support, which is called "Recognition of Derogatory Geographical Names in Canada". Believe it or not, there are a number of place names that use the "n" word. I am not going to use it in this context obviously, but there is a [Blank] Rapids, Le Buttereau-du-[blank], Premier rapide [Blank]-Eddy, and so on.

The petitioners ask that the House of Commons recognize that these geographical names must be replaced with names that cease to be racist and prejudicial, and do not reflect Canadian values.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is very straightforward. It refers to the issue of the management of marine protected areas.

The petitioners ask that the government branches simplify multilateral communications and responsibilities within marine protected areas.

POVERTY

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise and present this petition on behalf of a couple of hundred of my constituents from Louisdale, River Bourgeois, Grande Greve, Mabou, and Louisbourg.

The petitioners are concerned about the state of poverty in the country and want the Government of Canada to work with the provinces and territories to implement an anti-poverty plan based on human rights that focuses on income security. The petitioners want us to work with partners to establish measurable goals, timelines, and indicators on the progress.

I am very pleased to present this on their behalf.

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to table a petition dealing with visitors' visas, in particular from residents of Winnipeg North. There is a lot of frustration in countries like Ukraine, Philippines, India, and particularly the Punjab. They are trying to get visitors to be able to come to Canada for wonderful celebrations, such as weddings and graduations, or just to be able to visit with family, and being turned down. The petitioners are asking the Government of Canada to take into extra consideration how important family connections are and to do what we can to improve the system so that more people can visit Canada.

* * *

• (1030)

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Ms. Karine Trudel (Jonquière, NDP) moved:

That the House (a) acknowledge that mounting job losses combined with a lack of access to Employment Insurance (EI) contribute to growing income inequality and a situation where too many Canadians are struggling to make ends meet; and (b) call on the government to honour its campaign promises and Throne Speech commitment to strengthen the EI system “to make sure that it best serves both the Canadian economy and all Canadians who need it,” by taking immediate action to: (i) create a universal qualifying threshold of 360 hours for EI, regardless of the regional rate of

Government Orders

unemployment, (ii) immediately repeal the harmful reforms of the previous government, including those that force unemployed workers to move away from their communities, take lower-paying jobs and those that eliminated the Extended EI Benefits Pilot program to help seasonal workers, (iii) protect the EI account to ensure that funds are only spent on benefits for Canadians, including training, and never again used to boost the government's bottom line.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Churchill—Keewatinook Aski.

I am very proud to table and move in the House our opposition motion on how important it is for Canadians to be able to access employment insurance. In Canada, we are lucky to have social safety nets that help people who are going through difficult times to provide for themselves until they get back on their feet. Unfortunately, those safety nets are unravelling.

A growing number of families are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet in a struggling economy where good jobs are increasingly rare and many jobs are part-time and much more precarious. Entire sectors of our economy are in trouble or disappearing completely. I therefore hope that we will all agree that it is high time we began repairing our social safety nets and helping all Canadians improve their situation and live a better life.

Employment insurance is a very important safety net. It enables people who lose their jobs to pay their bills, put bread on the table, and help their children go to school. It benefits both workers and employers who need qualified seasonal employees to operate their business. It is no secret that many businesses such as golf courses need skilled workers. Because of the EI reform, these are seasonal workers. We can all agree that in northern regions such as Quebec there is no golf in the winter. Those golf courses need seasonal workers and those workers need to receive employment insurance benefits. The workers have the skills and training to cut the grass and maintain the course. That may not seem like a big deal, but that expertise is important to the golf courses. Unfortunately, with the changes that were made to employment insurance, the expertise goes away.

Over the past two decades, it has become harder to access employment insurance. Let us be frank, the previous governments really did a number on employment insurance. The biggest problem is that time and again governments use the employment insurance fund to balance the budget. That should be prohibited. Over the years, we have seen the government dip into the EI fund that belongs to workers. Those are the workers' contributions. The government balances the budget on the backs of the workers. It is unacceptable.

More than \$57 billion in EI premiums were taken to pad the government's budget. Had they left the money in the fund, accessibility would not be an issue. Unfortunately, the result is that only 38.9% of unemployed Canadians received benefits last December, the month for which we have data. This does not mean that the remaining unemployed workers found jobs or that the economy was doing well. Often the unemployed feel discouraged. The reforms put in place by the previous government discourage workers.

Government Orders

I will talk about an example in my riding of Jonquière. The Service Canada office in Kénogami was closed. In addition to having a hard time accumulating hours and getting information, these people can no longer go to an office. It is no longer accessible because it was closed. Workers become discouraged, and now we have people living in poverty because they do not receive unemployment insurance.

This is also a vicious circle. In fact, Canadians with no access to employment insurance have more precarious jobs, which make it difficult for them to accumulate enough hours to qualify for benefits. I am not making this up. The parliamentary budget officer himself pointed out this problem.

I can provide you with many examples from my region and my riding of Jonquière. There are many seasonal workers in the area who are skilled and who really like the work they do.

• (1035)

These people have chosen to come to the region not only because we have a very nice quality of life in Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, but also because they have a job for which they are qualified and of which they are proud.

Natural resource companies are having to lay off employees because the cost of raw materials is too low and the business is therefore not profitable. When an employer wants to rehire these workers, they are no longer available. They have had to leave the region because they cannot get EI. In my riding of Jonquière, a number of people have had to leave the region. I have met many of them who are leaving Quebec in search of work. They are leaving their families and selling their homes. We are seeing an exodus from our communities, municipalities, and region. Most importantly, we are losing skilled workers with good experience.

Some car dealership employees have been locked out for three years and have not been able to return to work. These are service jobs and things are slowly turning around, but as a result of the EI reform, the people affected by the conflict are no longer entitled to benefits. They cannot access their benefits under the act. These people are unfortunately waiting to return to the work that they studied for, that they are qualified for, that they believe in, and for which they want to stay in our region. Unfortunately, they will end up with no income, below the poverty line.

We need to protect the employment insurance fund once and for all, to ensure that it serves Canadians. I am not just talking about providing benefits, but also about providing training. When workers lose their jobs, they need money to access training and find new jobs in their communities, in their region.

Of course, we also have to repeal the harmful reforms of the previous government. During the election campaign, I was very happy to hear that we were not the only party wanting to repeal the employment insurance reform. We all know that was a very popular topic during the election campaign. Many people who are now members of the government advocated for abolishing the employment insurance reform and even said that the number of hours should be reduced to improve access.

Forcing workers to accept a job that pays up to 30% less than their previous job or risk losing their benefits is totally demeaning to

them. There are a number of factors that affect employment insurance benefits, including hours worked and regional unemployment rates. For example, under the Conservatives' reform, a mom who decides to move to a particular municipality might have a hard time finding work. Yes, people choose to move, but we have to make sure there are places where those people can work. For seasonal workers in particular, it is not the workers' fault, it is the industry's fault they cannot work. For example, the brush cutters who work in our beautiful Canadian forests cannot work there in the winter. They cannot work as brush cutters during that season.

I could talk about this all day, but I will conclude by saying that this is why we think there should be a single 360-hour threshold for everyone, no matter where they live. I hope to get a lot of support from my colleagues in the House to make changes, bring in universal benefits, improve access by reducing the number of hours, and restore services. Most importantly, the government must never again take money from the employment insurance fund.

• (1040)

[*English*]

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what is the position of my colleague on providing assistance to the areas hard hit by the commodity drop and what does she recommend for those people who are impacted in Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karine Trudel: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the question.

As I said earlier, money could be set aside to provide additional training to people who want to go further in their sector.

In my riding, Jonquière, some businesses closed. It is our responsibility to take care of the people who lost their jobs and to set up programs. Funding needs to be allocated to provide training to these people so that they can find new work. We have to come up with innovative, creative ways to keep our economy going and develop other sectors that these workers may not have thought of before. We might also entice them into becoming entrepreneurs.

Mr. Peter Julian (New Westminster—Burnaby, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague on her excellent speech.

For 20 years or so, first under the previous Liberal government and then under the Conservative government, we have seen successive cuts to the employment insurance program, as the hon. member knows quite well. The vast majority of unemployed workers cannot access the insurance program that they paid into.

Government Orders

When a person or family that contributes to EI cannot access it when they need it, there is a serious problem.

Can the hon. member talk about the consequences of those cuts in the Jonquière and Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean region, cuts that have resulted in unemployed workers not having access to employment insurance?

• (1045)

Ms. Karine Trudel: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

This is having a huge impact. Since I often engage with the people of my riding, I met some people from the forestry sector, which is mostly seasonal, who have been left without EI benefits.

The five-week waiting period, the infamous black hole, was working well for seasonal workers. If by some misfortune a machine broke, the weather was bad, or snow arrived early, seasonal workers would not have enough hours, so those five weeks could be a big help. They could also help families continue to invest in our economy, pay their bills, and put food on the table.

The consequences are enormous. This leaves people without any income, and that is catastrophic. When single mothers or fathers who need to provide for their families are left with no income, they sometimes have to part with their things. This has a huge impact on our regional economy.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the NDP wants to establish a 360-hour threshold. There is no recognition at all in regard to the different regions of the country. Rather, it is one threshold that would apply to the whole country.

Does the NDP believe employment situations differ among regions, or should every region be treated the same? If so, why 360 hours?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karine Trudel: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for this very important, very pertinent question about the 360-hour eligibility threshold.

It is important to have a universal threshold. For instance, my riding is divided into two main geographic areas. If two people work for the same company but live 50 km away from one another, they do not have the same eligibility threshold. If the company is forced to shut down after its employees have worked 300 hours, some will have access to EI while others will not. It also depends on the context. They might be seasonal workers.

It is therefore important to our economy to have a universal threshold of 360 hours, which I think is reasonable, in order to help our workers.

[*English*]

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to rise in the House to speak to the NDP motion today, essentially calling on the new Liberal government to act immediately to fix employment insurance for Canadians.

The NDP has always stood up for Canadian workers, workers who depend on a strong social safety net, a safety net they can rely on. That safety net has been under attack in the last few decades. The most vicious attacks were undertaken by past Liberal and Conservative governments, whose actions in the 1990s caused a great deal of harm, particularly to the employment insurance system.

In recent months, we have heard a great number of promises from the government benches on how they plan to fix the EI system, a system that many of their constituents rely on as well, but we have yet to see that kind of support in action. In fact, despite commitments that were made even in the election campaign by the governing party, one commitment that definitely was not made was to stop pillaging billions of dollars from the EI account.

I believe that members of Parliament always have to know their history, so let us look at that history. Let us go back to the 1990s. The Liberal prime minister at the time adopted a series of measures that led to a drastic drop in EI eligibility. The fundamentals of these changes were brought into place as well by the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney. When the Liberal Party got back into power, it did not miss the opportunity to continue the work of dismantling the employment insurance system.

In 1994, then minister Axworthy proposed a reform of the employment insurance system and the adoption of a new bill in 1996 that radically changed how employment insurance, then called unemployment insurance, worked. It changed the system from an insurance mechanism to something that put more emphasis on individuals' responsibility to sort out their employment situations. The consequences of these measures were dire.

The proportion of unemployed Canadians who received benefits was nearly cut in half between 1990 and 1997. It is not just progressive economists and researchers, but many others, including the Conference Board of Canada, who have made a direct connection between the cuts to employment insurance and the rise of income inequality in our country. The Liberals of the 1990s continued to push forward with their changes and we are still living with the consequences today. Employment insurance is one of the strongest links in our social safety net and it should come as no surprise that its demise has led to skyrocketing inequalities.

Let us look at one of the most dramatic decisions to date when it comes to EI. Some \$51 billion in the EI fund was pillaged by the Liberal government. This, as many know, was not government money, but the money of Canadian workers and employers that has been put into this fund. The money was taken from the premiums that employers and workers paid into the system, which should have remained to help workers on an ongoing basis.

Government Orders

Previous Conservative governments went full speed ahead with dangerous reforms that put a huge strain on Canadian workers. Even if only half of unemployed Canadian workers had access to EI in the midst of the Liberal reforms in the 1990s, the Conservatives doubled down on the challenges to create even more barriers to accessing employment insurance. Many of these changes were mean-spirited, forcing workers to take jobs that would be up to one hour away from where they lived, and taking lower-paid jobs at that. We often heard that the Conservatives wanted to match every job opening with Canadians able to do the work, but for seasonal workers in particular they created conditions that required many of them to give up their trades and leave their home communities.

Today, less than four Canadian workers out of 10 facing unemployment have access to EI. In terms of accessibility rates, the unprecedented historic low of 36.5% eligibility was reached while the Conservatives were at the helm.

How did we get here? We got here by repeatedly putting up barriers to accessing employment insurance.

● (1050)

The increase in work hours required to access employment insurance, now between 420 to 700 hours, depending on where one lives, is a considerable barrier to accessing the system. A Canadian living in western Canada might have to work much longer than a Canadian in the east in order to access employment insurance. Having inconsistent access rates between regions has the unintended consequence of the government not being able to take into account a rapidly changing economic situation in certain parts of the country. This has to be changed. That is why the NDP stands by its proposal, with many other advocates, in supporting the proposal to move to a universal 360 hours threshold for workers, regardless of where they live.

The Alberta government has requested an alleviation of the hours required and demands that the government take into account the rapidly degrading economic situation in its part of the country. Premier Notley said Albertans should be able to enjoy the same access to benefits. We hope that the federal government will act on their needs.

This dramatic shift in the economic situation for the people of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, and other parts of the country is one of the reasons we feel it is a priority to present this motion in the House today. The creation of a universal qualifying threshold, regardless of the regional rate of unemployment, should be a priority for the government. The regional threshold never made any sense, but it has been shown in recent months to be an ill-advised approach to administering a critical program.

The bottom line is that employment insurance should be there for every worker who needs it, regardless of where he or she lives, and the system has to take into account the economic condition of various areas in the country so that things can shift quickly. A lower threshold would also allow more Canadians to have access to the regime. We hope the government will take this into account immediately.

We are also proud to introduce a proposal that would repeal other aspects of the harmful Conservative reforms, including the need for Canadians to uproot themselves to find employment. A one-hour commute should not be imposed on Canadians as an eligibility criterion to receive the benefits for which they have paid.

We are also proud to present measures to protect the EI account from political interference and to ensure that what workers and employers pay into the system will only be used for their benefit, and not to fund tax reductions for the richest Canadians or the biggest corporations.

Considering the timing of the motion, we hope that our colleagues in all parties will find that the federal government must take immediate action.

● (1055)

[*Translation*]

The motion moved by my colleague from Jonquière is very timely. It bears repeating that the previous government's employment insurance reforms must be repealed, and this has the support of many people in Quebec and the Maritimes.

Anyone who has applied for EI knows that the barriers to program access have become insurmountable for too many workers.

In fact, more than six out of 10 Canadians who lose their jobs are deprived of their benefits. This means that a majority of Canadians who lose their jobs can find themselves without any income when their professional situation deteriorates.

As I mentioned, this is the result of a series of both Conservative and Liberal reforms that have dismantled this important component of our social security program.

This work must be carried out in a meaningful way, and we hope that, together with civil society and the unemployed, we will keep up pressure on the government so that it puts together a social safety net that meets workers' needs.

[*English*]

The motion in front of us today is fundamentally about justice, a principle that ought to guide all of us as Canadian parliamentarians, the need to achieve justice for Canadian workers and the need to achieve justice for Canadian families. Let us fix employment insurance.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments by my colleague and I am very proud of the platform put forward by our government throughout the election.

It is interesting to note that at the outset of the committees being re-established, my colleague across received support for a study on EI and EI reform. Therefore, how is the circle squared between wanting to go forward with an EI study and presenting these changes in the motion today?

Government Orders

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Speaker, I am very proud that our motion at the human resources committee is going forward. It will be a very succinct, focused study based on hearing from Canadians about what exactly they are facing right now, and to add urgency to the need for action, we are presenting our motion the House of Commons today.

As the member across pointed out, many commitments were made in the election campaign by the government. It is time to act. In Alberta, the rate of employment insurance applications has doubled. We know that only 39% of eligible workers are receiving EI. It truly is reaching a crisis point.

What we are saying is that we need to act. We need to hear from workers, advocates, industry, and from stakeholders. We should not delay action. We hope that the new Liberal government will act to fix EI immediately.

• (1100)

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at the beginning of her speech, the member mentioned the fact that her party has consistently stood up for Canadian workers.

One of the things that I believe Canadians want is to work. What this motion proposes is two months of work for, effectively, one year of EI. It is important to have that social safety net as a temporary measure for difficult situations. However, I would be more curious to hear the member's position on supporting jobs and job growth for Canadian workers.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Speaker, if the member had been listening to my speech, employment insurance is paid for by Canadian workers and Canadian employers and is critical to closing the inequality gap in our country.

Coming from western Canada, I am aware of many people who are hurting a great deal right now, losing their jobs. People are moving back to Manitoba because they have lost their jobs in the oil patch and need something to pull them through until they find their next job.

We need to take seriously what people are going through, the fact that they have paid into EI, that they have the right to access EI and, of course, as was pointed, the fact that most people in western Canada are not eligible given the unfair barriers they face.

Today, we are here to talk about the need to fix a system that workers have paid into, that belongs to Canadian workers, and I hope that all Canadian parliamentarians will support this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her speech.

The employment insurance program has been in place for 75 years. What we have seen over the years is that the reforms have always had the same result. They make access increasingly difficult while benefits shrink.

The 360 hours are a first step, but I would also like to hear my colleague talk about the important changes that we would like to see to the Conservatives' reform. For example, I am thinking of the concept of "suitable employment" and the three categories of employment, which, in my opinion, have dire consequences for the program.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his question and acknowledge the wonderful work that he has done when it comes to employment insurance.

Obviously, there is a whole list of reforms that need to be made to undo the measures imposed by the Conservatives. As the motion indicates, we hope to push the government to take action as soon as possible.

Whether we are talking about the reality of seasonal workers where I live or those in eastern or western Canada, Canadian workers are in crisis right now. We need to take immediate action, and that is why I am proud that the NDP has moved this motion. We hope that everyone will support it.

[*English*]

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this opposition motion gives me an opportunity to discuss Canada's employment social safety net and the urgent changes that are needed as well as to explain why we will oppose the motion.

Any system wherein some regions of Canada 26% of workers are covered and in other areas 95% of workers are covered is a system that is not working. The state of unemployment and the rapid job losses in areas with a strong dependency on commodities is top of mind for this government.

In recent years, Canadian labour markets, demographic profile, family and community supports have continued to evolve rapidly, at times challenging an old model and unfortunately leaving workers outside the safety net that was created to help them, even though they are the ones paying for that protection. This is a real problem, and that was why the Liberals made a strong commitment to Canadians in the election.

We are working hard to strengthen employment insurance to ensure it serves both the Canadian economy and the Canadians who need it. Our goal is to modernize our worker insurance program to make it fair and flexible and respond to the needs of all Canadians.

Let me now tell the House what we have in the works.

We have committed and are prepared to eliminate the NERE provision, which means those who are newly entering or re-entering the workforce. This is a particularly offensive change that the previous government brought in. Unfortunately, this motion does not address that. I hope does not mean that the NDP is opposed to those changes.

Government Orders

First, the current rules put immigrants and youth at a disadvantage, a program which is ineffective and makes youth engagement in the workplace even more difficult. Canada's young people and immigrants deserve a fair chance. That is why we will do away with these mean-spirited Conservative government provisions. Our changes to NERE will ensure that all Canadians are treated equally under our EI system. These changes will allow many more Canadians access to the EI program.

Second, and here we agree with the opposition's motion, is about modifying the 2012 changes that forced workers to move away from their communities and take lower-paying jobs. This was, and is, totally unacceptable, and we are working to change the situation. This was a Liberal Party platform commitment and we intend to keep it.

We are also committed to helping young families, something the opposition motion does not address. Does this mean once again that the opposition supports the present system in terms of parental EI benefits? We understand the system is not meeting the needs of families and the middle class. We are committed to providing a more flexible parental benefit program.

To complement this, we plan to introduce a more flexible compassionate care benefit. Many Canadians find themselves looking after elderly parents or other sick family members and the system must be more inclusive. The Liberal plan is to make this available to caregivers who are providing care to seriously ill family members, again an area the opposition has chosen not to see as a priority.

When people lose their jobs, it is important when they collect their first cheque. Time is of the essence. Canadians expect to receive their benefits as quickly as possible. That is why our government will be reducing the waiting time or deductible from two weeks to one week.

• (1105)

We will improve service standards by improving service delivery, something the previous government chose to compromise. We will begin this process by streamlining program rules. The present rules are cumbersome, hurt workers, and actually cost the government in administrative wages.

We are also committed to reducing EI premium rates, which will help businesses, particularly small businesses, by reducing payroll costs. This initiative will help all payers, both the workers and the employers.

Some of the basic principles of EI are that claimants are entitled to employment insurance regular benefits if they were employed in an insurable employment; if they lost their job through no fault of their own; if they have been without work and without pay for at least 7 consecutive days in the last 52 weeks; if they have worked for the required number of insurable hours in the last 52 weeks or since the start of their last EI claim, whichever is shorter; and, if that they are ready, willing, and capable of working each day and are actively looking for work, keeping a written record of employers they have contacted, including when they contacted them.

The EI program is also there to help people balance work and life responsibilities through EI special benefits. For example, a worker

could claim EI sickness benefits in the event of an illness, maternity benefits for pregnancy, parental benefits for the birth or adoption of a child, or compassionate care benefits or parents of critically ill children benefits for family caregiving needs.

The EI program is not just about charging premiums and paying out benefits. This is where the labour market development agreements come in. Each year, the government provides \$2 billion to all provinces and territories for employment programs and services. These focus primarily on helping current and former EI claimants prepare for jobs and get those jobs.

Our government is committed to moving forward on investing even more in labour market development agreements to provinces and territories and to support training for those unemployed workers.

In addition, we are committed to expanding the Canada job fund agreements, which currently provide \$500 million annually to provinces and territories. The Canada job fund is unique in that it provides employment services, and supports those who are unemployed and are not eligible for EI benefits.

We will also continue to strengthen existing tools and services. This includes the national job bank, which is intended to help unemployed Canadians return to work.

As members can see, we are tackling the issue of unemployment from all angles. Our government is also monitoring the level of employment and unemployment across the country, understanding that Canadians need support right now.

My cabinet colleague, the Minister of Finance, took a positive step this week and offered support to Alberta at this time of need. Specifically, the federal government will provide Alberta with the advance of a fiscal stabilization payment of approximately \$251 million.

Let me assure members that Canadians who need EI immediately are receiving it. Today, there are double the number of EI claimants in Alberta compared to a year ago. In recent months, the number of claimants in Saskatchewan has shot up by 30%, and also Newfoundland and Labrador has seen staggering numbers.

However, employment insurance requirements are flexible and they need to respond to economic changes as well as the specific needs of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Government Orders

•(1110)

There is some flexibility built into the program that allows it to respond to deteriorating economic conditions and changes in local labour markets. We measure this by looking at regional unemployment rates. When a region's unemployment rate rises, the entrance requirement is reduced and the duration of benefits increases. We see those forces at work in regions affected by the decrease in commodity prices.

The EI system also tries to support Canadians through the work-sharing program, which is an adjustment program designed to help employers and employees avoid layoffs when there is a temporary downturn in business that is beyond the control of the employer, particularly in the downturn in commodities. It provides income support to eligible employees who agree to work a temporarily reduced work week, while their employer recovers. The goal is for all of the participating employees to return to normal levels of working hours by the end of the work-sharing agreement.

Work sharing allows employers to retain those valuable skilled employees and avoid the unnecessary rehiring and retraining costs when their business returns to normal levels. At the same time, the program helps employees keep their jobs and maintain their skills and connections to the labour market.

While the employment insurance program is designed to cope with varying economic conditions and shifting circumstances, it must also keep up with today's labour market, which is changing rapidly. We need to ensure that the program is better aligned with today's labour market realities and that it is responsive not just to the needs of Canadian workers but to the needs of Canadian employers as well.

We are also aware that service delivery is vital when it comes to EI. We want to make it as simple as possible for Canadians to get the benefits to which they are entitled. With that in mind, we will review the EI system with the goal of modernizing our system of income support for unemployed workers.

Service Canada, which is our front face of service delivery, is continuing to modernize its services to provide all Canadians with ongoing improvements to its business model. This includes increased online services for clients and employers. We are also committed to improving service standards and the speed of pay for the EI program. These modernization efforts will provide Canadians with greater access to an increased range of information and services no matter where they live.

The men and women at our Service Canada offices across the country are keen to serve Canadians better. Moving forward, Service Canada will continue to ensure that the implementation of the EI service transformation agenda is responsive and cost-effective.

The unemployment rate and the need to provide temporary income support is a pressing issue, and our government understands that. We have pinpointed a number of important changes. The upcoming budget will outline those steps that we have committed to Canadians and that Canadians have endorsed. We want to ensure that the needs of Canadians are reflected, that any program changes be founded on a sound analysis of the evidence, and that careful

consideration be given to labour market impacts and the costs of individual measures.

Our government is working quickly and diligently to deliver support to Canadians when they need it most. We recognize the need for change, and we are taking action to change the employment insurance system for the better.

•(1115)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the minister for her speech. I listened to it carefully.

Of course, I acknowledge all of the efforts made by Service Canada, which was gutted pretty badly by the former government, but we will still wait until we see results before we start applauding.

People may be wondering why some of the measures that were announced are not included in the NDP motion. I think that we led the charge on almost every aspect of employment insurance in the previous Parliament. Obviously, I do not think that anyone in this Parliament would take exception to an increase in compassionate care benefits, for example. The crux of today's motion is how we can deal with this urgent situation.

Is it realistic or logical to think that workers who lose their jobs should have to be able to prove that they worked 420 or even up to 700 hours before they are eligible for the employment insurance program that they paid into? That is like telling someone who has health insurance that, even though he is sick, the services he is able to receive will be based on the rate of illness in the region. That does not make any sense.

People need immediate support when they lose their jobs.

•(1120)

[*English*]

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk: Mr. Speaker, the reforms to EI would ensure that more Canadians are able to access EI when they need it. We are committed to improving the EI program so that it is responsive to the needs of Canadian workers and employers, and also so that it meets our fiscal responsibilities to all Canadians.

To that end, we are moving forward with initiatives that include eliminating discrimination against workers who are newly entered, reversing the 2012 changes of forcing individuals to move, rationalizing and expanding labour market agreements, developing more flexible parental benefits, easing access to EI supports, reducing wait times, improving service, reducing EI premiums, and undertaking a broad review.

That broad review will include comments from experts, Canadians, indigenous people, and those who are workers, on the issue of a flat rate. That is the point of having an open and fair discussion.

I look forward to the continued consultation on EI reforms, but at this point the issue here is to allow Canadians to speak to the question.

Government Orders

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour for her speech and for being here today. I am buoyed by the fact that the Liberals will be voting against the motion.

The minister talked about addressing unemployment from every angle, but the one angle she has not talked about in her 20-minute speech was having an atmosphere to help create jobs, which is the most important angle when it comes to addressing unemployment.

Yesterday in question period, she mentioned that employment insurance is not working for any Canadians right now. I wish she would talk to people in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Atlantic Canada who are relying on employment insurance right now and ask them if it is working for them, as they are using it to pay their mortgages and keep their heads above water.

However, in her speech she also talked about how important it is to give Alberta the \$250 million and how much that is going to help Albertans who are out of work. That is \$60 per Albertan. How does the minister feel this token \$250 million is going to help the 125,000 Albertans out of work?

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk: Mr. Speaker, the question gives me an opportunity to point out that this is a government that ran on a platform of job creation. We talked about the need to invest in the economy, to invest in infrastructure, to create those new jobs, and to help to redeploy those workers who unfortunately were laid off because of the commodity price depression that we are facing. These are investments that will make a difference in Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland, and across the whole country. Our focus is job creation.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to commend the minister on her speech. I am very excited about the forthcoming changes, but like many in the chamber here, I too am a fan of the great American philosopher, Willie Nelson. Willie Nelson has shared with us his definition of leadership. Willie said that when one sees a group of people heading in a certain direction, one should grab a baton and jump out in front. I have been here for 15 years now, so maybe you will forgive me, Mr. Speaker, but there is a little bit of cynic in me.

I see today's motion by New Democrats as sort of saying a little bit, "Let's jump out in front of it". They know that the Liberal government ran on a platform of change for EI. I can speak first-hand to the investment that the minister has made, working with her officials and her colleagues in Alberta on coming up with a package that makes sense, that is progressive, that will be really respected by the Canadian people.

I know the minister is close to making an announcement over the next bit of time. Looking at much of what we see in today's motion, does the minister think the package coming forward will address many of the concerns that are being brought forward in the NDP motion today?

• (1125)

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk: Mr. Speaker, that gives me an opportunity to once again indicate that, yes, we support much of the motion that the NDP presented, but I must point out that it was this

Liberal government that ran on EI reform, not the members across the way.

In fact, it was their decision to argue that they would balance the budget, which would have meant reducing supports for workers, reducing supports for the middle class, and actually seeing even higher unemployment.

Yes, there are many parts of the motion we support, but we will go much, much further.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am really glad that the minister has joined us in the chamber today. It is always nice to have a member of the executive branch of the government.

The Liberals have a less than exemplary record on employment insurance. When they were last in power, they raided the EI account to the tune of \$54 billion. It was money that was used to pay for corporate tax cuts and whatever else they wanted.

The Conservatives continued on this. Stealing a page from the Liberals' play book, they diverted billions of dollars of EI premiums to cover budget holes. These premiums were paid by workers and by employers for one purpose only: to insure employment.

Will the minister commit today to protecting the EI fund, and if she is not prepared to make that commitment, could she please provide this House with a reason why not?

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk: Mr. Speaker, the use of EI funds for other purposes, which was illustrated by the Conservatives in 2010, I believe, to actually backdate part of the huge debt incurred through those measures, was a very tough time and in fact emergency measures were needed, but dipping into the EI fund to pay for them was questionable at best.

In today's world we are saying that EI is actually for the workers who receive it, and that indeed, any surplus will be seen, for example, in the reduction to EI costs that people pay.

Our intention, as the platform indicated, is that EI contributions will be used for the EI system.

Ms. Dianne Watts (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I find the comments that were just made interesting, because the general practice of the previous Liberal governments was to deplete the EI fund to balance the budget, both in the Chrétien and the Martin governments, to the tune of almost \$60 billion.

Will the government continue that practice, to use those funds to balance its budgets?

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk: Mr. Speaker, as we committed in the platform and as we committed to Canadians, the goal of the EI system, with the payments that workers and businesses make, is to support a platform that helps workers when they unfortunately lose their jobs.

That is the purpose of the system. It is an insurance system, and that is how we intend to manage it.

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to say that I will be sharing my time with the member for Elgin—Middlesex—London. This vibrant, young colleague represents the up-and-coming generation of young women we are very proud to have within our caucus, and we are proud of all the young men and women who joined our party and were voted in during the last election.

Today is an opportunity for us to reaffirm the importance of employment insurance. EI is an important tool for workers who unfortunately lose their jobs. Job loss is a reality of the job market, and we have a system to mitigate the damage of losing one's job. For example, I am thinking about young families dealing with job loss. Employment insurance is there in these situations.

Our government worked over the past decade to strengthen the system, especially for the most vulnerable. Extra benefits were added for people who experience health or legal problems, for example. We always worked to improve the EI system, and we are open to more improvements. I will add that I was an EI recipient more than 20 years ago, and I appreciated it at the time. We had young children, and EI helped us make ends meet.

The New Democrats are unfortunately on the wrong track today. They have moved a motion that contains falsehoods, but most importantly, these reforms would take us in the wrong direction. Reforms should aim to give the unemployed more opportunities to earn more income, not make them poorer. Unfortunately, that is what this New Democrat motion proposes. It proposes unproductive, ineffective, and costly measures, and it also contains some falsehoods, which I will talk about later.

Basically, what the New Democrats want is to let people work for two months and collect benefits for a year. We all know that employment insurance benefits amount to a fraction of the income recipients earned previously, so that could limit workers to a lower income for a longer period of time. The point of employment insurance is to give people a decent income while they are unemployed, but it is also to encourage people to get back into the job market.

I should also point out that these measures would be costly. As we all know, the money in the fund comes from employers and employees. This plan would put a lot of pressure on everyone. Some estimate that the New Democrats' unrealistic proposal could cost as much as an extra \$4 billion. For one thing, companies need all of their resources to invest in productivity and compete on the international market. For another, employees would have to contribute more to pay for a costly, ineffective measure that would wind up making them poorer.

Benoît Bouchard, a former Conservative minister, clearly explained and defended this position some time ago, in 2009, on *Le Club des Ex*, a program I was on with my friend Simon Durivage. Benoît Bouchard said that we could not have a standard threshold of 360 hours for employment insurance eligibility. We would be paying for it for years because when the economy recovered we would return to a period of normal employment.

This measure was brought forward in the midst of an economic crisis. What happened 20 years ago will happen again. People will work nine weeks, go on unemployment, and receive benefits for 50 weeks.

Mr. Bouchard also said that is why Claude Forget, in his 1986 report, stated that the unemployment insurance program had to stop competing with employment.

Therefore, I will repeat that the EI program must stop competing with employment. I am privileged to come from a region where the entrepreneurial spirit is phenomenal.

● (1130)

We just came out of an election campaign. In Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, we have been dealing with a shortage of skilled labour for about 10 years now. I have met business owners who have had to make the difficult decision of investing south of the border sometimes because they cannot find skilled workers at home. This has happened in Sainte-Justine, for example. This slows economic growth and the growth of our communities.

This government seems unusually preoccupied with large urban centres, and yet the regions are the economic backbone of our country. The manufacturing and agricultural sectors are important, and they play a critical role in the regions. Those businesses could use a boost from the government. They are having a hard time finding skilled labour.

The measure proposed by the NDP here today would shrink the potential labour pool even further. Jobs in the regions are often very well paid. Those jobs pay people enough to raise a family and live decently. That is the reality in Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, the reality that I faced during the economic crisis and during the reform that our government brought in.

I want to come back to what the hon. member for Jonquière said this morning. She said that seasonal workers, more specifically those who work at golf courses, do not have jobs in the winter. She suggested that the reform therefore had an impact. I attended meetings where the Lac-Etchemin golf club said it was hard to retain its skilled workers from one season to the next to maintain and develop the course. The general manager of the Mont-Orignal ski hill was in the room at the time. Needless to say, a logical connection was made between those two businesses. The workers can work for the golf course in the summer and the ski hill in the winter. Their earnings are therefore much higher than what they would have received in employment insurance benefits. It is a win-win situation for everyone. More money ends up in the workers' pockets. There is also more opportunity to create jobs to address the labour shortages in the region. This in turn leads to more economic activity. Obviously, Mont-Orignal would need a bit of snow, but this winter we are not so fortunate.

Government Orders

I am quickly running out of time, and I just barely touched on the first point that I wanted to raise, that of reform. Of course, it is important to point out that the money belongs to workers, to employees, and I hope that the government will confirm that. The government cannot dip into that fund.

I would like to remind members that our Conservative government paid off all the deficits and helped workers and employees. The government injected over \$10 billion into the employment insurance fund to compensate for the economic crisis. It is because of our policies and the 1.3 million jobs that we created that there is now a surplus in the employment insurance fund. The best remedy for unemployment is job creation. We hope that the government will make that a priority.

I will end now by saying that improvements could be made. For example, I am thinking of the Institute for Research on Public Policy, an independent, bilingual, non-profit organization in Canada that makes recommendations. People like Michel Bédard and Pierre Fortin work with that organization. The NDP's recommendation is not consistent with those made by credible organizations that have shown what EI reforms should look like.

In closing, the best remedy for unemployment is job creation. Unfortunately, that is not what the NDP is proposing today. I therefore do not intend to support the motion.

• (1135)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Salaberry—Suroît, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is rather hypocritical of the Conservatives to say that it would cost taxpayers, workers, and employers a lot of money to abolish and modify the Conservatives' reform to make benefits more accessible.

The Conservatives are the ones who helped themselves to \$3 billion from the EI fund and put that money into the public funds account. This money should have been given to workers in need, but it was taken by the Conservatives. Before them, the Liberals took \$54 billion from that same fund.

There are plenty of farmers in my riding who cannot work when the land is frozen. However, they need agronomists and machinery workers, for example. These are qualified workers, experts in their field. Farmers cannot lay off these workers for three or four months in the winter, since they need them for the following season.

Farmers need to be productive and competitive, and they need to keep these excellent workers in our region to prevent it from declining. We do not want the regional economy to crumble as a result of backwards measures like those of the Conservatives.

• (1140)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I remind my hon. colleague from Jonquière that in 99% of cases, our reform helped workers find a higher-paying job more quickly. The big winners in our reform were the workers who found higher-paying jobs and the regional economies that benefited from a more skilled workforce.

I invite my colleague to consider a quote from the New Democrat member from Montreal who acknowledged that there was a \$9-billion deficit in 2011. During the economic crisis, there were so many unemployed workers during a short period of time that our

Conservative government invested \$9 billion in the EI fund. Obviously, it was only fair to restore the balance.

We were there for workers. As a result, we left the current government a \$1-billion budget surplus and we created 1.3 million jobs in the last decade.

[*English*]

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government in the past looked at fiscal responsibility. What it did with its goal of saving money and redirecting expenditures to its own priorities was to create a system that did not meet the needs of all Canadians. In fact, we know that over 60% of working Canadians who pay into the insurance program are not covered. Obviously, that is a deficiency.

Not only was it ineffective, it was inefficient and mean-spirited. I hear the member's claim that the motion by the NDP would in fact throw away fiscal responsibility completely at a time when that party just ran on the idea that it would balance the budget. It is an interesting flip-flop.

Does the member support the previous Conservative system of EI, which left 60% of Canadians out in the cold without any coverage?

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned, 99% of the workers were not impacted by the measures we put in place. There was just more revenue.

I would answer the minister's question with a question for her own government. I refer to the Institute for Research on Public Policy, an independent, national, bilingual, non-profit organization. It clearly states on page 2 of a report of theirs that the biggest impact of any reform for workers was done in 1996. I think the Liberals have their answer within their own government.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis for sharing his time. I know that his time in government provided him the opportunity to study, consult, and evaluate this very important program.

[*Translation*]

I respect his comments and his knowledge of the issues.

[*English*]

I will not be supporting this motion put forward by the NDP. As I have said several times in the House, I have worked with many Canadians during my time as an executive assistant to the member of Parliament for Elgin—Middlesex—London. From 2004 to 2010, I worked directly with constituents on their employment insurance claims, an experience that has given me invaluable knowledge that benefits me greatly in my new role.

This is definitely not a new debate in the House and many before us have spoken on this topic. Studies, debates, and consultations have already been done on this topic, and the bottom line is that this would cost up to \$4 billion, according to a study in 2009.

I have heard many speak about how Canadians do not currently get employment insurance, but we need to look at the basic numbers in front of us. I am going to put this in common terms so that all Canadians watching today's debate will understand. I am citing these numbers from many years of my experience in sitting down and looking at what the numbers are, what people are contributing into the employment insurance plan, and how the benefits are paid out.

Currently, a new claimant must have 910 hours to be eligible for benefits. This is approximately 24 weeks of full-time work in a 52-week period for eligibility requirements. I do not want to confuse the topic, so I will not address the labour workforce attachment hours for returning claimants.

Currently, the maximum that a Canadian personally pays toward employment insurance is \$930.60 in personal premiums. Currently, the maximum benefit received by an individual is \$524 a week. The simple math shows that in less than two weeks, the personal premiums paid annually are recovered. It is really important when we are looking at this that we understand that it is highly subsidized by the Canadian government. Therefore, when we talk about people receiving their benefits, we must recognize that we are talking about \$930 put in, and up to \$45,000 recovered. We have to recognize that there is not a true one-on-one balance.

I will quote directly from the Service Canada website, which states:

You may receive [employment insurance] regular benefits for a period ranging from 14 to 45 weeks. The number of weeks you may receive benefits depends on the unemployment rate in your region and on the number of hours of insurable employment that you accumulated during your qualifying period, which is usually the last 52 weeks before the start date of your claim.

This is just one side to the EI benefits, as there are many other variables and numbers of hours required for special benefits, such as maternity and parental and sick benefits. Sticking with the average claim, we must recognize other factors that are used, including the best 14 weeks, a really great change that I am so proud the Conservative government put forward. As I said, I saw many Canadians benefit from this change. When calculating the benefits, we also have to recognize the family supplement for some low-income families making less than \$25,000 and the re-entry requirements for new people or return claimants.

One thing I noticed and question in this motion is subclause (b)(ii) that indicates that the previous government forces unemployed workers to move away from their communities. I am not sure if the member who presented this motion has ever worked with an EI claimant, but I have never seen this occur. Rather, when claimants complete their EI claims, they are provided with a list of opportunities in their areas that might be suitable for them, an initiative that is called "connecting Canadians with available jobs". To me, this is a fantastic tool. As we have heard so many times in the House, Canadians are looking for jobs, not for handouts, and this is a way of getting Canadians back into the workforce. I have personally seen, when people are putting in their claims, three or four jobs pop up right after their application is completed. It inspires people and also gives them the right to go out to try to find a new job if one is available to them.

Once again, I would like to share the following from the Service Canada website. What are the responsibilities of a claimant?

Government Orders

Although I tried to reduce this list, I want to share the common-sense approach that is used when providing employment insurance details. I apologize for this being very lengthy, but we need to look at what a claimant is responsible for.

When one applies for regular benefits, including fishing benefits, which can be looked at as seasonal work as well, one must be capable and available for work.

• (1145)

One must actively be looking for and accept suitable employment. I must note that "suitable employment" is underlined here. Therefore, we are not asking people to do things they would not regularly do or are not skilled for.

One must also conduct job searches, prepare resumés and cover letters, register for job search tools, attend job workshops and fairs, network and connect with prospective employers, submit job applications, attend interviews, keep a detailed record of proof of job search efforts, let Service Canada know when a job is refused, record all periods when not available for work, keep appointments with the office, notify the office of any separation from other employment, report absences from Canada, and report all employment and earnings.

To me, this seems extremely reasonable. I say to my children that if they are looking for a job, these are the exact steps that any Canadian should be doing, whether unemployed or looking for their first job. It is very reasonable. If one is looking for a job in the community, then start knocking on the doors, or go on the Internet and look for those jobs. This is exactly what the Service Canada requirements are of an EI claimant.

I have looked high and low trying to find in section 2 of the motion, and nowhere is it to be found, that one must leave one's area. That is nowhere to be found, and hopefully someone can bring that to my attention, because I cannot find it in black and white whatsoever.

After reviewing the responsibilities of the claimant, can anyone share with me the unreasonable request of a claimant? Claimants are asked to look for employment, prepare resumés, and attend interviews.

We as the official opposition have stated many times in the House, when dealing with the current economic climate, that Canadians are not looking for a handout, they are looking for jobs. That is one of the key reasons that I will not support a motion like this. Canadians are looking for jobs, and we have discussed this many times. We need to build our economy and provide opportunities for people to work. I could come up with an easy remedy, like working with energy east. We have heard that many times in the House. However, we do not seem to have the target audience of the government on board.

Government Orders

Instead, we see motions put forward by the NDP, and perhaps just because those members too do not see the co-operation of the government as well. Unfortunately, I know this is untrue as in the NDP's previous platform, prior to any of the losses here in Canada, there was a reduced number of hours required. How can we have a sustainable program to help Canadians with loss of employment when claimants are required to have only 360 hours of work, just under 10 weeks, or in regular terms, 45 days out of 365 days a year? I think we really need to look at that and put it very simply.

I heard one of my colleagues from the other side talk about agriculture. I come from a farming community, and, yes, I do respect that there are times when farmers and their employees cannot get on the fields. The member referred to four months of freezing, but in the motion that was put forward to us it is 10 months of freezing land. Therefore, we really have to look at those things. Also, if we are talking about times of unemployment, we cannot use agriculture and golf courses as the reference.

I see this motion as a very short-term solution. It is important that we come up with long-term solutions, and job creation to me is just that.

Last night I was speaking to my husband. I always like to prepare my speeches on FaceTime and share with him what I am thinking. His thoughts were, "10 weeks of full-time employment over 52 weeks is all you need? Really?" Then I got a really blank stare, one a little different than usual. It is interesting to hear his perspective. He is not involved in Canadian government and politics. This is just my husband saying that. Imagine what all Canadians are saying. This is supposed to be a program, a social safety net, not a clear approach to sustainable long-term solutions.

Prior to October 2015, the Conservative government created well-thought-out plans to assist Canadians and made enhancements. When going through the economic downturn, the Conservative government made changes to help employees through programs like the work-sharing program, which is a very effective program to avoid layoffs when there is a temporary downturn. There was the best 14 weeks pilot program to allow employees to have benefits calculated using the best 14 weeks of earnings. Also, working while on claim is an initiative that gives Canadians the opportunity to earn more and keep more money in their pockets while on claim. The previous government also introduced the Fairness for the Self-Employed Act, which extended EI access to self-employed Canadians for maternity, parental, sickness, and compassionate care benefits.

•(1150)

A great introduction to the EI program was the EI support for parents of critically ill children, providing up to 35 weeks of special benefits. In unfortunate times, the previous government created a program to help parents of murdered and missing children as well.

I believe it is important to protect the employment insurance account to ensure that the funds are only spent on benefits to Canadians, including training as noted in this motion. I believe that we must continue to connect programs and opportunities for all Canadians with Service Canada initiatives.

In a perfect world, no one would need employment insurance, but this motion does not create better opportunities for employment or better options for Canadians, and overall it is fiscally irresponsible. If we moved forward on a plan to do this, it would not be a sustainable program. We need jobs, and we need a plan for jobs. This is the important piece of the puzzle that we are missing, and something that we should be striving for if we are looking for equality. Employment insurance does not equal equality; job creation equals equality.

I appreciate the time, and I look forward to this discussion.

•(1155)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Salaberry—Suroît, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am actually offended at what the Conservative member just said. Does she know that because of the Conservatives' EI reforms, fewer than four people in 10 can now collect employment insurance benefits?

Employer and employee contributions cover the cost of benefits, so people who lose their jobs should be able to collect employment insurance. Fewer Canadians than ever now have access to benefits because of the Conservatives' misguided reforms. The Liberals and the Conservatives swiped billions of dollars from the employment insurance fund. That total stands at \$57 billion.

The worst part is that workers who want to collect benefits have to accept jobs that pay 30% less than what they were earning before and that are an hour away from home. In places like Salaberry—Suroît, which is very rural and far away from major centres, jobs are not going begging, and not everyone can start a business. It is very hard for families to make ends meet during hard times like these.

What does the Conservative member have to say about the fact that only 38% of workers currently have access to employment insurance?

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Mr. Speaker, I do not really understand the question because I look at some of the facts the hon. member provided to me.

I am from Sparta, Ontario, population 300. That is rural Canada, so I do understand these things. I am from a farm where we plant and we have grains and oilseeds throughout our communities. There is also work to be done after those times, and the planting season is not just two months as the member indicated. The farmers in my community work. They fix their tractors during their different returns throughout the winter, and there are different things to do on a farm, not just between March and November. We have to look at that.

Government Orders

I also worked on a golf course, so it is interesting that the member brought that up. I worked on a golf course closing up skunk holes in March, and closing the traps in October. Those are really interesting things when we talk about the limited time.

The bottom line is we are talking about 365 days in a year, and the NDP motion is asking for 45 days of work. That to me is not a sustainable program. I think it is very important that we are putting forward job initiatives, job creation, and getting Canadians back to work.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for many years Liberal members of Parliament have been talking about the importance of employment insurance and how we needed to change programs so that employees from coast to coast to coast would have a social safety net. That need for change was talked about a great deal in the last federal election.

Our Prime Minister made the commitment to look at reforming the employment insurance program. We have heard consistently from the minister responsible, the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, talk about bringing forward a comprehensive package to deal with that. We are very sensitive to the unemployment needs in some of our regions. Whether in Alberta or Saskatchewan with the commodity prices, or in Newfoundland and Labrador, there is a need for change.

My question for the member is this. Would she not acknowledge that due to what has taken place in the last number of years there is a need for reform, and that members should seriously look at what the current Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour is talking about, in particular some of those changes that are on the horizon?

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is that employment insurance is a short-term plan. It is exactly that. It is a social safety net. I look forward to hearing the minister's full and comprehensive plan. It will be interesting.

At the same time, we need to have something sustainable. Our government put through some fantastic initiatives to help employers and employees in a time of recession and some great things moved forward with that.

Programs need to be reviewed. The economy changes and our population changes. It is important to review many of our programs. At this time I look forward to what the minister is going to bring forward.

Once again, the most important thing to me is job creation. The employment insurance plan does not necessarily match job creation. I am looking forward to that from the government.

• (1200)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, never have I been happier than I am today to have microphones in the House of Commons to carry my voice, because there was no way that I was going to stay silent on an issue as important as standing up for workers. In case my voice gives out, I would like to say right away that I will be sharing my time with the member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

During the 41st Parliament, I was lucky enough to be our employment insurance critic and to learn from one of the greatest defenders of EI and workers' rights of all time, the former member for Acadie—Bathurst, Yvon Godin, whom I salute in passing and whom I thank for sharing his passion and above all his knowledge with me for so many years.

The issue before us this morning is extremely important. It is based on three main pillars, which have been neglected by both the Liberals and Conservatives in recent years.

This is evidenced by the fact that every time the EI system has been reformed since its creation, the same two things have happened: it has become harder for people to access the system and the benefit amount has been reduced.

We are talking about employment insurance. It is an insurance plan. That says it all. People contribute to it in order to draw benefits when they need them. In an insurance policy, the criteria are specific and well established.

Imagine if after choosing life insurance, car insurance, or property insurance, we were told how much it would cost and then we were told that there was a 64% chance that we would not be covered when the time came to make a claim. We would probably look for another insurance provider as quickly as possible.

The problem is that when it comes to employment insurance, there is only one plan in Canada, and the employers and employees who contribute to it and keep it going are the least entitled to it.

Oddly, since the beginning of this debate, we have heard all sorts of misleading statements about how the former Conservative government rescued the employment insurance plan by injecting \$9 billion into it, but paid itself back afterward. The Conservatives put \$9 billion into the plan because they had taken \$52 billion out of it. If we take 52 and we subtract nine, then we can see that the plan absolutely had the means to be self-financing. That is the key to the plan.

I would like to recognize another former colleague, Robert Chisholm, who introduced a bill in the 41st Parliament to protect premiums paid by employers and employees into the employment insurance fund and to ensure that every single dollar paid into this fund is used only for the purposes stated in the Employment Insurance Act.

We know that a Supreme Court ruling more or less legalized the misappropriation and use of money from the employment insurance fund by a former Liberal government. Just because something is legal does not make it legitimate. That is why the NDP has been fighting for months and years to protect the fund. No government, regardless of its political stripe, can use this fund for anything other than to support workers.

I will now move on to the second most important point. Oddly enough, when I was the critic, there was a lot of talk about unemployment in Quebec and the Maritimes, whereas the economy was in high gear in western Canada, especially Alberta. I always maintained that it was an insurance program.

Government Orders

I hope that everyone has the good fortune of paying for insurance their whole life and never needing to collect a cent. However, insurance is insurance, and when disaster strikes we have to be able to do something about it.

• (1205)

Now disaster has struck in Alberta and the workers in that province are in exactly the same situation as all the workers in eastern Canada, Quebec, and Ontario, some of whom had to face this type of stress long before them.

The threshold of 360 hours is just the beginning. There is no reason in the world why the stress level of a person who loses a job would differ from one region to another, because job loss is one of the most stressful things that can happen in life. Health insurance would not be offered differentially from one region to another because the rate of health or illness is different. That is absurd. When people get sick, they need health insurance and they get the services they need. When people lose their jobs, they need employment insurance, and if they paid into it, they should have access to it at a set threshold of 360 hours.

For a while now, I have been hearing the same rather short-sighted reasoning from our Conservative friends who are going on and on about how people will only have to work two months to be eligible for EI, as though workers might make a way of life out of doing that. However, for people who work odd hours or who are in a precarious situation with fewer hours of work per week, it does not take two months to accumulate 360 hours of work. It may take six or eight months.

Take for example the closure of all the Target stores in Quebec just a few months ago. Most of the employees who worked there every week were ineligible for employment insurance benefits. Three hundred and sixty hours is not two months of work. It may be many months of work for those who are less wealthy and who really need this little boost.

It is also important to note that employment insurance is commensurate with income. People who work in precarious, part-time jobs earn a lot less than people who work 40 hours a week, as our Conservative friends calculated. It is completely unfair and out of touch with reality to paint these workers as people who only want to work two months out of the year and live off EI the rest of the time. That is completely ridiculous.

The last important point I wanted to make, since I said I had three points, has to do with the vile consequences of the Conservative reform, and yes, I mean vile. Unfortunately, I have too much to say and not enough time, but let us talk about the notion of suitable employment.

We have already heard a former finance minister in this House say that suitable employment is whatever job one can get. Let us imagine for example a teacher with a university education who has developed a particular expertise. In the first few years of his career, as is often the case, he gets laid off at the end of the school year, because there is no guarantee that there will be enough students the next year to guarantee him a job. If this worker were asked to go and pick strawberries, he would have to prove that he is incapable of picking strawberries. I do not know too many people who would not be able

to pick strawberries, so that would be considered suitable employment.

It is completely ridiculous to suggest that a teacher, who has developed an expertise and special skill that society needs, will be deprived of his professional work only to be sent to do a job that he never intended to do. That is not the kind of contribution he wants to make to society. Worse still, because the teacher is taking that job in order to fill the gap months, when the time comes to leave the strawberry patch and return to teaching, if he is offered a contract, his departure will be identified as being voluntary and he will not be eligible for EI, should he lose his teaching job. This is the world upside down. There are many details like this that just do not make sense.

I need to stop getting worked up, even though I could go on and on about other topics. However, I am ready to take questions.

• (1210)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, I am a bit surprised that the NDP chose this motion given the timing. The member for Cape Breton—Canso has been a strong advocate toward seeing reforms to the employment insurance program. He led the charge, in good part, over the last number of years in the House of Commons. Ultimately, the need for reforms and a comprehensive package on employment insurance was incorporated into a part of the Liberal Party's election platform.

The New Democrats would be fully aware of the fact that this is in the works right now. We anticipate that some significant changes will be made. It appears the New Democrats are trying to get under the wire to perhaps assume some credit. We are a generous government. We are more than happy to share in the credit.

However, could he provide some comment with respect to recognizing that we are moving in the right direction in making the changes the minister talked about earlier in her comments, and that this is the direction we should be going in, especially dealing with the compassion that is necessary with respect to unemployment in some of the hardest hit regions because of low commodity prices?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

In her speech, the minister obviously mentioned many things that are still in the works, which we will evaluate when we see them. I mentioned some interesting points, in particular her desire to increase services at Service Canada. This would enable those who want to apply, and hopefully more than 36% will be successful, to get better service, since we know very well that services were slashed under the previous government.

I also said that no one can take exception to improving compassionate care benefits.

Government Orders

However, I think this approach is misguided unless the government puts it in writing that the EI fund belongs to workers and must be used for the purposes set out in the act. Unfortunately, what I deduce from the minister's speech is that, once again, the Liberal government wants to give itself the same leeway to dip into the EI fund as needed for purposes other than those set out in the act.

[*English*]

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we talk about the processes. He has talked about teachers having to pick strawberries or having to leave to go to other professions. It is important that when an opposition or a government puts forward a motion like this, that it study what occurs.

I would like to bring to the attention of the member the process of adjudication. Is the member aware of that? When someone voluntarily leaves his or her job to go on to a better job, that is adjudicated by Service Canada. What he is doing is misleading the members of the House and all Canadians by saying what he is. That is not what happens.

Is he aware of the adjudication process that already occurs within Service Canada?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I am certainly familiar with the process because, in my constituency office, I have spent months, years even, dealing with the process that the former Conservative government brought in.

What I see week after week is that people cannot get answers and then have to wait for an unreasonable period of time. I also see that when people find the courage and the time to jump through the hoops, they sometimes get an adjudication, but they are without benefits that whole time. I would say that, most of the time, we help them put together winning cases. Still, it makes no sense to attack unemployed workers rather than unemployment.

• (1215)

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today it is my pleasure to talk about employment insurance. My colleagues may not know this, but I am from a rural region, a remote region with lots of seasonal industries. Employment insurance is therefore a reality for many of my constituents. They would like to have other options, but that is a fact of life in my region.

I think that one of the most important parts of the motion is the one that would protect the employment insurance fund for good. People need to understand that the employment insurance fund is like a nest egg for workers. It is money they have saved. Employers contribute too. Workers and employers pay for the employment insurance fund. The government does not put money into it. Logically, the fund should belong to workers. The government should not be able to take whatever it wants from the fund to balance the budget, but that is what previous governments have done, unfortunately.

From 1998 to 2008, the Liberal and Conservative governments stole \$57 billion from the employment insurance fund. Workers built up that fund with their hard-earned money, and employers contributed to it as well. Governments stealing \$57 billion from

the employment insurance fund is like parents who are unable to pay their bills and balance their budget deciding to raid their children's piggy bank to steal their children's hard-earned babysitting money or lawn-cutting money. Everyone agrees that stealing money from children to balance the budget does not make sense.

Being forced to do so shows a lack of financial capacity. We must secure the employment insurance fund once and for all, precisely to stop governments from dipping into it every time they have to balance their budget. This habit is totally unacceptable.

The fund is profitable, especially when we consider that \$57 billion was stolen from it. The fund would be perfectly healthy if the government had not stolen that money. In 2016, the fund had a \$3.3 billion surplus. The fund belongs to workers. It is there to protect them when they lose their jobs, and the government has to stop dipping into it. We must secure the fund once and for all. This is a priority for many people and many organizations that advocate for the rights of workers and the unemployed.

Access to employment insurance is another big problem. Currently, less than 40% of workers have access to it. The country has many workers, and out of all those who lose their jobs, only 40% manage to get benefits when they need them. This is an insurance plan. Is it normal for an insurance plan that is meant to cover job losses to pay out benefits in only 40% of cases? This makes absolutely no sense, especially when it is the workers who are making the contributions. We must ensure that the employment insurance fund is used to pay benefits to workers and help people when they are especially vulnerable.

We also have to talk about the two-week waiting period. This creates a very difficult situation. In addition to the two-week waiting period, when no money is coming in, there are other countless delays.

The former Conservative government massacred the employment insurance program and made it practically inaccessible. Furthermore, the processing times are outrageous.

People called my office to tell me that they still had not received an answer after three months. When you earn very little, you cannot survive without any income for three months.

• (1220)

Therefore, while they wait to find out if they qualify for employment insurance, most people are forced to take on debt, mainly by obtaining credit at very high interest rates using credit cards. These situations are unacceptable for our workers. The waiting period must be eliminated in order to provide better access to our employment insurance program and ensure that workers' security is not jeopardized when they lose their jobs.

Government Orders

We must also lower the eligibility rate. This rate, expressed as a number of hours, varies by region, which makes it discriminatory. For example, it can be difficult for people just starting their career to accumulate these hours. That is why we want to reduce this rate to 360 hours. Someone who works full time may not really have difficulty accumulating 360 hours, but if a worker cannot get a full-time job, it is difficult to accumulate the number of hours required, which can be quite high, to be eligible for employment insurance.

Many times people have come to see me to tell me that they do not have enough hours and that they have no recourse. I know that these are people who worked hard and tried as hard as they could to accumulate the proper number of hours, but were unable to do so. Often, it is because of their job and the nature of their employment.

Employment insurance needs to take into account the reality of workers. It is not the workers who are seasonal. It is the industry. Take farmers for example. They would like to work 12 months a year, but there comes a point where the snow begins to fall and hay will no longer grow. That is the reality. We cannot do anything about it. That is the way it is.

The tourism industry also has a season. We would like tourists to visit all year round, but that is not the case. We need to understand that it is not the workers who are seasonal but the industries. That is why we need to be able to support these workers; if we do not, our seasonal industries will be completely unable to find workers.

We also need to understand the reality for people who work on call. For example, orderlies who work in major hospitals start their careers working on call, until they have enough seniority to obtain a better, full-time position. At the beginning of their career, they will work on call and fill in for others, during summer holidays, for example. They will have significant periods of downtime. If we require these on-call workers to accept a job elsewhere, they will never gain enough seniority to obtain a full-time job.

This is key. We need to ensure that people who work on call and have very irregular work hours for the first two or three years of their career are not forced to accept another job elsewhere. Otherwise, they will never succeed in finding a secure job.

We also have to make sure that employment insurance takes regional realities into account. Forcing a worker who lives in one RCM to travel long distances to work in another RCM causes all kinds of problems, such as transportation and housing problems. It costs money. If a worker is forced to travel 100 km from home to earn 70% of his or her pay, and if we factor in higher child care, transportation, and other costs, people could end up losing money because of this increase. It makes no sense at all. The government has to understand regional realities and stop displacing workers.

Some jobs do not fit the mould. Some self-employed workers choose to contribute. When we are talking about employment insurance, we need to understand regional realities and not come up with laws that make no sense and do not take different employment circumstances into account. I think it is important to have an employment insurance system that meets workers' needs. Let us come up with a really good program once and for all rather than take a piecemeal approach to fixing it.

• (1225)

[*English*]

Mr. John Oliver (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for her thoughtful presentation.

When I consider the NDP motion, there are several issues that I could support. It is what is not in the motion that concerns me. I am wondering if a fuller review of EI would be of greater benefit to Canadians.

For example, in the motion, there is no mention of developing more flexible parental benefits, no mention of easing access to EI support for caregivers, no mention of developing flexible compassionate care benefits, and no mention of reducing wait times and improving service standards.

I am wondering if the hon. member would not agree that a fuller reform of EI could bring greater benefits to Canadians than those that are proposed in the motion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, the motion covers the essentials. Yes, we have a lot to do to come up with an employment insurance system that really helps workers once and for all. That is critical, and that absolutely has to be one of the changes we make to employment insurance. Yes, we have a lot to do. The Conservatives made such a terrible mess of the program that it has to be changed. We can do it together, but we need to act quickly. Every time we wait one, two, or three years to make changes, workers in my riding suffer that whole time. There are some things we need to do immediately, but we also need to launch a continuous improvement process to ensure that the program always meets workers' needs. We need to make this happen as quickly as possible.

[*English*]

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for her presentation this morning. It has been an interesting conversation today.

There has been a lot of time and resources put into dealing with unemployment, apparently both on the government side and in the NDP caucus.

There are two partners in the employment process, the employee and the employer, but I have seen very little from either of these caucuses on what they are doing for the other side. I recognize the needs of those who are in need when they have lost their job, but there is also a need for employers.

What can the government do, or what can it say it has done or is working on, to help employers create jobs so that employment insurance is not in such a crisis situation?

Government Orders

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, I think it is important to create jobs, but now we are talking about employment insurance. I first want to say that the priority should be to have an EI program that protects workers when they lose their jobs. The issue of job creation is also very important and must be addressed in partnership with the provinces. Some local employment centres are doing a fantastic job. They fall under provincial jurisdiction. In my riding, they provide a lot of support in the area of development and finding jobs. They also provide services to employers.

When it comes to job creation, it is important to work closely with our provincial partners. The previous Conservative government had an abominable record in terms of working with the provinces. It was appalling. I am very hopeful that we will start working with the provinces again on things like job creation. I also hope we will create an employment insurance system for the workers that really benefits the workers. Those two things go hand in hand.

When someone unilaterally decides to make cuts without taking the concerns of workers into account, when a government decides what needs to be done without consulting the provinces, we cannot expect positive outcomes that reflect the reality on the ground.

● (1230)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for New Brunswick Southwest.

I rise in the House today to speak to this motion and express my disagreement with it. Despite its good intentions, it does not adequately address the real problem experienced by Canadian workers who have lost their jobs recently, especially after the changes that the previous Conservative government made to the employment insurance system. This system is a very important asset not only for the well-being of our workforce, but also for the stability of our economy.

I remember when I made the transition from banking professional to social worker. My goal was to help Canadians better understand and manage their personal and public resources.

By organizing workshops on financial literacy, and as a social policy university lecturer, I often noticed that there was a lack of knowledge about the employment insurance program and even a stigma around its use as a key element of our social safety net, regardless of the socio-economic level of the people in my groups.

Our modern employment insurance system is the product of hard work since the 1930s, the Great Depression era, work done by the two main parties of the House, the Liberals and Conservatives, in collaboration with the Senate, the provinces, and the territories.

There were definitely differences of opinion about which jurisdiction should administer such a program, eligibility for the program, and the amount of benefits. The debates were very interesting. However, during those difficult years, it was recognized that workers were not in any way responsible for the economic crisis at that time and that it was neither appropriate nor prudent for a society to ignore the well-being of its workforce, the very backbone of society.

Naturally, when these workers joined the army in the 1940s, the need to provide them with an employment insurance program upon their return to the country seemed even more essential. It was the best way to manage the highs and lows of the labour market, which are normal consequences of the business cycles of an industrial economy.

The need for an employment insurance program with non-judgmental accessibility was proven when the program was opened up in the 1970s in order to protect more than 90% of workers, including seasonal workers, and to provide sick benefits and maternity benefits.

Although the program was funded by the contributions of employees and employers, the federal government was still responsible for covering the losses. It was vital that the solvency of the program be ensured, which required adjustments over the years. In general, the program was working well.

However, in 2012, the previous government, tightened the eligibility criteria for EI, in its obsession to cut spending at all costs, even at the expense of vulnerable Canadians. It got to the point that someone who had the misfortune of losing their job, even after many years of contributing to EI, was forced to accept a job more than 60 kilometres from home at a lower wage, after just a few months of searching for work.

Supply and demand are at the heart of the job market. However, workers' freedoms and bargaining relationships with their employers were seriously undermined as a result of the changes ordered by the previous government.

Other limits were imposed, such as the eligibility threshold of 910 hours and the two-week waiting period. The purpose of those limits was to punish workers who had the misfortune of losing their jobs. These limits did not in any way help these people make a dignified return to the job market.

● (1235)

The hon. member who moved this motion is calling on our government to honour the commitments made in the throne speech, namely that we would strengthen the employment insurance system to make sure that it best serves both the Canadian economy and all Canadians who need it.

I want to share a quote from the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour's mandate letter, as published on the Prime Minister's website:

As Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, your overarching goal will be to help Canadians get the skills they need for good quality jobs. You will be able to achieve this goal by working with provinces, territories, municipalities, the post-secondary education system, employers and labour to strengthen our training systems to build the human capital that Canadians and employers need. You will undertake this work in a collaborative way with provinces and territories.

In particular, I will expect you to work with your colleagues and through established legislative, regulatory, and Cabinet processes to deliver on your top priorities:

Improve our Employment Insurance (EI) system so that it is better aligned with the realities of today's labour market and serves workers and employers. This would include:

Government Orders

repealing the recent changes made to the EI system that have been punitive to unemployed workers;
 reduce EI premiums;
 undertaking a broad review of the EI system with the goal of modernizing our system of income support for unemployed workers that leaves too many workers with no unemployment insurance safety net;
 eliminating discrimination against immigrants, younger workers and parents re-entering the workforce so that they are treated the same as other workers in their region;
 reducing the wait time for new recipients to one week from the existing two week waiting period;
 working with the Minister of Finance to ensure that EI contributions are only used to fund EI programs; and
 working with the Minister of Public Services and Procurement to set transparent service standards for the delivery of EI benefits so that Canadians get timely access to the benefits to which they are entitled.

The minister also must:

Improve workers' access to good quality job training that provides Canadians with pathways to good careers.

That is how our government plans to respond to the very serious problem of economic inequality, which has gotten worse because of the many job losses across the country. With an effective new program, presented here in the House, our government will ensure that our society is fair and equitable and gives every Canadian the opportunity to reach his or her full potential, as described in the minister's mandate letter.

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in a previous life, I worked full time in a museum. However, only three guides were full-time employees, and the rest were on call. Because of the nature of the job, people had to be called in when groups came to visit the museum. The guides on call were often students. They had found a part-time, unionized job that paid well, which allowed them to study and work at the same time.

Every January, however, the school groups stopped coming. There were certain times of the year when it was much more difficult to work, and EI could be very useful to help them get by. In 2013, when the Conservatives changed the rules, I mentioned this exact scenario to the minister at the time. Her response was that those people could just find a full-time job. In the case I described, it was simply not possible to find a full-time job. These workers were on call.

Does the member think that this is a reasonable response to get from a minister? Can we really expect that everyone will get a full-time job and that that will solve everyone's problem?

• (1240)

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her question. It is very important that we work hard together to create jobs.

Under the Canada job fund agreements, the provinces and territories receive \$500 million per year. That money is used to provide employment services and support to workers. Priority is given to people who are out of work and do not qualify for employment insurance benefits and to low-skilled workers.

In its campaign platform, the government promised to invest an additional \$200 million per year in provincial and territorial training programs to help people with precarious jobs who do not qualify for employment insurance benefits. We will use these measures to create jobs for all Canadians who need one.

[English]

Mr. John Oliver (Oakville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the NDP motion proposes a universal threshold for EI, regardless of regional rates of unemployment.

EI has been designed to respond to various labour market changes. For example, the government is sensitive to the ongoing situations resulting from lower oil prices and is carefully monitoring the impact across Canada, and the duration of EI benefits has increased in all four economic regions in Alberta.

Could the member comment on the need for EI to respond to variable labour market conditions?

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Indeed, Mr. Speaker, I think that is a cornerstone of the employment insurance program and its ability to respond to regional needs. Because we are a big country, we are spread out over many different types of micro-economies and it is very important to respond accordingly.

The fact is that the government is sensitive, for example, to the ongoing situation resulting from lower oil prices in Alberta and Saskatchewan and has allowed the EI program to increase the level of EI benefits in all four economic regions in Alberta. There are five more weeks of EI available in these hard-hit regions and the number of weeks now is at the maximum entitlement nationally of 45 weeks. Again, I think that really goes to the idea that in our confederation, sometimes a province is a have province and other times a have-not province, but that equation can change at any time and that is what our program is designed to respond to.

Ms. Karen Ludwig (New Brunswick Southwest, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians have asked us to do things differently. They want to trust in a government that puts their best interests first, and they expect us to deliver on what matters most to them.

What does matter? For almost a decade, the top-of-mind issue for the majority of Canadians has been jobs and the economy. Because this has been a concern to so many for so long, it is our top priority.

We are aware of the escalating unemployment rate, and we know that the employment insurance system is not living up to its name. There are Canadians who need it and do not have access to it. In the 21st century living in Canada, there is absolutely no reason for families to wonder whether they can pay their bills by the end of each month.

Government Orders

As Canadians, we rate our country as one of the top five best countries to live in the world. It is about time that every Canadian not only hears about these statistics, but actually feels this is true. Our government is ready to make being in the top five a reality for all Canadians. We have made a solid commitment to grow the economy, create jobs, strengthen the middle class, and help those who are working so hard to join it.

Our government pledged to improve our employment insurance system so it reflected the current labour market: an EI system that works to benefit employers and employees, an EI system that works for modern Canadian families, a system that supports people if they lose their job, or are caring for a seriously ill family member, or simply need to get skills training to improve their future careers.

Our first order of business will be to work toward eliminating discrimination against Canada's most economically at-risk workers. This includes young workers and new Canadians.

The platform was crystal clear. No longer will new workers or those reapplying for EI have to acquire 910 hours of insured employment. To tie into this, we have also pledged to reduce the waiting period by one week and improve service standards and speed up the rate of payment. This will help Canadians receive the benefits they deserve as quickly as possible and when they need them. We are determined to beef up the program so even more Canadians can access benefits when needed.

We will also improve the compassionate care benefit so it will be more flexible, inclusive, and easier to access. It will lift the burden from those needing financial support when they are unexpectedly called on to care for a seriously ill family member.

Another one of our commitments is to reverse the 2012 changes that forced unemployed workers to move away from their families and their communities to take lower-paying jobs. Workers who have paid into the EI program deserve to be protected. They deserve the opportunity to take advantage of the safety net that they themselves have contributed to. What we really need and what we really are committed to doing is to build more flexibility into EI so it is fair and responsive.

We want to help Canadians attain jobs and work toward their long-term career goals, even if there is a time of unemployment along that journey. We know it is not simple, but our improvements will provide the protection that is needed to weather the storm.

Each work situation is different. Family situations are often complex, and training and education needs to evolve rapidly. This EI modernization embraces flexibility so it can meet today's realities. Keeping Canadians engaged in the workforce is good for families and it is good for our economy. At the same time, the government will continue to strengthen and promote existing tools and services to help them return to work.

For example, through the Canada job fund agreements, the government provides \$500 million annually to all provinces and territories to support training for all Canadians regardless of employment status. Labour market development agreements with the provinces and territories also provide nearly \$2 billion each year for employment programs and services.

Our government will continue investing in the future and prosperity of Canadians because we care and because we have initiatives in place to do so.

● (1245)

Finally, we will continue working with the Canada Employment Insurance Commission to set the annual premium rate according to the new seven-year break-even mechanism. We will ensure that premiums are set no higher than needed to cover the projected cost of the EI program. As mentioned in our platform, we are committed to reducing the EI premium rate next year to reduce payroll costs for workers and employers.

We know these commitments can be met, and I look forward to the day when we can proudly check them off our list of promises.

It is time to implement changes to the EI system to benefit working Canadians for the long term. We have a plan, and it will succeed. As of right now, we must act quickly to help workers who have been affected by our unstable economy. Let us do what we can to get money into the hands of Canadians who need it the most.

● (1250)

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the fascinating things about this place is how Canadians come together. For many members in the House who do not know this, the member opposite and I went to high school together and were in the same grade, although we do not share the same views on politics. I am not quite sure what went wrong in high school for the member opposite.

However, this is the second time I have heard this morning about reducing costs to both employees and employers. When we reduce the cost of employment insurance, we run a risk, especially given the fact that the government has talked about enhancing employment insurance. Could the member answer how those reductions in cost to employers can meet the demands of her government in improving employment insurance costs?

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to our campaign promises. Of those campaign promises, it is looking at the sensitivity and vulnerability of not only employees but also employers. A standing committee currently is working on the specific issue of employment insurance, which will be making recommendations.

At this point, we are committed to eligibility being less than 910 hours, being sensitive to regional needs, individual needs, and employment needs across the country.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member and I did not go to high school together, as is evident from the fact that I am so much older, however, I welcome her speech.

I want to draw the attention of members in the House to what the member opposite has talked about in her speech on fixing the unemployment insurance program, or as it is now called “employment” insurance program, which is critical. There has been a lot of damage.

Government Orders

I think all members of this place need to know that when we disappear for election writ periods or Christmas, the wait staff in this place, among other workers, are laid off every time. They spend Christmas without any income and have to go to EI if they hope to draw any income over the period of time that this place does not function. It is an outrage.

However, it was made much worse with the seasonal insurance laws brought in by the previous government, as though those who were hired in seasonal businesses were some form of recidivists when they came back to look for unemployment insurance for the periods in which they were not employed. This is typical in the forestry, fishing, and tourism industries, and it is of great benefit to the employers in these periods of time to have employment insurance.

We need to fix the treatment of the employees in this place, in the House of Commons, so if we do not pay them when we are not here, they have access to employment insurance.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague's statement is important. I take the member's comments with great sensitivity. I represent a riding that is significantly impacted with seasonal employment in tourism, fisheries, and aquaculture. As recently as yesterday, we had an issue regarding a lobster plant dumping lobster because there was an issue regarding employment.

We do need much more sensitivity, but we need the flexibility. Our changes to the EI program will be flexible in looking at regional needs. We have to end the one-size-fits-all for programs. One size does not fit all programs. Every region is different, and in many cases, each case is different. Therefore, that sensitivity and flexibility needs to be invested in, and our government has committed to do that.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Windsor—Tecumseh.

I am proud to stand in the House to speak to this NDP motion, which calls on the government to urgently act on ensuring that benefits are available to help Canadians who have lost their jobs. Job losses are mounting and Canadians need immediate action on employment insurance.

Canadian workers pay for the program, but access to benefits has become harder over the years. Before the Liberals brought in austerity in the 1990s, around 80% of the unemployed received the benefits they were owed. Shortly after Liberal austerity, the EI coverage fell to less than 50% of workers who lost their jobs.

The Conservatives continued the Liberal austerity, and now we have a situation where only 39% of unemployed Canadians are receiving benefits. The Conservatives also destroyed the extended EI benefits pilot program, which was in place to help areas with very high unemployment. The program helped ensure that seasonal workers would not suffer from a gap in their EI benefits at the beginning of the employment season.

If I were an insurance sales person, and I had to sign people up on my policies and had a qualification rate of a 40% payout if something bad would happen, how well does everyone think I would do? I would have to explain to my potential clients that, yes, they would have to pay me every month out of their paycheques so if

some tragedy befell them, I would help them cover it. The only problem is that less 40% of my clients would be successful at getting their claims approved. I know that I would never go to that sales person and I know that most Canadians would not either. Somehow the Conservatives thought they could do this to their people and still stay in power.

The Conservatives also made a change that allowed workers to keep 50% of their income received while working and receiving benefits. The problem with this change was the same problem the Conservatives faced while in power. This change largely benefited the wealthiest Canadians and penalized lower-income earners.

In the past, lower-income earners had the right to keep all their earnings below a certain threshold in order to help with the inequality. The NDP put pressure on the Conservatives to modify this unpopular change and they accepted and introduced a temporary measure that would have allowed those who had previously participated in the program to pick which method worked best for them on an individual basis. This is why we put the plan to allow workers to choose which formula would benefit them in our platform.

The New Democratic Party was the only political party that explicitly committed to reinstating the extended EI benefits pilot program. Of course, this does not stop us from working with the government to re-implement the program, and I know there are sympathetic ears on the government side.

I remember the press conference on Prince Edward Island, when the member for Malpeque stated that he saw the human factor from the changes first-hand, and I can certainly empathize. He said:

When you have people who come into your office two months before the work season begins and they've got no money and they're wondering how are they going to put food on the table and they're in tears—we see that human factor first hand.

I know exactly how he feels. I have said it before and will say again. I spent seven years working as a case worker to a former member of Parliament, so I have the experience of meeting people in the constituency who have had problems with employment insurance. Rookie members will have to get very used to this. Case work is a huge part of the job that MPs do. I often meet people who are 20 hours short of qualifying for employment insurance. They talk about the onerous reporting conditions they have to go through. These are emotionally charged experiences. Oftentimes families are really struggling to put food on the table. When there is an employment insurance program that only meets 39% of needs, it is simply not good enough.

We can work with the Liberal government to make this program safe and secure for Canadians who lose their jobs and have the right to the benefits. The issue for a long time was that we asked Canadians to pay into the system, but then Liberal and Conservative governments set up elaborate hoops for people to jump through, even to access the programs they funded.

• (1255)

In order to qualify for EI benefits, there are many different requirements and hours worked as a qualifying period, depending on the individual's circumstance and what part of the country that individual lives in. The difference in hours worked is based on the regional rate of unemployment at a given time. Why do we continue with a system that discriminates between workers who need maternity or sickness benefits and new entrants and re-entrants to the workforce? This program should be simplified.

The NDP is proposing a streamlined system in which a worker must work 360 hours in the previous year to qualify, regardless of where that worker lives in the country. The 360-hour mark was proposed by the NDP after extensive consultations with women's groups, student groups, labour unions, and anti-poverty organizations.

This upgrade to the employment insurance program would cost money from the system, but we are lucky that the EI account has a major surplus and it would be more than enough to cover this change. That is only going to be true if we put in safeguards to put a firewall around the fund. A big reason why I am going to be supporting this motion is the importance of protecting the EI fund from governments that put their political ambition before the welfare of the Canadians they represent.

For years, Liberals and Conservatives have treated the EI account like a government slush fund. As I mentioned, they slashed EI benefits and then spent the money in other ways.

When the Liberals were in power before, they took \$54 billion from workers and employers who paid into the EI fund, and they spent it on various programs, such as tax cuts and giveaways to corporations with absolutely no strings attached.

The Conservatives, who were recently in power, like to tout that they had a balanced budget, which was suspect for many reasons, as we have already debated in the House. They took from the EI fund in order to call it a balanced budget.

The employment insurance fund was paid into by workers and employers to fund employment insurance, not to put up smoke and mirrors to look as if a particular political party was keeping its election promises. The Liberals are now plunging us into deficit, and we cannot allow any government in that situation to be able to steal from Canadian workers to make its numbers look rosier for the media. We can work together in the House to make sure that never happens. The 360-hour streamlined proposal could be paid for with the money that is already in there for that purpose.

The government's ability to provide real change has been worrisome over these past months, however. Job losses are happening all over the country, and bureaucratic trials are set up to keep workers from accessing desperately needed help that they are owed.

Government Orders

The Liberals used their first bill in the House to help give the wealthy a tax break—to some of the highest-earning Canadians, including Liberal members of Parliament. They called it a middle-class tax break when it really benefited the top 90% to 95% of earners. Anyone earning between \$100,000 and \$200,000 is going to get the maximum tax cut. When we look at the details, we see it really was just a public relations ploy.

Time and time again, we blasted the Conservatives, when they were in power, over their insistence on putting in programs that were designed to help the wealthiest among us. So far the Liberals have been falling into that same trap of leaving regular, working Canadians behind. The issue is that the Liberals won a mandate to put Canada in a better direction than the Conservatives did. Canadians can count on New Democrats to make positive proposals and work with the government, so we do not continue down a road where the government is only there for the elite and the privileged.

This motion, which would act on recommendations from those working in the anti-poverty sector, as well as those working for women's rights, student groups, and labour unions, would allow an equal playing field to access employment insurance benefits. It would also stop the absolutely disgraceful act of robbing the insurance fund to pay for corporate tax breaks or for a short-term image that the budget is actually balanced.

We implore Liberals to act on their promises, reverse the Conservatives' damage to our EI program, and accept our motion so that Canadians can get some immediate relief in an economy where far too many are suffering.

• (1300)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments by my NDP colleague. I can assure him that this government will act on the promises that were made, and I look forward to the package coming forward.

I did not catch all of his speech, but he was making reference to working while on claim. Actually, in the last nine years, there was one thing the Conservative government did that actually worked out okay for working Canadians. If an employee works three, four, or five days with the new formula that was brought in by the Conservatives, it would actually benefit workers who have the benefit of working those days. There are many industries where the employee is only able to get that one day a week, or maybe two days a week, and it is sort of iffy on the second day as to which system works better.

Are you encouraging a move to a hybrid system? Are you looking at doing away with the changes that were made in 2012 to working while on claim, which were brought in by the Conservatives?

Government Orders

• (1305)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): I want to remind hon. members that I am not looking into anything. If you do not mind, go through me to go to the member.

The hon. member for Cowichan—Malahat—Langford.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from my colleague across the way. I believe I did make reference to that aspect of the program in my speech, when I said we supported a proposal that would allow workers to choose which system benefited them individually.

What we have before us today is a motion. The real meat of the issue has to come in the form of legislative change. I would have preferred to have seen that legislative change come in Bill C-2, but unfortunately, the member's party had other methods that it wanted to pursue. Many of the changes we are proposing can be brought forward in a government bill. We do not need to wait for the budget. If we are serious about immediate action for those who are suffering, the government should bring us a bill, show us something we can work with, and we will look at some amendments if necessary.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my NDP colleague for a typical recitation of left-wing philosophy, nothing but spend, spend, spend and class warfare, just the two things this country simply does not need.

I remember that, in our first term, I would question the NDP members over and over again about why they would never talk about how to actually create wealth. For them it is all about spending. By the way, in terms of our government's economic record, we will take a back seat to nobody. There were 1.3 million net new jobs, with the surplus noted in the "Fiscal Monitor" up to \$3 billion now, soon to be spent.

I would like to ask my NDP friend why he thinks Canada can spend itself rich and why the NDP never, ever offers any ideas on actually how to create wealth in a free-market, capitalistic economy.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Speaker, I am not going to take any lessons from the Conservatives on how to balance budgets or present fiscal responsibility; that is for sure.

What we need to keep in mind here is that we are talking about the employment insurance fund. This is not something for general government revenue, and the Conservatives used that fund to balance their books. So I am not going to take any lessons.

What we have before us today is a system that is broken. When fewer than four out of 10 Canadians are qualifying for benefits that they paid into, it is not an insurance program that is worth the name it is called.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when the recession hit in late 2008, Ottawa enacted temporary measures to stabilize the economy and help households make ends meet. The most important of these was adding an extra five weeks to the EI benefits. When the economy is bad, it takes workers longer than usual to find new jobs. This would be especially true when one sector or region is at the centre of most job losses, which we have now with Alberta and the energy industry. Another five weeks of benefits would recognize this reality and give workers

the time they need to find a good job. Increasing access to benefits would make the stimulus more effective and equitable.

The Liberals' EI election promises slated to take effect in January 2017 would seem to be straightforward, and there are some that must take place now. The nuances of these changes can be discussed meaningfully as time goes on, but we also have the so-called low-hanging fruit that our motion addresses here today.

First is the promise to eliminate the eligibility requirement of 910 hours of insured employment for new entrants and re-entrants to the labour market. If the federal government eliminated the higher requirement for this group immediately, it would make access to EI fairer, especially for those who are new to the workforce.

Second, unemployed workers are facing significant delays in getting benefits approved, receiving decisions on appeals, or even having their questions answered. Cuts to front-line services over the past few years have been devastating to the EI program. More staff must be hired to make sure the benefits flow without delay. It would also take little time to scrap the 2012 changes to EI, such as reversing the three tiers of workers, returning to the previous definition of suitable employment, and restoring the best 14 weeks pilot programs that created a single national standard for determining benefit levels.

Finally, existing skills training programs are important to help workers transition to new employment.

Another Liberal election promise was an increase of \$200 million to fund provincial literacy and essential skills training aimed at those who do not qualify for EI. While it is not part of EI, it would help where it is needed most.

We believe these are changes that can be done quickly and painlessly. We salute the new government's commitments to make sizeable investments in infrastructure. The Liberals have promised to provide much-needed investments into the areas of affordable housing, public transit, and municipal water system upgrades over the next few years. All of these are necessary and will contribute to economic growth and the well-being of Canadians, but they will not give the economy the boost it needs now. Employment insurance can help fill the gap, and that is what we are here to do today.

Government Orders

In the Windsor-Essex area, within which we find my riding of Windsor—Tecumseh, the unemployment rate is 9.6%, which is significantly higher than the national rate of 7.2% now. These people, like the unemployed throughout the country, have lost their jobs through no fault of their own and are at the mercy of market forces, which they did not create and over which have no control.

We heard some numbers earlier today in the statements made by other hon. members. I wanted to know what some of these numbers about unemployment meant for my area, so I did some cursory number-crunching as well, the back-of-the-envelope type, just to illustrate my point. While it is not entirely scientific, it is close enough to paint a very poignant picture of the immediacy of the issues that are involved in the motion as it is articulated here today.

While the population of the Windsor area, which is Windsor and Essex County, is around 319,246 people, the percentage of those who are of working age is 67.5% or about 215,491 people.

● (1310)

With an unemployment rate at 9.6%, this would work out to 20,618 people. However, when I again look at the number of people who are currently utilizing EI benefits, according to the government's own figures the number is 5,640. That is 5,640 out of 20,618 people without work. That is how many are eligible to collect EI. That is pretty brutal.

One's thoughts go immediately to the over 16,000 people who are unemployed and yet, for whatever reason, do not have access to employment insurance. I know some of these 16,000 will be students. A small percentage of them will be unable to work. I provide these figures as a broad sense of how many people might be denied access to EI benefits in the Windsor—Essex area.

I know members agree these numbers are horrifying because we know that numbers are numbers and people are people.

I would also like to add that while the debate we are having may require a lot of numbers and statistics, we do not forget that unemployment figures are more than figures, a data table, or a spreadsheet. These are family members, friends, and neighbours. They are parents raising children, our future workforce. They are sons and daughters who are providing for their parents that important informal caregiving that we all need as we age.

As I alluded to earlier, a series of policy changes over the last two decades has made access to EI benefits increasingly difficult. Back in 1990, 83% of unemployed Canadians received benefits, but it took a dive to 42% in 1998, when the former Liberal government redesigned the program to make it far less generous. After further changes by the Harper government the beneficiaries to unemployed ratio fell below 40% in 2012, for the first time in almost 40 years. Further changes in 2013 drove down the eligibility rate to 37%, a new all-time low. It also became tied to absurd rules, like accepting any job the government deemed suitable even if entirely unrelated to one's career, it comes with a 30% pay cut, and requires an hour-long commute.

As job losses are mounting, Canadian families are struggling and they need immediate action from the government. After 20 years of Conservative and Liberal reforms, our employment insurance program is completely broken and is not providing the help that

Canadian families need. The Liberals and Conservatives have dramatically slashed access to employment insurance benefits, leaving the majority of unemployed Canadians unprotected.

Over 80% of the unemployed received unemployment insurance benefits before the Liberals devastated the program with its reforms in the 1990s. After the Liberals' reforms, EI coverage fell to less than 50% of the unemployed. Under the Conservatives, access to EI benefits fell to historic lows, with fewer than 4 in 10 unemployed Canadians receiving regular EI benefits.

In December, the last month for which we have data, only 38.9% of unemployed Canadians received benefits. Both the total number and the proportion of unemployed Canadians went down compared to November, even though the number of unemployed Canadians increased.

Economic mismanagement has also contributed to the low number of Canadians receiving EI benefits. According to the parliamentary budget officer, many of the Canadians who are not receiving EI have been unemployed for more than a year, or were employed in precarious work where it made it difficult for them to accumulate enough hours. Currently, to qualify for EI regular benefits a worker needs to work between 420 and 700 hours in the preceding 52 weeks before they can make a claim. The number of hours is based on the regional rate of unemployment in the claimant's region. New entrants and re-entrants need 910 hours to qualify for EI regular benefits.

● (1315)

The NDP has long proposed a threshold of 360 hours for workers, regardless of where they live. The cost of this proposal, based on the NDP's calculations during the campaign, would be \$1.2 billion, a cost the EI account can easily afford, given the current surplus and assuming that this pool paid for by workers and their employers is protected.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member opposite for her speech. It was certainly a passionate speech.

The NDP is a party that joined the election and promised many things to many people, like a \$15 a day daycare with no way to pay for it, and a \$15 an hour minimum wage that was only going to be for 1% of Canadian workers.

My question to the member opposite is this: given that her party and her leader promised, and committed to, a balanced budget in year one, how would they ever begin to pay for the changes that they are proposing in EI?

Government Orders

• (1320)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Speaker, I am very well versed in our NDP platform that was fully costed and included addressing corporate taxation and addressing tax loopholes, so that everyone is paying his or her fair share.

I would like to note, as well, that the employers are also paying into this EI system. They are the ones, especially in the resource sector that is currently being championed today, who want a returning workforce when they are ready.

I am very confident that we could implement these changes, and they would provide the stimulus that we require and decrease a burden on other social service programs that end up needing to be accessed. The original intent of our employment insurance program was that when people were knocked down, they could get up again. What we have now is a hole that is so deep that when people get knocked down, they cannot climb out. This is a broken policy. The intent and rationale need to be re-addressed. We need to stay the course to be able to do that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her wonderful speech. It was illuminating, as always.

It comes as no surprise that the Conservatives will not be supporting us on this motion, but I am a little surprised by the Liberals. During the previous Parliament, they stood by us when we talked about the 360-hour qualifying threshold. They stood by us when we debated the harmful elements of the Conservatives' reform. Now, even though they have not yet said so outright, it looks like the Liberals will not support the motion.

Is the fact that they see no need to protect the employment insurance fund and contributions to ensure that the services provided are self-funded the only thing that sets us apart from the Liberals?

[*English*]

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Speaker, being a new MP, I have had to come into this honourable chamber and learn a little bit more about the politics. One of our colleagues opposite, earlier today, articulated that there was a definition of the term of leader, where one could grab the baton and go to the front. I know that we have been championing changes to EI. Yes, they do align with some of the changes that the Liberals had wanted to make. Unfortunately, this is just a matter of people taking credit.

How we could move forward is to realize that this motion is about the immediate action. It is about the low-lying fruit. We need to be able to set the path and the parameters for the more nuanced changes that the hon. minister spoke about earlier today in our debate. I was very privileged to hear that.

I did feel heartened by it, even though a part of me did accept the cynicism of the politics of it. I really do believe that our EI system has a lot of merit to it. We know that these are the immediate changes that need to take place. I have every faith that our system and the debate today will allow some of the merit to come forward. No matter how it is presented, the tenets of this motion are going to be the first things that we have to do. We have to hit the ground running.

In bringing this motion today, some of us were very frustrated that these things had not already been done in over 100 days of governance. These were the no-brainers.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Pontiac.

I take this opportunity to provide a perspective of one of our government's significant economic successes, which is improving people's competencies in the workplace. Labour development is one of our key priorities as a government. If we wish to grow the economy, we need to be responsive to all sectors of the economy as well as regions of the country.

I know first-hand that in my riding of Don Valley East, there is 11% unemployment and underemployment. I am concerned about the issue and I like the fact that our government is taking a holistic approach to improve the conditions for those who are underemployed and unemployed. Our government is helping in a broad perspective to ensure that we develop strategies that are working. For employees, the acquisition of new skills and the development of existing skills means increased contribution to society and greater self-esteem and motivation. This leads directly to a more productive and a more competitive society and better quality of life.

It is one thing to provide monetary benefits to people while they are looking for work, but our actions need to go further. We need to offer the tools that will help Canadians get ahead in today's labour market. There are too many stories of people who no longer possess the skills that make them employable, and I am very familiar with these stories in my riding.

Our intention is to offer people a path that can lead them to new employment possibilities and work that is in line with the requirements of today's market. We believe that with the right preparation and the acquisition of the right skills, a very large percentage of unemployed people can reintegrate into the job market without having to move away from their community or accept low-paying employment.

Through the labour market development agreements, the Government of Canada provides over \$2 billion each year to provinces and territories for employment programs and services. The primary focus is to help current and former EI claimants prepare for and obtain employment.

Our Liberal government will work closely with all provinces and territories to improve skills training. We will ensure that training is better aligned with the needs of the labour market, and we will enhance the tools available to help unemployed workers get back to work.

Our initiatives complement a large range of programs that are already provided to provinces and territories for this very purpose. As an example, the Canada job fund agreements provide \$500 million in funding annually to provinces and territories. The purpose is to support training for all Canadians, regardless of their employment status, through the Canada job grant and other employer-sponsored training initiatives.

Government Orders

Under the employment supports and services, priority is given to unemployed persons not eligible for EI and low-skilled employed workers. Our government believes in the hard-working people of Canada, and as such, we will continue to strengthen and promote existing tools and services, such as the national job bank, to help the unemployed return to work. We will work with provincial colleagues to ensure that people get the services and training available to help them with labour market transitions.

We all know that the jobs of the future will require a highly trained workforce. We intend to make Canada's workforce among the most competitive in the world. For this to happen, we need to adapt to the new realities of the labour market.

• (1325)

We are working collaboratively and in partnership with all provinces and territories, and are ensuring that Canadians have access to the education and training programs they need to be successful in the workplace. The measures we are putting in place are designed to support both employees and employers in all regions of the country.

We are looking at the wide range of changes that would increase the fairness, as well as the effectiveness, of the program. For instance, we intend to eliminate discrimination toward people who are entering or re-entering the employment market. We are looking at reversing the Conservatives' 2012 changes to the employment insurance system that forced unemployed workers to move away from their communities and take lower-paying jobs. These rules have had negative consequences on a large number of workers, notably seasonal workers. In addition, we will provide more flexibility for parental leave under the employment insurance system to better meet the needs of families. As one more example, in our desire to help job seekers, we have committed to reducing the waiting period for EI claimants. This would help workers who lose their jobs to receive their benefits faster.

These are only a few of the improvements we are working on toward an improved employment insurance program, and this is the spirit that will drive modernization of our EI programs now and in the future. Our ultimate objective is to help Canadians find good jobs that are meaningful, well paying, and that strengthen our economy. The residents of Don Valley East will be very proud that this is what we are doing.

Throughout this important process of change, we will be focused on strengthening the EI program so that it reflects the needs of all Canadians. Employment insurance reaches millions of Canadians, either as beneficiaries or as employers. It is a crucial part of our social safety net, and this is why both EI and training and skills development are such important priorities for this government. I hope all members will work with us as we bring changes and consultation to this program.

• (1330)

Mr. Scott Duvall (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very happy that the hon. member for Don Valley East is for making some changes to what the Conservatives did in their reforms.

The Liberals have always supported the NDP motions in the House, including for a 360-hour threshold and the call for a repeal of

the Conservative reforms. In 2009, the Liberal Party called on the government of the day to institute a national 360-hour threshold for access to benefits.

Is the Liberal government in favour of the 360-hour threshold today? If not, why not?

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Speaker, in our process of consultation and reform, we will ensure that there is fairness in the system and that more Canadians are able to access EI when they need it. We are committed to improving the EI program so that it is responsive to the needs of Canadian workers and employers. We will eliminate the discrimination against workers. We will reverse the 2012 changes. I hope we can move to work together in the House and bring about the necessary changes.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a Liberal I was pleased to see, not just in our platform but in our throne speech and in the Prime Minister's responses to questions here in the House thus far, that we are steadfast on reforming the EI program.

Following the question that was posed by my NDP colleague across the way, I would note that the system is about fairness and balance. We have looked at some things that would probably better suit Canadians now. We have looked at changing the number of weeks, the waiting period, from two weeks to one. These will all have an impact on the broader system. We pledged in our platform that we would do away with 920 hours threshold for first-time users and new entrants and re-entrants to the program. We are going to go with regional thresholds that will allow far more Canadians access to the program.

I know that the member's party is committed to making sure that EI is there for people. In this regard, the absolute best thing we can do is to provide EI benefits to people who need them, but also to give them some hope and aspirations about employment, for getting on with their lives and working. How do her constituents respond to the path set forward by this government?

• (1335)

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Speaker, I agree that EI is a temporary measure. Yes, it is a safety net. However, people want to work, because they have pride and self-esteem. Our labour market development agreements with provinces, the job fund agreements to support training for unemployed workers, are \$500 million agreements. There are so many ways we can provide hope to the residents of Canada. The residents in my riding very much appreciate that we are taking a progressive way to addressing the issues, going from underemployment or unemployment to jobs.

*Government Orders**[Translation]*

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to an issue that is key to what we want to achieve when it comes to employment and our communities throughout the Pontiac and the Gatineau valley.

I am talking about having an employment insurance plan based on justice and compassion, one that is in line with the needs of our job market and supports the Canadian economy, including our regional economies.

Our employment insurance plan is an important part of our social safety net and is generally fairly effective. It does what it was designed to do, providing support to people looking for a job or looking to enhance their skills.

Canadians know they can count on some financial support when they finish a job. They also know that they will get guidance in looking for a new job or acquiring new skills. The plan also helps them balance professional and personal responsibilities in the case of an illness or other family obligations, including the birth or adoption of a child or providing care to a loved one.

Our intention is clear. We will ensure that our system remains aligned with the realities of Canada's labour market and that it serves those who need it. To that end, it needs to remain current, which means that it must change with the times. Today's world of work is changing at an incredible rate. The skills required change with technological developments and consumer demands. We all know this. Jobs considered essential one day can become obsolete the next, and the people in those jobs can find themselves in a precarious situation very quickly. We just have to think of the falling commodity prices and the impact this is having on many regions of the country.

The EI system contains provisions designed to respond to economic changes. The system divides Canada into 62 economic regions. When a region's unemployment rate rises, the eligibility requirement for employment insurance is reduced and the duration of benefits increases. The system is flexible so that it can adjust to local economic conditions, which are constantly changing.

We must ensure that the system responds to today's realities and that it is aligned with the needs of workers and employers. To that end, our government is firmly committed to providing programs that reflect the values and needs of our communities. We recognize that there are currently components of the system that could be improved. That is why we intend to eliminate discrimination with respect to people who enter or re-enter the workforce.

We intend to put an end to regulations that penalize people who are just entering or re-entering the workforce and to ensure that they receive the same treatment as other workers in the region. Similarly, current regulations are very disrespectful of seasonal workers, a reality in the Pontiac, which is very frustrating. The seasonal worker is nevertheless a key player in our economy. Some sectors such as the market garden industry, tourist outfitters, seafood processors and the forestry industry rely on temporary labour. That is the nature of these industries. In this same spirit of fairness, we will reverse the changes made to employment insurance in 2012, which forced

unemployed workers to leave their communities and accept jobs with lower wages.

The measures we will put in place are designed to support both employees and employers in every region across the country. Those are just a few of the improvements that we plan to make to the employment insurance system. We also plan to do more.

● (1340)

For example, we will work to reduce the waiting period for benefits by 2017, so that workers who lose their jobs can get their benefits more quickly.

What is more, we are going to make the parental leave provided for in the employment insurance system more flexible in order to better meet the needs of families. Our government is determined to support parents and family caregivers by providing them with more flexible, more comprehensive, and more easily accessible EI benefits. That is how we plan to manage the EI system in the future.

Our ultimate goal is to help Canadians, including those in the Pontiac region, to find good jobs that are rewarding and well paid and to strengthen the economy of our regions and Canada.

[English]

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the one thing I heard in my colleague's speech, as well as in the speeches given by many of his colleagues, was the concern that Canadians had to leave areas close to their home to go to other places for lower-paying jobs. It has been a historic part of Canadian society that people have travelled from one end of the country to the other for better paying jobs. We see that in Alberta. How many Atlantic Canadians have been in Alberta for decades for high-paying jobs in the energy sector?

Could the member tell me why his party wants to discount Canadians who go elsewhere, if there are no jobs in their own communities, where they are needed and where there are great opportunities for employment in higher-paying sectors? Why would the government want to counteract that by eliminating those opportunities?

Mr. William Amos: Mr. Speaker, the member's question gives me a great opportunity to speak to specific examples in the riding of Pontiac where workers and families have suffered as a result of the changes to the employment insurance regime established by the Conservative government in 2012.

Government Orders

It is difficult for people who work in the forestry industry for only 10 to 20 weeks at a time, or for people who work in the ecotourism industry but only for the spring, summer and fall, to be told they are not eligible for employment insurance and that they will have to move to a new community far away from the support of their families or to a community where they are not able to provide support for their families. This is hard on them. It depresses regions and it can ultimately kill communities. There has to be greater flexibility and we will bring that in the weeks and months to come.

• (1345)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, would the member tell me what his bone of contention is with our motion? Why is he not supporting the motion after everything he has just said, which aligns with the intent of our motion?

Mr. William Amos: Mr. Speaker, philosophically there are many similarities between what the opposition is proposing and where the government is going to go eventually. This requires study, consultation, and an evaluation of what we need to do to ensure communities are not destroyed by rules that require people to move away to take lower-paying jobs.

This government will move forward with a budget. I look forward to the changes that are being evaluated by the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, rather than us not agreeing with the NDP motion, it is more like the NDP agreeing with the government's throne speech. Our throne speech outlined the necessary changes that would have to take place within the EI system.

I want to make a comment for my friend from Foothills. He is absolutely right about Atlantic Canadians. It surprises me as well.

Being an Atlantic Canadian, we have always taken great pride in being a mobile pool of labour. We have worked on some of the biggest, most complex construction jobs across the world. I worked in Fort McMurray for nine years. I did not contribute too much to the success of Fort McMurray, but I fully understand that many Atlantic Canadians have been a big part of Alberta's success.

We are talking about low-paying jobs and people living in one small rural community being asked to go to another small rural community for minimum wage jobs. There is no access to public transit or to child care in some of these rural communities. That is where the difficulty comes in.

Does my colleague from Pontiac see the merit in challenging these new rules that were brought in by the Conservative government and fixing these aspects of the regulations?

Mr. William Amos: Mr. Speaker, it goes without saying that we need to fix the system. It is broken particularly for small communities. Whether people are in Cape Breton or in the Pontiac, small-town Canada needs EI's help when the economy is down. It needs flexibility and skill building. It does not need to have workers moved out of communities and forced to take on lower wage jobs.

I look forward to working with our Minister of Labour and proposing something that works for Canadians.

Ms. Tracey Ramsey (Essex, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time today with the member for Windsor West.

I am pleased to speak in support of today's opposition day motion brought forward by the hon. member for Jonquière. The motion calls on this place to acknowledge that Canadians need better access to employment insurance benefits. It also calls on the government to take immediate action. The motion is very relevant to the people I represent in Essex.

Over the past number of years and decades, southwestern Ontario has lost tens of thousands of good-paying manufacturing jobs. Manufacturing accounts for 11% of Canada's GDP and employs over 1.7 million Canadians, many of whom live in southwestern Ontario. However, over the past decade, under the Conservatives' watch, 400,000 good-paying manufacturing jobs have been lost. Those job losses have impacted communities across my riding, including Amherstburg, Belle River, Essex, Harrow, Kingsville, Lakeshore, and LaSalle.

According to Service Canada, the EI region of Windsor, which includes the riding I represent, has an unemployment rate of 9.6%. This is one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, much higher than the 7.2% national rate. In reality, we know the rate is probably much higher than the 9.6% at which Statistics Canada looks. Statistics Canada has a narrow measure of unemployment that really only looks at those who are actively looking for work.

In a region like the one I represent, which has experienced chronic underemployment over the years, people simply stop looking or they settle for lower-paying jobs, or part-time work, sometimes piecing together two or three part-time jobs to make ends meet. They may also seek retraining opportunities as I did in 2008 after being laid off from my auto manufacturing job.

When I started working on the assembly line at Ford, we had 6,700 people and 20 years later we are down to 1,500. People in my riding deserve fair and equitable access to employment insurance. When people lose their job through no fault of their own and there are not many opportunities in the area they can turn to, they need time to make the important decision about their future and the future of their families.

Yesterday, I published an editorial in the *Windsor Star* that talked about Neil from London. Canadians were introduced to Neil during the Prime Minister's one-on-one interviews on CBC. Neil's interview embodied more than just a generation concerned about their financial retirement. He reminded me of all the people I had worked shoulder to shoulder with during my 19 years at Ford. It reminded me of the conversations I had at the doors of Essex voters. It reminded me why I am now working in Ottawa as the MP for Essex.

Government Orders

Thanks to Neil, the concerns he raised with the Prime Minister were brought to a national audience. His questions reflected the real anxiety that resides in manufacturing towns across southwestern Ontario. He became the face of tens of thousands of families. His questions were real and they were poignant. Sadly, they largely went unanswered by the Prime Minister.

Canadians from all corners of our country face anxiety about mounting job losses. We know the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan are facing an extraordinary period of slow economic growth and falling energy prices. This has led to tens of thousands of workers losing their jobs, which means tens of thousands of families concerned about how they will make ends meet while trying to secure quality jobs in this economic downturn.

When communities face mounting job losses, like Alberta over the past year or so, and southwestern Ontario over the past few decades, workers rely on fair access to the employment insurance benefits they paid into for so many years. The premier of Alberta, the Hon. Rachel Notley, knows EI is an important component supporting families in these tough economic times. She has said that they are looking for a fast-paced adjustment to EI so they can extend eligibility and eligibility for the length of claims, which are shorter in Alberta than in any other part of the country.

While the Liberals talked a lot about improving access to EI during the election campaign, many Canadians will remember that it was a Liberal government that created many of the problems with EI that we now are dealing with today. In fact, successive Liberal and Conservative governments have tightened eligibility criteria and have pillaged \$57 billion from the EI fund. They have distorted the purpose of the EI program, which is to provide income to workers who have the misfortune of losing their job.

● (1350)

Looking back into the 1990s, the Liberal government of the day embarked on a devastating austerity program, reducing transfers to the provinces and cities and slashing services on which Canadians relied. Under the Liberals, employment insurance was radically overhauled to restrict eligibility requirements. In 1990, eight out of ten Canadians qualified for EI benefits, but after the Liberal government's changes, EI coverage fell to less than 50% of the unemployed.

Let us talk about what the Liberal government did to the EI account.

To provide a little background, when employers and workers pay into EI, the money goes into a consolidated specific purposes account. These specific purposes are very straightforward. EI premiums are intended to provide relief for workers who have lost their job. They are not meant for any other purpose, like funding reductions in the corporate tax rate, or giving subsidies to the fossil fuel industry. EI premiums are meant for unemployed workers.

What the Liberals did to the EI account was unconscionable. They raided the fund of about \$50 billion. Rather than reducing premiums for small business owners and workers, the government took the money for its own purposes. Rather than increase access to EI for the unemployed, the government took the money for itself. Rather than provide greater retraining opportunities for unemployed workers, or

address the serious skilled labour shortage that existed across Canada, the Liberal government took \$50 billion out of the EI account and away from Canadian workers.

It is all well and good for the Liberals today to be talking about fixing some of the Conservatives' mess, but let us not forget the governing party's sordid history on this file.

Fast forwarding to the 2000s, let us take a look at what the Conservatives did with EI.

Faced with deepening recession in 2012, the Conservatives failed to address the economy and instead focused on attacking Canadian workers. They undertook a large series of reforms to EI that were designed to further restrict eligibility, especially for seasonal and lower-wage workers. The number of people qualifying for EI hit an all-time low. Let us remember, in 1990, eight of ten Canadians qualified for EI benefits. After the Liberals were done with their changes, this number dropped to about five in ten. After the Conservatives, just four out of ten Canadians qualified for the benefits they had paid into.

The Conservatives introduced new rules forcing workers to accept lower wage jobs that paid up to 30% less than their previous jobs, or accept jobs that were up to an hour's drive from home. Refusing such jobs meant workers risked losing their benefits.

The Conservatives also changed rules for the working while on claim pilot project, which penalized lower income earners, and they killed the extended EI benefits pilot program, which granted five extra weeks of benefits for workers in regions of high unemployment.

Stealing a page from the Liberal playbook, the Conservative government diverted another \$3 billion from the EI account to cover budget holes left by its multi-billion dollars in corporate tax giveaways.

Hassan Yussuff, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, put it well, "How is it acceptable to be accumulating annual surpluses in the EI account, when 63% of unemployed workers aren't receiving any benefits?"

It is time for the federal government to stop raiding the EI account. Enough is enough. This money can never be recovered, and it is a grievous theft from Canadians who are at their most vulnerable.

Today's motion proposes a clear way forward.

Statements by Members

First, it proposes to create a universal qualifying threshold of 360 hours, regardless of the regional rate of unemployment. Currently, the required hours range from 420 to 700 hours, which restricts EI eligibility for many Canadian workers. Levelling the playing field with a standard number of hours is good for workers. It is a proposal that has been endorsed by 80 Canadian groups, including anti-poverty, women's groups, labour unions, and student groups.

Second, the motion proposes to repeal some of the Conservative government's harmful EI reforms. Forcing workers to accept low-paying jobs far from their homes puts an undue strain on families and prevents workers from securing the right job for their future. Let us get rid of these unnecessary measures and restore the pilot program to help seasonal workers.

Third, the motion calls on Parliament to protect the EI account, to ensure that funds are only spent on benefits for Canadians, including training, and never again used to boost the government's bottom line. This is such a critical part of the motion.

I encourage my colleagues to acknowledge the wrongs of the past and support today's motion as a positive way forward that restores the EI program to its intended purpose.

• (1355)

I thank my hon. colleague from Jonquière for bringing this motion before us today.

On behalf of the people I represent in Essex, I will be voting yes to this motion.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mr. Anthony Rota): Order, please. Seeing that it is 2 o'clock, we will commence with statements by members.

The hon. member for Essex will have five minutes remaining for questions and comments after question period.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*Translation*]

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when the motion on the peaceful BDS lobby campaign was carried on Monday, it was a sad day for freedom of expression in Canada, even though that right is recognized in the Quebec and Canadian charters.

Imagine my surprise when the Liberals fell headfirst into the deceitful trap that their Conservative opponents laid for them. We already know that there will be more traps like this one.

Right now, the only thing left to do is lament the fact that the Liberals chose to continue the former government's policy of confrontation rather than seeking to build bridges by strengthening dialogue. The Liberals certainly will not build any bridges by condemning a peaceful lobby campaign.

The Bloc Québécois has chosen a side. Obviously, we are on the side of peace.

• (1400)

[*English*]

COLDEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR FUNDRAISER

Mr. Kyle Peterson (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I want to bring attention to an event that took place in Newmarket—Aurora this past Saturday.

Newmarket's Inn From the Cold, a local organization that serves people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness, held its annual Coldest Night of the Year walk. On this night, local residents and volunteers walk for the homeless, hungry, and hurting in our community.

I was proud to play a small role in the event this past Saturday by taking part in the walk with a great team. This annual walk impacts hundreds of lives in a positive way, helping many Canadians who are struggling.

This year, I am proud to announce that Newmarket's Coldest Night of the Year walk raised over \$63,000, almost double the original goal of \$35,000. Newmarket ranked in the top 10 of all of Canada.

I want to thank the spectacular team of volunteers who dedicated their time to organizing, fundraising, and walking the walk for an excellent cause. They serve as a prime example of the fantastic people and organizations found in Newmarket-Aurora.

* * *

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Mr. Alexander Nuttall (Barrie—Springwater—Oro-Medonte, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as most of us know, this is Black History Month. Two hundred years ago, Canada was the final destination for over 30,000 oppressed peoples fleeing slavery on the Underground Railroad. In Canada, one of the major destinations was to the township of Oro-Medonte, where those fleeing were given land to farm in the 1840s.

The settlers built the Oro African Church on the 3rd line of Oro-Medonte soon after their arrival. It stands today as a national heritage site for being the oldest African church standing in North America.

Thanks to the leadership of the Township of Oro-Medonte, the MP for Simcoe North, and many local residents, over \$400,000 has been raised to restore this national treasure. This includes \$90,000 in crowd funding, and a contribution from the former government of \$78,000.

Restoration is projected to be completed this summer and the church to be reopened to help recognize our collective history and educate those in our community.

On behalf of the people of Barrie—Springwater—Oro-Medonte, I would like to congratulate Oro-Medonte on this success.

*Statements by Members***IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP**

Mrs. Eva Nassif (Vimy, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada continues to shine as a beacon of hope for Syrian refugees.

The newly formed riding of Vimy in Laval, which I proudly represent, has welcomed with open arms many grateful families seeking to escape conflict from half a world away. I was honoured to personally greet some of them at the Pierre Elliot Trudeau Airport on New Year's Day, and hope to welcome many more to a new life of peace and stability.

[Translation]

His Holiness Pope Francis has ordained His Excellency Antoine Nassif as a new bishop for the Syrian Catholic community. The induction ceremony will be held this Saturday in Vimy. This demonstrates the importance of the Syrian community in Laval. Canada's contribution to this humanitarian crisis has not gone unnoticed, and I am very happy to work with Bishop Nassif in order to help the Syrian community in Vimy.

* * *

[English]

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, many support the forthcoming inquiry on missing and murdered indigenous women and welcome the government's pledge to address the 94 recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I was recently reminded of the immediate need for action on both. I met Kirsten in a beautifully painted teepee at an Edmonton winter festival. On entering the teepee, I was overwhelmed by the aroma of spruce boughs, then invited to join indigenous youth reclining on buffalo hides. They told me about their backgrounds and the program called "moving the mountain".

Kirsten proudly led me to the teepee she was building adjacent to a moose hide she had stretched. Left with such a strong feeling of hopefulness, I decided to find out more. Moving the mountain, initiated by Edmonton's iHuman Youth Society, is now hosted by the University of Alberta. It directly supports indigenous girls and young women wishing to escape homelessness, addictions, and abuse, providing them with a safe place to learn and seek alternative paths. These next-generation victims of residential schools deserve our support now.

I will be looking to the March budget for expanded support for concrete programs to deliver a ray of hope to these young women and others like them.

* * *

• (1405)

KHALSA COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Mr. Raj Grewal (Brampton East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to welcome to Parliament Hill the grade 5 students and teachers from Khalsa Community School in Brampton.

Khalsa School was founded in 1995 by principal Ripshotam Singh Grewal. The school's philosophy is not only to educate our

youth, but also to develop a strong sense of civic engagement among them.

These students are our future leaders and will be the foundation for an ever more engaged Canada, at home and abroad. They are in Ottawa to watch question period today to learn how government works, and to participate in a meet and greet with a few of my honourable colleagues later on.

Although these young minds are in Ottawa today as students on a field trip, I have no doubt that with the education they receive at Khalsa School, many of them will go on to be CEOs, lawyers, doctors, engineers, members of Parliament, and even a future Prime Minister.

I welcome Khalsa School to Ottawa.

* * *

[Translation]

RICHMOND—ARTHABASKA

Mr. Alain Rayes (Richmond—Arthabaska, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate two elected officials in my riding on their recent political appointments.

First, I would like to congratulate someone some of us know, a former MP and my successor as mayor of Victoriaville, André Bellavance, on his decisive win in last Sunday's election. As the former mayor of Victoriaville, I wish Mr. Bellavance every success, and I look forward to working with him on various files.

Second, Hugues Grimard of Asbestos, another dynamic mayor, recently distinguished himself by being elected to the board of directors of the Union des municipalités du Québec. I am certain that Mr. Grimard will represent the riding well within this organization.

In closing, since we are talking about municipal officials, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the fine men and women who are actively engaged in developing their communities. With their decisions and actions, they contribute, as we do, to improving our citizens' quality of life. I thank them and congratulate them on their commitment to all Canadians.

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AVIGNON—LA MITIS—MATANE—MATAPÉDIA

Mr. Rémi Massé (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my riding's economy is struggling. Three companies in my riding have shut down in recent months.

Residents could have decided to throw in the towel, but instead, 50 entrepreneurs in the region, led by François Rioux, the president of Groupe Bertrand-Rioux, developed a fund to create new companies and new jobs in the RCM of La Matanie.

These 50 entrepreneurs collected \$300,000 in a show of entrepreneurial solidarity. Our entrepreneurs care about stimulating our region's economies. Now is the time to be inspired by Mr. Rioux and to be a positive, unifying leader for the business community.

We have a vision for our region. The community is prepared to work together and to be actively involved in the region's economic recovery. I am counting on our government to support this initiative, which will help create sustainable jobs. I salute Mr. Rioux for his initiative. This is a concrete example of how to create an environment that supports economic recovery in our region.

* * *

[English]

BORIS NEMTSOV

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise in honour of the late Boris Nemtsov. When one looks at his photos, one sees a man who had a twinkle in his eye, a love of life. However, he had an even greater love: the Russian people. For this love, he was a fearless fighter for their dignity and for their rights.

A year ago, it was peculiar that Boris Nemtsov was not being arrested despite his harshest criticism to date of Putin's kleptocratic dictatorship and war of aggression against Ukraine. Arrests were not working in Boris' case; bullets would send a clearer message. The Kremlin was chosen as the kill zone, the most unlikely place for an assassination unless the professional killers felt protected.

Afterward, investigators committed the indignity of partially undressing Boris' corpse while filming live for Russian TV with the Kremlin as a backdrop: a gruesome message to what remains of Russia's democratic opposition from a psychopathic killer.

This weekend, in Russia, people will remember.

[Member spoke in Russian]

* * *

WESTJET

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this Monday, February 29, will mark 20 years since the first flight of WestJet. From its origins with three used aircraft, 225 employees, and five destinations, WestJet has grown in two decades to be North America's ninth-largest airline by number of passengers carried.

Today, WestJet fields over 142 aircraft, has over 10,000 employees, flies to 100 destinations worldwide, and has carried over 20 million passengers. This company also strives to excel in efficient and clean technology. It has significant social investments in communities across our country.

WestJet is a Canadian success story using a unique business model to expand and thrive and create jobs across Canada. I would like to congratulate this Calgary-based company that has demonstrated that success comes from innovation, ideas, and hard work.

Since the debate has been over four hours in this place, I would like to remind my colleagues that the exits are here.

* * *

• (1410)

DUNBARTON HIGH SCHOOL

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this week we learned of a stabbing incident in Pickering

Statements by Members

at Dunbarton High School. As a graduate of Dunbarton, I extended my heartfelt concern for the students, teachers, and community. A 14-year-old girl came to school with knives and injured students and teachers. Thankfully, no one was fatally injured.

The incident could have been far worse if not for the bravery and quick action of the students and teachers. I would like to thank these brave individuals for their quick thinking during what must have been a very terrifying event. I also want to thank the first responders, who were there very quickly and acted professionally. I am extremely proud of the way everyone involved has reacted to such an unnerving event.

My thoughts are with the victims. I know I speak for everyone in this House when I wish them a full and speedy recovery.

* * *

[Translation]

SPECIAL OLYMPICS CANADA

Ms. Gudie Hutchings (Long Range Mountains, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to inform the house that the riding of Long Range—Mountains will be hosting Special Olympics Canada next week.

[English]

Two weeks ago, I was thrilled to announce our government joined provincial and municipal counterparts and committed \$250,000 to ensure the event is a success and raise awareness of our country's Special Olympics.

I also want to thank the many organizers, volunteers, and sponsors. Without their valuable contributions, this event would not be possible. Because of them, from March 1-6, Corner Brook will host over 1,600 athletes, coaches, families, and friends from coast to coast. The games include alpine and cross-country skiing, figure and speed skating, curling, floor hockey, and snowshoeing. These winners will represent Canada at the 2017 Special Olympics World Winter Games in Austria.

The Canadian Special Olympics is dedicated to enriching the lives of Canadians with disabilities through sport. Their spirit and determination could not be more inspiring. I ask all members of the House to join me in wishing all the athletes good luck next week.

* * *

DEFIBRILLATORS

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in June last year, I pointed out to the House that over 300 lives could be saved every year if defibrillators were installed in all 5,600 RCMP cruisers at a cost of \$10 million.

Statements by Members

I calculated this as follows. For over a decade, the Ottawa Police Service has had a defibrillator in each cruiser. In each of the past two years, an average of one life has been saved for every 17 installed defibrillators. Multiply that by 5,600 RCMP cruisers, and it adds up to 320 lives saved each and every year.

I am not the only person who understands this. In 2013, the present Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness presented a private member's motion, Motion No. 446, which called for defibrillators to be installed in all RCMP cruisers. He is now the minister in charge of the RCMP. I asked him to follow through on Motion No. 446. If he does so a year from now, that will be better than nothing; but if he does so today, the lives of 320 Canadians who would otherwise be dead a year from now would be saved.

* * *

[*Translation*]

FRANCO-ONTARIAN COMMUNITY

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the Province of Ontario and Premier Kathleen Wynne for apologizing to Franco-Ontarians on Monday. With that historic gesture, Ms. Wynne recognized that Ontario violated the rights of the Franco-Ontarian community and threatened its long-term survival.

I would like to pay tribute to the hundreds of thousands of Franco-Ontarian men and women who resisted and fought to continue teaching in French and transmitting their language to their children. With nearly 600,000 members, hundreds of community organizations, and dozens of cultural institutions, today's Franco-Ontarian community is flourishing.

Recognizing the mistakes of the past is an essential step toward greater appreciation of both of our official languages from sea to sea. Canada as a whole can be proud of the Franco-Ontarian community's contribution to our vitality and our identity.

* * *

• (1415)

[*English*]

JACK MCFARLAND

Mr. Scott Duvall (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is with a great deal of sadness and respect that I rise today to mark the passing of Hamilton icon and World War II vet Jack McFarland. He was a hero. Mr. McFarland, who celebrated his 95th birthday in January, was one of the three remaining veterans from the 582 Rileys who stormed the beach of Dieppe on August 19, 1942.

Alongside his fallen comrades, Jack was wounded and captured and spent over two years as a prisoner of war. After his release, Jack returned to Hamilton, where he enjoyed a distinguished career with the Hamilton Police, retiring with the rank of staff sergeant in 1981. As president of the Hamilton United Council of Veterans, he worked tirelessly to have a Dieppe Veterans' Memorial Park built in Hamilton and was able to see that dream fulfilled in August 2003.

My colleague from Hamilton Centre and I have had the privilege of many interactions with Jack over the years. Jack spent his entire

life serving his country and his beloved hometown, Hamilton, and for that, I and all Canadians sincerely thank him and salute him.

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THE ECONOMY

Mrs. Shannon Stubbs (Lakeland, CPC): Mr. Speaker, times are tougher than ever for my constituents in Lakeland, and for all Albertans. Businesses in all sectors are shutting down. EI is running out for those who even qualify. Food banks are packed. People are losing their homes and, in some most drastic situations, their lives. People move to Alberta or commute from other provinces to work and to live their dreams, and now they are living a nightmare. That hard work has provided more than \$200 billion over the last decade to increase the standard of living for every person in every community across Canada.

Chris Timbury is a recently laid-off young father from Nova Scotia. Instead of enjoying the first years of his baby's life, he is worrying how he's going to pay the mortgage and feed his family. He's trying, but no one's hiring. There are many thousands of Chris Timburys across Canada.

Government members show much compassion about people struggling in other ways, but when it is about Alberta and energy job losses, it is meaningless robotic talking points, no plan, and "hang in there".

* * *

MARCH FIRST MOVEMENT

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to bring to the attention of the House a matter of great pride to many of my constituents in Willowdale and indeed to the Korean Canadian community in general. Next Tuesday, March 1, marks the 97th anniversary of the dawn of the March First Movement, also referred to as Samil or the Man-Se demonstrations.

The March First Movement marks an important milestone in the Korean independence movement. On this day we pause not only to remember the ideals articulated in the Korean Declaration of Independence, but to celebrate Korean independence and the Korean Canadian community. One can only marvel at how far the Republic of Korea has come since then, positioning itself as one of the world's most advanced and innovative societies and a beacon to the rest of the free world.

On March 1, I ask all Canadians to join members of the Korean Canadian community in celebrating this historic milestone.

[*Member spoke in Korean as follows:*]

Dae Han Min Guk Man Seh.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

THE ECONOMY

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in only a hundred days the Prime Minister has gone from sunny ways to a cloudy haze, creating complete incoherence. He claims we are fighting ISIS, but then says Canada has no combat role. He claims we support Ukraine, but he wants to normalize relations with Putin. He claims he wants to create jobs, but does nothing but spend billions of dollars he does not have.

How can Canadians have confidence in the direction of our country when the Prime Minister is so incoherent?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I had the honour and privilege of serving with the Right Hon. Paul Martin, the former prime minister who gave the previous Conservative government a \$13-billion surplus. What did it do with that surplus? It turned it into a \$150-billion debt.

It is also important to note that we have a plan. We have been articulating that plan since the campaign. That plan includes a historic investment in infrastructure and helping to reduce the burden for middle-class Canadians. We will grow the economy and create jobs.

• (1420)

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians did not vote for this. During the campaign, the Liberals promised Canadians they would cap their borrowing at \$10 billion. The Liberals have broken their promise.

Now we have learned that they are borrowing \$30 billion. As for next week's numbers, who knows?

After the Conservatives left the Prime Minister a surplus, why is he borrowing money that he does not have, on a recession we are not in, with no plan to pay it back?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have a plan and we are very committed to that plan. That plan is to ensure that we not only help small businesses and help the economy grow but that we have an innovation plan that will make us more productive and more competitive. Many businesses from across this country are supporting our plan because they understand we are making key investments to grow the economy and to create jobs. Not only are we investing in infrastructure and helping the middle class, the Canada child benefit will help hundreds of thousands of Canadians out of poverty.

We have a plan and we will remain committed to that plan.

* * *

TAXATION

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am looking forward to it.

The Prime Minister has broken yet another promise. He said that the provinces would decide if they wanted a carbon tax. However,

Oral Questions

now he is going to impose a carbon tax on every province whether they want one or not.

Canadians are already struggling, so why is the Prime Minister piling on more taxes when they fill up their cars and heat their homes?

Hon. Catherine McKenna (Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we were very clear when we were elected that we would take real action to tackle climate change, unlike the previous government.

Members should not just take it from me that a carbon tax is the most efficient way to tackle emissions. The Suncor Energy Inc. CEO said, "We think climate change is happening. We think a broad-based carbon price is the right answer." Someone else the Conservative Party members might remember is well-known Conservative Preston Manning, who said that he wholeheartedly supports carbon pricing.

We are going take action because it is the right thing to do.

* * *

[Translation]

FINANCE

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Beauce, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are only about a hundred days in and the Liberal Party and the Minister of Finance have broken another election promise.

We were supposed to have a small deficit of about \$10 billion, and it was not supposed to be permanent. What do we have? We have a permanent deficit of more than \$25 billion. Goodbye balanced budget. Balancing the budget has been put off indefinitely.

Will the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance at least have the decency to apologize to Canadians for deceiving them during the election campaign?

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the last election, Canadians were given a choice between a plan to grow the economy and cuts to balance the budget at any price. They chose economic growth and support for the middle class.

Imagine the alternative: the opposition parties would be making budget cuts at the worst possible time. That would lead to job losses, cuts to programs in every region of the country, and it could even lead to a recession. Canadians made the right choice.

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Beauce, CPC): Mr. Speaker, their plan is to scare Canadians.

The Liberals' plan was to spend \$10 billion. Now it is more than \$10 billion. They want to spend and drive Canadians into debt, knowing that the household debt rate is 160% of disposable income. The credit card is maxed out. This is not the time to drive Canadians into debt.

I would like to ask the Liberals how driving Canadians further into debt will create more wealth.

Oral Questions

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, after years of weak growth, our government's approach to managing the Canadian economy is fundamentally different from that of the Conservatives. We know that many Canadians are suffering because of the recent economic slowdown. That slowdown makes our plan more important than ever. We will stimulate the economy, create jobs, and put Canada back on the right path.

* * *

• (1425)

[English]

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we lost another young person in Moose Factory this week. That brings the number to over 600 young people who have killed themselves or tried to kill themselves in the northern part of my riding since 2009, and requests for suicide and depression counselling are regularly turned down by government. This week Mushkegowuk Nishnawbe Aski Nation declared a state of emergency. It needs action now.

I am asking the government, will it meet with the leaders Jonathan Solomon, Isadore Day, and Alvin Fiddler, and commit to a comprehensive plan to end this systemic discrimination?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member of Parliament for his dedication and interest in this important topic.

Our government acknowledges the scope and seriousness of the health and mental health issues faced by our northern Ontario communities and elsewhere in Canada. Federal, provincial, and first nation partners are working strongly together to address these complex issues of mental illness and suicide, addictions, chronic disease, and at improving access to quality health care needed by everyone in Canada and, in particular, our indigenous communities.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for the answer, but a nation-to-nation relationship needs a commitment by the leadership to meet. Ever since the government of Paul Martin, everyone in Ontario has received an annual 6% increase in health transfer payments, and first nations got nothing like that. What they do have are the highest rheumatic fever rates in the world, hep C, a suicide pandemic, and children with parasitic bacterial infections.

I am asking the government, what commitment will it make to close that gap in the coming budget for health care and why will it not meet with the leadership now and commit to ending this discrimination once and for all?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I again thank the hon. member for his sensitivity to this very important issue.

He has heard over the last few weeks and months this government's commitment to working on a renewed nation-to-nation relationship with indigenous peoples in order to make progress on the issues that are most important to them, including health. Our government is working with our partners everywhere in Canada, including provincial and territorial governments, to provide

effective, sustainable, and inclusive services to our indigenous communities.

[Translation]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, far too many first nations peoples are living in atrocious conditions. The current crisis in northern Ontario is just the latest example. This is unacceptable and intolerable. We have a duty to help them and to rectify decades, or even centuries, of injustice.

In the next budget, will the government commit to funding first nations health care services to the same standard as services for other Canadians?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for her comments. I certainly appreciate her sensitivity to this serious need in our aboriginal communities.

As everyone knows, our government recognizes that our aboriginal communities in northern Ontario and across Canada are facing significant, serious physical and mental health challenges. Our government is working closely with the provinces, territories, municipalities, and first nations to significantly and seriously improve living conditions in our indigenous communities.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the former chief of staff of the outgoing Conservative prime minister, the former clerk of the Privy Council, unions, and student groups are urging the government to adopt a new proportional representation system.

The Prime Minister said that the October 2015 election would be the last one under the existing system, yet nothing has been done since then. The NDP suggested that we create a committee that would include all the parties represented by a member elected in the last election.

Will the minister accept our suggestion so that we can finally move forward without partisanship?

[English]

Hon. Maryam Monsef (Minister of Democratic Institutions, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are pleased to see an emerging consensus on this issue where even our Conservative colleagues agree that the status quo must end.

We look forward to engaging in a meaningful conversation with Canadians that will ensure that all voices are heard.

Oral Questions

●(1430)

TAXATION

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Milton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Finance has told us that there is going to be a cost to the Canadian taxpayer of \$1.2 billion for the Liberal tax scheme, which gives a Canadian family just under \$550.

Yesterday, the Premier of Ontario, the Prime Minister's bestie, announced that she is going to put a 4.5-cent tax on a litre of gasoline. It is about \$900 a year for Canadian families. So much for the plan. One Liberal government gives; the other one takes away.

My question is this: does Minister of Finance realize, or is it the plan, that he is using the federal credit card in order to pay the Ontario Liberal bill?

[*Translation*]

Mr. François-Philippe Champagne (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague.

This government has a plan for the middle class. In December, this government committed to lowering taxes for the middle class. In the next budget, we will follow up by making historic investments in infrastructure, innovation, and productivity. This government is the middle-class government. We were elected on that platform, and that is what we will continue to do.

[*English*]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Milton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is called a carbon tax. Ontario is bringing it in. It is 4.5 cents on a litre of gas, which means a lot to the people who haul our trade in this country, like the truck drivers in Brampton and Milton, my part of the world.

Nine consecutive years of deficits for Kathleen Wynne's government and a big tax coming at the end. Is that what we can expect from these guys as well, with all these deficits leading to nothing but burying Canadians in taxes?

Mr. François-Philippe Champagne (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the one thing we will never take is lessons from the previous government about deficits. That is for sure. Let me tell the House that.

We have a plan to invest in the economy, and that is exactly what we are going to do. We were clear with Canadians in October that we will do it responsibly. We will continue to reduce our debt-to-GDP ratio throughout our mandate. We still have the goal of balancing the budget. That is a responsible government.

* * *

[*Translation*]

REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Mr. Speaker, those are fine words, but despite what we are hearing, this government has no plan for stimulating the economy or creating jobs. It is also ignoring those who have projects. For example, the reeve of the Appalaches RCM and the mayor of Thetford Mines are unable to get a meeting with government members. They want to present a natural gas network expansion project that could support the jobs of 1,300 workers.

Can the Liberals tell us when they are going to attend such a meeting? Where is their plan to develop the regions of Quebec?

[*English*]

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are an open and transparent government. Our doors are always open.

We will work with anyone who has a plan to grow the economy and create jobs. That is why we made investments in different sectors, not only in Quebec but across Canada. Let me name a few: aerospace, automotive, business services, chemicals and plastics, digital media, financial services, food and beverage, medical devices, mining industries, oil and gas, renewable energy, retail, and software.

We will continue to invest in the economy. We will continue to grow the economy. We will make sure that we have good quality jobs.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the Liberal government spends billions of dollars outside of Canada on the Prime Minister's vanity projects, hundreds of thousands of Canadians are losing their jobs right here at home.

To make matters worse, the Minister of Environment is proposing a punishing carbon tax grab, which will raise the price of everything, including gas, groceries, and housing. Provinces and territories, like Saskatchewan and Yukon, have resoundingly said no to a carbon tax.

When will the minister finally listen and abandon her foolish plan to tax Canadians?

Hon. Catherine McKenna (Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the last election, we were elected to tackle climate change. The previous government did nothing.

Eighty percent of Canadians currently live, or will live, in a jurisdiction where the provinces have taken leadership to put a price on carbon. Once again, do not take it from me. Mark Cameron, whom members might remember as a former policy adviser to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, said:

the most effective way to reduce emissions is to price them through a carbon fee—

The Speaker: Order. There are some former prime ministers we can mention by name, but not those who are still in the House, as the member knows.

The Minister of Environment and Climate Change has a few more seconds for her answer.

Oral Questions

●(1435)

Hon. Catherine McKenna: Mr. Speaker, sorry, I meant the former adviser to the former Prime Minister, who said:

As most free-market economists recognize, the most effective way to reduce emissions is to price them through a carbon fee or carbon trading system, and let the market find—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Portage—Lisgar.

* * *

NATURAL RESOURCES

Hon. Candice Bergen (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the mining sector is a major source of jobs for Canadians, especially in rural and remote communities and for indigenous people, but this important sector is being hit hard by low commodity prices. Now more than ever, they are counting on the mineral exploration tax credit, something our government proudly supported and renewed each year for nine years.

Can the Minister of Natural Resources tell the people whose jobs depend on mining in Canada if the mineral exploration tax credit will be continued and expanded by the Liberal government?

Hon. Jim Carr (Minister of Natural Resources, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, members can imagine how warmly I welcome a question on the mining industry and how much I am looking forward to an upcoming meeting in Toronto with the prospectors, developers, and Canadian companies who are leading on the global stage, particularly on sustainable practices in mining.

Our government recognizes the important contribution of Canada's exploration and mining sector to our economy and to communities. Industry groups have stressed the importance of renewing the mineral exploration tax credit, and we are considering it as the upcoming budget approaches.

* * *

TAXATION

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal platform attempted to raise revenue by taxing gains on stock options as income rather than capital gains. However, the Liberals forgot that doing so would allow corporations offering their stock options to deduct them, something they cannot do now. Economist Jack Mintz said that the net result would be a reduction in revenue.

Has the government actually found an innovative way to reduce government revenue while raising taxes?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member has asked this question a few times, and I have told him that through our initiatives, we have been engaged with different businesses. When I talk to those businesses, they are very supportive of our innovation agenda. They appreciate the fact that not only are we investing in start-ups, but we are helping them scale up. We are creating an environment for SMEs to succeed not only in Canada but globally. We are doing so through investments in R and D through our industrial research assistance program.

These are the commitments we made in our platform when we talked about our innovation agenda. These are the commitments we are going to honour to grow our economy.

[Translation]

JUSTICE

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Salaberry—Suroît, NDP): Mr. Speaker, since the election, the Liberals have been sowing confusion around their promises about marijuana.

Yesterday, the Federal Court of British Columbia declared the previous government's regulations on cannabis unconstitutional. The Conservatives had stripped medical marijuana users of their right to grow their own plants at home.

My question is simple. Does the Minister of Justice intend to comply with that ruling?

[English]

Mr. Bill Blair (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the decision that came down yesterday from the courts only concerns medical marijuana, and it is very important to assist the member opposite in clearing up some of the confusion her party is apparently experiencing. This ruling in no way affects the existing criminal prohibition on the possession, production, and trafficking of marijuana for non-medical purposes.

The decision delivered yesterday is being reviewed by staff, and both the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice, who will be advising this government shortly.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the current government is sowing confusion left and right on marijuana. The Liberals promised to legalize it, but they offered no timeline. When the chiefs of police complained that this was creating uncertainty, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice helpfully cleared things up when he said that, well, the current approach of criminalizing people for possession is failing, but the government is still going to continue the current approach indefinitely.

Why does the government not clear up the confusion and simply decriminalize personal possession of marijuana immediately?

Mr. Bill Blair (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Victoria for the opportunity to clear up his confusion.

The government has been very clear and unequivocal. We have a very clear plan to legalize, regulate, and restrict the access to marijuana. Furthermore, we want to remind all Canadians that until that important work is completed, the only control that is in place is the current criminal sanction for the production and trafficking of marijuana, and those laws remain in effect.

Oral Questions

•(1440)

Hon. K. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Health Canada spends hundreds of millions of dollars every year to encourage Canadians to stop smoking. Now the government wants Canadian kids to have access to a drug to smoke, marijuana. Parents are scared and concerned for their children. The government is sending out mixed signals. On the one hand, it claims it wants to enforce the law, but on the other hand, it has not appealed the B.C. decision to allow marijuana in the hands of children.

Will the Minister of Health take responsibility for this action and compel her colleague the Minister of Justice to appeal this decision? Will she step forward with me to protect Canadian kids from this mind-altering drug?

Ms. Kamal Khera (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is vitally important that those who need marijuana for medical use as prescribed by a medical professional have access to it.

I would like to quote from the court case, specifically section 1(2), which states:

This case is not about the legalization of marijuana generally or the liberalization of its recreational or life-style use. Nor is it about the commercialization of marijuana for such purposes.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Niagara Falls, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals are making a mess out of the marijuana file, and it is just one more example of Liberal incoherence. They say that pot is illegal but it should be sold in liquor stores. Police chiefs across this country are asking for clarity on whether or not they should enforce the law. We know that marijuana is dangerous for kids, yet in Vancouver there are now more pot shops than there are Starbucks.

What is the Liberal plan to keep marijuana out of the hands of our children?

Mr. Bill Blair (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to have another opportunity to clear up some of the confusion and apparently this hazy fog that has descended over members opposite.

The science and the evidence is overwhelmingly clear that the best way to protect our kids, to get organized crime out of the business of selling marijuana in our communities, and to ensure a robust public health response is through strict regulation. That is what we are doing. We have a plan to consult with the provinces and territories and with scientific experts, and base our regulations on evidence and fact. We have been—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Oshawa.

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PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED DYING

Mr. Colin Carrie (Oshawa, CPC): Mr. Speaker, seniors are among Canada's most important groups. They have helped build our country. Those suffering near the end of their lives with dementia are some of the most vulnerable. The Liberal doctor-assisted suicide plan would put our seniors at risk, especially seniors with dementia.

Why is the Minister of Health doing nothing to protect our vulnerable seniors?

Ms. Kamal Khera (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank members of the committee for their dedication in consulting with Canadians and key stakeholders on this complex issue. This is an extremely important and deeply personal issue to every Canadian.

We will be examining this report closely as the government crafts an appropriate legislative response to the Supreme Court of Canada's ruling and the *Carter v. Canada* case.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has always praised Quebec's experience and legislation on the sensitive issue of physician-assisted dying. Members know that I personally voted in favour of this law.

In Quebec, one of the fundamental requirements is that the person must be at least 18 years old. Physician-assisted suicide is not available to minors. This morning, the parliamentary committee opened the door to end-of-life care for minors.

Will the government open the door to end-of-life care for Canadian minors?

Mr. Sean Casey (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question and his work on the committee.

The committee's work will be vital as we strive to balance personal dignity with the rights of doctors and nurses.

There are still many steps to take, including the debates in this place, in committee and in the Senate. There will be several other opportunities to participate—

•(1445)

The Speaker: Order. The member for Regina—Lewvan.

* * *

[*English*]**NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Mr. Erin Weir (Regina—Lewvan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during the election the Prime Minister accused the Conservatives of being “unreasonably or unhealthily, attached to the F-35”. However, now it seems it is the Liberals who are unreasonably and unhealthily attached to the F-35.

Why is the government spending 45 million taxpayer dollars to remain in the joint strike fighter program if it is not going to buy the aircraft, or are the Liberals about to break another promise?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, part of the program, as the member knows from the previous government, is the industrial benefits that it also brings.

Oral Questions

However, while our government remains in the partnership with this program, that does not commit Canada to buy the F-35.

[Translation]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during the election campaign, the leader of the Liberal Party was unequivocal: if he was elected, Canada would not buy F-35 stealth fighter jets. Now we have learned that the government is going to spend more than \$45 million to remain in the F-35 joint strike fighter program.

I would like to know why. Why is the minister spending our money on F-35s that he does not want to buy?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think I answered that question just earlier. Being part of this program brings industrial benefits for Canadian companies, and being part of the program does not commit Canada to buy the F-35.

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PENSIONS

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, seniors in my riding of Surrey Centre who rely wholly on old age security and are struggling to make ends meet have not received an increase in their old age security in years. They are wondering if the Government of Canada plans to provide any relief.

Would the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development update the House on the government's efforts in helping to provide seniors with much-needed assistance?

Hon. Jean-Yves Duclos (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I sincerely thank the member for his very important question. I am delighted to remind the House that our government is committed to providing seniors with a very secure retirement. We will restore to 65 the age of eligibility for old age security, well before the planned increase by the previous government. This will put an average of \$13,000 back into the pockets of our most vulnerable seniors and will ensure that our seniors stay out of poverty.

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[Translation]

ETHICS

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC): Mr. Speaker, every day that goes by makes us realize how hard it is to get answers from this government on ethics. Again on Tuesday, the government dodged the questions about the justice minister and her husband, a lobbyist for the First Nations Finance Authority.

Let us try again. Can the Minister of Justice confirm to the House whether she will recuse herself during discussions on aboriginal programs?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I can confirm, on behalf of my colleague, that the Minister of Justice will meticulously follow all of the advice she is given by the Ethics Commissioner.

I am pleased to inform my colleagues that these measures are now in place and that she will follow them carefully, as she has always done.

[English]

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before her election, the Minister of Justice was the chair of the First Nations Finance Authority. It has just hired her husband to lobby the federal government. The FNFA receives monies from the federal government, approved by the federal cabinet, and is governed by federal statutes that she oversees. Her husband's lobbying on this file clearly puts her in a conflict.

This is not a matter for the Ethics Commissioner. It is a matter of common sense. When will the justice minister do the right thing, stop the excuses, and put an end to this obvious conflict of interest?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what would be helpful would be if the members opposite put an end to the drive-by smears.

What we have said from the beginning is that the Minister of Justice proactively raised this issue with the Ethics Commissioner, as someone of her high integrity should do. The Ethics Commissioner has now provided a structure and advice to avoid not only a conflict of interest but the appearance of a conflict of interest, and that is the advice she is always going to follow.

● (1450)

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is actually deeper than that. In fact, the Minister of Justice was the chairman of the First Nations Finance Authority until she was elected and ascended into cabinet. As she stepped out, her husband stepped in as a lobbyist. How can the Liberals continue to defend the minister?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are going to proudly continue to defend the minister, who is of such outstanding integrity. The member is clearly struggling with a very basic concept. When an issue like this arises, the appropriate thing to do is to ask the Ethics Commissioner, an independent officer of this Parliament, for her advice and to follow that advice. It is something that the member opposite is struggling with and I would advise him, as I did earlier this week, to meet with her and she could explain to him how it actually works.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the cozy ties between the government House leader and the Irving family run very deep. We now know that the government House leader appointed his good friend, Kevin Fram, as senior adviser in his office. Conveniently, just a few short days after, Mr. Fram was lobbied by Irving. When it comes to dealing with the Irving family, it is clear to everyone that the government House leader's so-called ethical screen is full of holes. How is this not clear to the House leader?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite seems to be a fan of Phoebe Gilman's book, *Something from Nothing*.

In the first 100 days of my mandate, I was very busy. I travelled from coast to coast to coast and had meetings with many key stakeholders. These individuals included provincial and territorial ministers, indigenous leaders, conservation and fisheries stakeholders, as well as industry. At the time of these meetings, this fine individual was a public servant from my department and was attending these meetings as my acting chief of—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Windsor West.

* * *

GASOLINE PRICES

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada's inflation rate rose to 2% in January, the highest rate increase in more than two years. Gas prices were the biggest contributor to this raise. Even the Bank of Canada has noted that falling oil prices have not been matched by lower prices at the pump.

The government has a role in preventing price fixing and collusion, so will the Liberals agree with our proposal for an oil and gas price ombudsman and a petroleum monitoring agency like they had before, so we can finally end this gouging at the pumps?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is a concern that, during the campaign when we were knocking on doors, we heard from different constituents. I look forward to working with the member opposite in finding a solution to make sure consumers are not being gouged, make sure we have a fair process, a competitive process, and make sure consumers have good choices to make, and I look forward to finding a solution with the member opposite.

* * *

CANADIAN COAST GUARD

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, just last week the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans approved a study on the imminent closure of the Comox MCTS, yet the minister seems to have already made up his mind. By implementing the Conservatives' reckless policy on closing MCTS centres, the Liberal government is putting the safety of boaters, shipping, and the environment at risk.

Will the minister do the responsible thing and wait for the findings of the committee before deciding on the future of this vital centre?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said many times, the Canadian Coast Guard has modernized its Marine Communications and Traffic Services centre with 21st century technology. We are moving forward with that plan, the equipment is working, and the committee members will do their work, and I am sure they will come to the same conclusions that we have, that the system is working and the coverage is exactly the same as it was before.

* * *

ETHICS

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is worse than just one meeting. The government House leader's new adviser is not really new at all, especially when it comes to dealing with the Irving family. Kevin Fram has already been in hot

water for trips he accepted to the Irving fish camp. Now he is working for the senior New Brunswick minister, who is supposed to have no dealings with the Irvings at all.

How can the minister have an ethical screen to the Irvings when both he and his senior staff are so closely tied to them?

• (1455)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is another fan of Phoebe Gilman's book, *Something from Nothing*.

Regarding the two meetings. I attended one of the meetings on January 17 with Mr. Fram, and it involved a not-for-profit organization called CAST, or Collaboration for Atlantic Salmon Tomorrow. The other meeting involving my acting chief of staff, Mr. Fram, was on January 20. It was a high-level meeting on shipbuilding. I asked him to attend on my behalf because I was in meetings in Quebec City.

* * *

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we already knew that the government has been inventing new phases for its plan to combat ISIS every day. This plan jumps from Jordan to Lebanon and from Syria to Iraq.

Yesterday, in the Senate, the Minister of National Defence indicated that this war plan now includes Africa.

Can the minister tell us what countries our soldiers will be fighting in and how he can justify that without Parliament's consent?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we clearly stated about our plan for the mission in Iraq, it was not just to take it into Iraq itself. We were taking a reasoned approach, and that was why it was a comprehensive plan.

I am glad the member listened to my statements in the Senate, because he would have realized what I was talking about.

We will also always consult with our allies on threats around the world. That is exactly what we are doing right now. We know a decision will be made. When the time comes, we will always take an open and transparent process to consult Parliament and move forward with that.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Defence is a great improviser.

After having a discussion with the Italian foreign affairs minister in Brussels, he is now moving the Canadian war effort against ISIS to Libya.

Oral Questions

Recently, in Washington, a senior official with the American government explained that it was not a good idea for Canada to go to Libya because of the presence of another terrorist group, Boko Haram.

What are Canadian soldiers going to do in Libya?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our government and our security forces will always look at threats around the world, not just Libya and other places. This is what responsible security forces do, and we will continue to do that.

I will look forward to all those conversations I will have with my counterparts from around the world, look at the threats and ensure that not only do we keep Canadians safe, but to keep our allies safe as well.

* * *

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Paul Lefebvre (Sudbury, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in 2015, more than 350,000 international students spent over \$10 billion in Canada and helped generate 90,000 jobs for Canadians.

Laurentian University, in my riding of Sudbury, is a big job creator. The community also benefits from the students this university brings in from around the world.

Can the Minister of International Trade tell the House about her initiatives to maintain Canada's status as a top destination for international students?

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Minister of International Trade, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a big part of my mandate is promoting the Canadian brand abroad.

That is why I was so proud to welcome Canada's new education brand, EduCanada. This brand was developed in collaboration with the provinces and territories to help attract the brightest international students, who will act as ambassadors for Canada.

We will continue to market the quality of a Canadian education.

* * *

[English]

TRANSPORT

Mrs. Kelly Block (Carlton Trail—Eagle Creek, CPC): Mr. Speaker, transportation is fundamental to Canada's economic performance.

For a government that is lacking in policies and standing in the way of job creation, the Canada Transportation Act review provides a clear opportunity to leverage our national transportation system into a strong economy.

The minister has had this report since December 21. With the review now tabled, how will the minister use it so industries across Canada can create jobs?

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I was delighted to table the Canada Transportation Act review this morning. In fact, it was initiated by the previous

government. We are glad to put it out. I made a special point of getting it out there so stakeholders could look at it as early as possible. That is what they will do.

We will also be consulting stakeholders throughout the rest of this year. We will come forward with recommendations that we decide are appropriate for Canada's transportation system for the next 20 to 30 years.

* * *

● (1500)

[Translation]

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this week Parliament welcomed creators, actors, and men and women who work tirelessly so that our films and television shows reflect our society and tell our stories.

However, with the CRTC's new rules that will come into effect next week, thousands of jobs are at risk. With their usual short-sightedness, the Conservatives had promised that these changes would have no impact on jobs, of course. As we all know, the Liberals have had a severe case of "consultitis" for the past four and a half months.

Besides just talking, what meaningful action does the minister plan to take to protect the creators and employees working in television?

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

I am pleased that he had the opportunity to meet with so many creators and people from the industry. I also had the opportunity to meet a number of creators, and I am very aware of the issues they face. My team and I understand very well that the technological changes will ultimately have an impact on many players in the industry. That is why we need to make sure we clearly understand how to make the transition from an analogue model to a digital model. Under the circumstances, that is why, as we plan to reinvest in our creators, we will also continue to consult in order to ensure—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Toronto—Danforth.

[English]

Ms. Julie Dabrusin (Toronto—Danforth, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada is preparing to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Confederation. In her mandate letter, the hon. Minister of Canadian Heritage was given the task of championing government-wide efforts to celebrate this important anniversary. Could the minister share with this House some of the steps her department is taking to get ready for Canada's sesquicentennial?

[Translation]

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Canadian Heritage, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

My team and I are working very hard on organizing festivities for the 150th anniversary of Confederation. Of course we will be focusing on a government-wide approach that will bring together Canadians from every community in the country.

Various projects have already been announced, including the tall ships and the Sesqui multimedia project that will travel across the country. Over the next few weeks, I will be making other announcements about further initiatives that will allow us to celebrate the 150th anniversary of our Confederation together.

* * *

[English]

TRANSPORT

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Grande Prairie—Mackenzie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Transport just stood up in the House and said that we would have consultations to make recommendations on recommendations based on consultations. At some point, the government actually has to do things.

The reason we had the expedited review of this act was to ensure grain could move. We saw it was not moving. The minister only commits to more recommendations and consultations and consultations and recommendations. Farmers want to know when will they finally have access to rail services?

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague is a bit confused, so let me clarify it for him. The grain is moving, by the way.

However, at the moment, we are going to present to Canadians and about 300 important stakeholders what this report looked at for the past 18 months. We will ask them what their opinion is, and we will make the decisions later on this year on how to go forward on Canada's national transportation system. The member should stand by; it is coming soon.

* * *

[Translation]

AEROSPACE INDUSTRY

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Mr. Speaker, 1,800 Aveos jobs, 2,400 Bombardier jobs, 1,000 Bell Helicopter jobs, and 300 CAE jobs are gone, not to mention all of the suppliers that are coping with uncertainty about their own survival.

The government rushed to support Ontario's auto industry a few years ago. This week it is leaping to Alberta's rescue.

How can the government justify its indifference toward Quebec's aerospace industry?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I recognize the importance of the aerospace industry. We are in talks with Bombardier. We are taking the time we need before making such an important decision.

* * *

● (1505)

AIR CANADA

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bécancour—Nicolet—Saurel, BQ): Mr. Speaker, let us talk about Air Canada. Under the Air Canada act, the company is supposed to maintain its entire fleet here. Many of its 408 planes need heavy maintenance now.

Points of Order

By changing the law, the minister is trading those guaranteed jobs for a hypothetical maintenance centre that might take care of 45 planes when they need to be refurbished in 10 years' time.

Instead of reiterating that this is good news, will the minister enforce the existing law?

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said repeatedly, we are pleased that Air Canada has decided to buy 45 Bombardier airplanes and possibly another 30. The airline has also decided to support the creation of a centre of excellence where these Canadian planes will be maintained for at least the next 20 years.

This will create jobs. It is good for the aerospace industry. Quebec is pleased. Canada is pleased. We should applaud this positive development.

[English]

Hon. Kevin Sorenson: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I think it is obvious now that Canadians know that when we are talking about our finances that they were better off with our Conservative government. The department knows it was better off with the Conservative government. The "Fiscal Monitor" shows it.

I seek unanimous consent to table the "Fiscal Monitor" that shows that we were better off.

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

SPECIAL JOINT COMMITTEE ON PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED DYING

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order concerning the report of the Special Joint Committee on Physician-Assisted Dying tabled earlier today.

Page 3 of the report lists me as a member of the committee representing the House of Commons. I was not appointed as a member of the committee. While I did attend virtually all of the committee's public hearings, as any member can, I was not part of the deliberations that resulted in the report, and I certainly do not endorse the content of the report. I ask that the record be corrected.

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for advising the House of that issue.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Thériault: Mr. Speaker, you will know that, today, fanatics have again launched a Quebec-bashing campaign following the comments made by the Premier of Saskatchewan. Therefore, I seek unanimous consent to move the following motion: That the House of Commons condemn the disrespectful remarks made by the Premier of Saskatchewan regarding Quebec and the fanatical call against Quebec by Ezra Levant.

[English]

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent?

Private Members' Business

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I would like to point out that the “Fiscal Monitor” is a snapshot in time, and does not give the fiscal situation—

The Speaker: The member knows that this is debate. We do not need any debate during points of order.

Now, we can go to the usual Thursday question. The hon. member for Regina—Qu'Appelle.

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before I ask the Thursday question, I would point out to the member for Malpeque that if he does not have a problem with it, he could allow us to table it. Anyway, I will keep to the matter at hand.

I know that next week we will all be hard at work in our constituency, meeting with constituents and various stakeholders. However, I was wondering if the government House leader could update the House as to what business will be deliberated both tomorrow and when we come back from our ridings.

• (1510)

[Translation]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this afternoon we will continue with debate on the opposition motion that we began this morning.

[English]

Tomorrow, we will have the final day of debate at second reading on Bill C-4, concerning unions. I would like to note that the votes relating to this bill will be deferred to the end of the day on Monday, March 7, pursuant to an order adopted earlier today.

I want to sincerely thank my colleagues in the House for their cooperation in finding an agreement on this matter, and also on the ISIL motion, which was debated earlier this week.

[Translation]

Next week, as my colleague indicated, members will be working in their ridings.

On Monday, March 7, we will resume debate, at second reading stage, of Bill C-2 concerning a tax cut for the middle class. I would like to inform the House that Tuesday, March 8, will be an allotted day. On Wednesday, we will begin debate at second reading stage of Bill C-6 on citizenship, which was introduced this morning by my colleague, the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. On Thursday, we will begin consideration of Bill C-5 concerning public servants' sick leave.

[English]

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I know that you have been looking forward to this. Pursuant to Standing Order 83 (2), I would ask that an order of the day be designated for the Minister of Finance to present the budget at 4 p.m., on Tuesday, March 22, 2016.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[Translation]

INCOME TAX ACT

(Bill C-222: On the Order: Private Members' Business)

Second reading and reference to the Standing Committee on Finance of Bill C-222, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (Canada-Barbados Income Tax Agreement) — Mr. Ste-Marie.

The Speaker: Before proceeding to the orders of the day, I wish to draw the House's attention to Bill C-222, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (Canada-Barbados Income Tax Agreement), standing in the name of the member for Joliette.

[English]

The bill is intended to amend the Income Tax Act, by including in the definition “taxable Canadian business”, any business that is entitled to a special tax benefit conferred by Barbados under the Canada-Barbados Income Tax Act Agreement, 1980. The purpose of the bill is to put an end to the tax benefits that certain companies currently enjoy under the income tax regulations. If the bill were adopted, it would increase the tax payable by these companies. Essentially, it involves eliminating a tax exemption.

[Translation]

As members know full well, any measures of this type raise questions about the need for ways and means motions. As it states on page 900 of the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, Second Edition, the House must adopt a ways and means motion before it can introduce a bill that imposes a tax or other charge on the taxpayer. Historically, this was referred to as charges against the people and, like today, required the adoption of a ways and means motion.

• (1515)

[English]

As described in the 24th edition of Erskine May, at page 761:

...‘charges upon the people’ may be...summarized as: (a) imposition of taxation, including the increase in rate, or extension in incidence, of existing taxation; (b) the repeal or reduction of existing alleviations of taxation, such as exemptions or drawbacks;

Further, at page 763, it states:

The requirement for a Ways and Means resolution also applies to any proposal for a change in tax law or the administration of tax collection which may lead, albeit incidentally, to an increased or accelerated tax burden for any class of taxpayers. A Ways and Means resolution was accordingly needed to authorize the Treasury to vary the way in which certain taxes have effect in relation to a transfer of property, rights or liabilities.

[Translation]

The question before the Chair is whether this is the case with Bill C-222. It is clear that, by obliging certain entities to bear an additional tax or charge by eliminating an exemption, the bill standing in the name of the member for Joliette would mean that the entities would pay more tax. As a result, C-222 should have been preceded by a ways and means motion. The rules in this respect are clear; such a motion can only be introduced by a minister.

Business of Supply

[English]

When confronted with a similar situation on November 4, 2011, my predecessor ruled that the legislative steps completed, namely introduction and first reading, had not respected the provisions of the Standing Orders and were therefore null and void.

[Translation]

The current circumstance is the same and, as a result, the Chair must order that the second reading of Bill C-222 be deemed null and void and that the bill be discharged from the Order Paper.

The hon. member is not without recourse. He may make use of a motion if he wants to ensure that the House debates this question. I therefore invite him to consider this option.

I thank hon. members for their attention.
(Order discharged and bill withdrawn)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am rising to talk today about employment insurance and the effect it has on the Canadian economy, Canadian citizens, and, most importantly, the most vulnerable in our communities. We can always measure a community and a country by how we treat our most vulnerable citizens. Sadly, Canada has not done a good job, not with our aboriginal nations, not with persons with disabilities, and, of course, not with social programs like employment insurance.

The motion today takes into account a number of different issues. The first is about acknowledging the mounting job losses. In Windsor West, we are not unfamiliar with this, having, for the last 14 years that I have been in the House, most usually among the highest, if not the highest, unemployment in the country. We have witnessed workers in the past who have paid into this system on a regular basis, only then to find out later that they do not qualify. That is a shame. When we pay into an insurance system, we would expect that we would get something back. We would expect that the terms and conditions of that policy would not be changed by others in this chamber, and over here with regard to the Conservatives, which has happened.

For example, say individuals sign a personal insurance policy for their house, the company would at least notify them if it were going to change the policy. Sometimes they would get a discount. If it were going to increase, they would at least be notified and have an option to get in or out of that product.

In the House of Commons over those years, we have seen unilateral majority-type changes that have changed people's input into employment insurance—sometimes for 30 or 40 years—and when they finally need it, they find out that they are not eligible. That is unacceptable. That is unfair. That is a breach of contract and

trust from the most important decision body there is, their government.

Individuals' insurance agencies do not take it for granted, but our own government does it to our own population, and it does it with a focus on the most vulnerable. The most vulnerable are part-time employees, employees who do not accumulate hours, and employees who have a disability who work part-time when they are able and end up not being eligible for employment insurance. It is not their fault that they are in precarious work, meaning part-time, seasonal jobs, and temporary employment.

Coming from a community that has faced this, we have gone from regular mainstream employers being the number one employment, to now having employment agencies as the number one employer in our region. It is a shame. I used to work on behalf of persons with disabilities as an employment specialist. Thank goodness, we actually had support to do this. We worked to get people off of disability support, be it provincial or federal. I was a support case worker. I was an employment specialist, who went out and made contact with employers and trained the employees. We got them jobs.

Sadly, the province at that time, first the Conservatives and then the Liberals, clawed back the Ontario disability support program payments to up to 75% of what the employees earned on this program. People went to work every single day without a problem. They were proud to have a job and to contribute. They made friends and other contacts that they normally would not have had. However, they worked at 25% of the wage of everybody else who worked there.

These unacceptable practices are ingrained into our political system. My appeal today is to my colleagues. Let us stop being part of that. Let us stop being part of a matrix of issues that end up costing our workers so much.

Part of this campaign that we are working on is to ensure that all Canadians have immediate action taken on this file. We cannot wait any longer. We see what is happening in Alberta right now, and in other places and jurisdictions. It is one of several places. We have seen what has happened on the east coast before. It is very significant. If my good friend, Yvon Godin, were here, he would certainly give highlights and would be proud to carry the flag for them in their region.

● (1520)

He started out talking about employment insurance. He actually talked about it to get his message out. He got into the back of a truck and used a bullhorn to talk to people in parking lots, grocery stores, and other places, and people would come to hear Yvon speak. He took it on the road all over the place. We miss his voice in this debate. However, he is here in spirit with us New Democrats, and we are proud of that.

Another issue we have with the employment insurance system is the qualifying period. There needs to be a national base minimum acceptance level one must qualify for to obtain employment insurance.

Business of Supply

Right now, the employment insurance system is like a gigantic puzzle for people when they are experiencing a most stressful time, such as having lost their job or been laid off, not knowing what the future holds for them and their family. Their colleagues are in the same predicament, and they wonder where the next mortgage payment will come from. They submit a claim in the EI process and it becomes a crapshoot whether or not they will be accepted. Therefore, we have proposed a qualifying minimum of 360 hours. We feel that is a stable level, because in certain areas of my region, it is generally over 400 hours. However, there are people in pockets and areas of the region where it is difficult to get work and hard to achieve the 360-hour minimum, so they wait around for something to happen because there is a two-week waiting period, which is painful for people.

On the other hand, we spend valuable resources on casework and programming, which is ridiculous. For example, when the Chrysler plant in my region needs to retool, it plans this well in advance, for up to a year. As it is well planned out, the employment insurance staff know that those positions will be returning in a matter of weeks. However, they send the workers who have been laid off due to retooling to employment insurance school to learn how to get another job even though they will be returning to their jobs. It is a waste of resources that we could be using on other people who do not have a job to return to, rather than for those who would in any case be going back to a job that pays benefits and is good for the community.

Another issue I would like to speak to is that both the Liberals and the Conservatives purged the surplus in the EI fund. That needs to be protected.

• (1525)

Mr. David Christopherson: Stolen, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Brian Masse: “Stolen” is the right word.

Let us discuss what employment insurance really is. It is the workers' contribution as citizens and employees, and the employers' contribution for that employment insurance aspect. There is no government money involved in that whatsoever. We simply run the program.

That purging of the system has to stop. There was \$56 billion that was stolen from workers. They need to return it now.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I can agree with a fair amount of what my colleague shared with the House. Perhaps I will disagree with him that Yvon Godin, our former friend and colleague, would need any kind of voice amplification if he were standing on the back of a truck. In this House, he was certainly very passionate and well-informed on issues around EI, and he brought that issue to the House on many occasions. Certainly, our colleague from Acadie—Bathurst is doing the same from this bench.

Much of the motion today does align with promises that we have made and that we as a government intend to keep going forward. However, we do differ on some choices in a couple of areas. One of the main issues is that we had indicated we would reduce the wait time from two weeks to one week, and there are certain costs involved in that.

Although it is not mentioned in the motion, does my colleague agree with the reduction of the waiting period from two weeks to one week?

Mr. Brian Masse: Madam Speaker, the member's comments about Yvon Godin are very germane. The only reason he needed a bullhorn was that the crowds were so large. There was such an interest in the subject matter that even Yvon needed help. Anyone who knows Yvon knows how loud he can be. I appreciate my colleague's intervention on his work and his knowledge of that. It is very kind and generous.

With regard to the issue of the reduction from two weeks to one week, or no weeks, it is not our money. If people qualify, they qualify and they get their money. I do not know why we have to keep one week of people's earnings that they contributed as employees and the employer has contributed. I say we should give that money back.

Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Madam Speaker, given that there has been so much reminiscing about a former colleague, Yvon Godin, I say it was good to see former colleague Jeff Watson, the former MP for Essex, who was in town last night. I know he mixed it up on occasion with my friend from Windsor West, but he was a tremendous advocate for working people, particularly in Windsor.

I agree with a couple of the comments by my colleague in the NDP. Certainly the stress of the waiting period and uncertainty related to EI is something that all members of Parliament hear in their offices from people, and if there is a problem, we all like to try to help people access the program.

Where I disagree and where it seems this opposition day motion is really missing the mark is that this program is an insurance program. As the member said, it is their money, but they have to pay into a program to then receive from it. A threshold of 360 hours ends up being only 45 days of work, and that would not be a positive incentive for an insurance program that is to be there for people when they lose a permanent job, people have paid into the insurance program for that purpose.

I would ask the member how it would help our economy and the sustainability of the EI program to have a threshold that is really far too low.

• (1530)

Mr. Brian Masse: Madam Speaker, first of all, putting any money back into poor people's pockets is a boost to the economy. We are talking about saving their homes, making sure they have money for food and the basics, and looking for another job.

If members do not believe me, believe the person in my riding who wrote to me, Michelle Baldwin. She was attacked and had a back injury. She stated, “I have not yet received a dime from EI, although I have provided all the necessary items”. She worked a part-time job for about six months, lasting until October, which was the reason for the delay, and then was no longer provided any support. She paid in up to her capability with the jobs that were available and what her physical condition allowed, and yet her claim was totally nullified because she worked a part-time job. Part-time jobs do not pay a lot of money normally. She was nullified.

Business of Supply

We made someone with a disability and who is living on the poverty line pay into something she would never get. That is a shame and the government over here is also complicit in taking from the employment insurance money. It is their money, not the government's.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am very happy to join the debate on the motion.

I would like to inform the House that I will be sharing my time with the member for Kenora.

I just had a conversation with the member for Kenora, who was in the House quite a few years prior to this, and he said this is probably more about the fact that the NDP want to be seen as pushing the government to make change.

Earlier I shared with the House my great love and appreciation for that famous American philosopher, Willie Nelson, whose definition of a leader is when one sees a whole group of people going in one direction, to grab a baton and jump out in front. I think that is where we are today.

We said in our platform that we would address the changes that had been made to EI by the past government, because we know they have hurt workers. We were very clear in our platform that we would change that and take some responsibility and show some leadership on this.

In response to the throne speech, and certainly every day in the House, although there have not been any questions from the Conservatives on this, the leader of the NDP asks the Prime Minister about it. The Prime Minister is steadfast that we are serious about this. We made the promises. I know that our minister is seized with this and is very much engaged in it. I am looking forward to when she comes forward with a tranche of changes.

However, I think it would be helpful for the debate to peel back a little to at least 2012 and see the changes that were made at that point, because there were significant changes that hurt many areas and sectors of this country.

In Atlantic Canada, seasonal workers and industries contribute to 53% of the regional GDP. Those industries, whether tourism, forestry, fishery, construction, or whatever it might be, need a skilled labour force. However, what we saw with the changes made by the last government was that they chased people out of rural communities. The Conservatives vilify seasonal workers in particular.

Members might remember the satirical show *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* when the actors were chasing EI recipients around Prince Edward Island. They came up with a skit called "PEI EI PI" where they were chasing people down and hiding behind bushes to see whether or not they were really out looking for work. That is when people saw the government sort of turning over those rocks.

We absolutely believe that there has to be integrity in the system, and I do not think that the NDP believe anything less. However, the Conservatives' changes went beyond. We heard this from provincial and municipal leaders. We would hear from councillors in rural communities or a county warden who knew that the main job

provider in the community was having trouble finding workers, because they were being scared out of seasonal industries. Those industries were hanging on by a shoestring, and these changes did nothing to enhance their opportunities. We see now that a lot of those sectors are up against this problem of trying to find qualified workers. These changes very much had an impact.

The Conservatives also tried to starve the beast. It was almost like they did it on purpose. They cut 600 jobs out of EI processing and call centres. In 2008, Service Canada had a service standard that if one phoned a call centre, 95% of the time the call was answered within three minutes. However, the Conservatives cut the jobs, sent those people home, and closed those call centres and processing centres in everyone's riding except Peter MacKay's and Gerald Keddy's—but I do not want to be cynical about this, and maybe that was just a coincidence. However, when they closed those call centres, they lost those people working the phones.

• (1535)

By the end of that year, the call centres had to downgrade the service standard from 95% of the calls being answered in three minutes to 80% of the calls being answered in three minutes. By 2014, they were not hitting the 80% in three minutes. They had to downgrade it again to 80% of the calls in ten minutes.

We heard testimony at the committee. We spoke with some young apprentices. They said that they had to quit their apprenticeship. When they go back to school, they receive EI benefits. However, they were waiting too long for their benefits. I asked why they did not phone the 1-800 number, knowing very well what the answer would be.

They had three stages of answers they would get. The first stage was that they would actually get a warm body to say, "Yes, I am here. I am from the government and I am here to help you." The second was, "Please hold, a representative will be with you shortly." The third level was, "Could you please phone back later", because of the number of the calls, and it would be a dropped call. Fifty-two per cent of the time, people would get that third level. If they got the first level, they should have gone out and bought some quick picks because their planets were aligned.

People who worked at low-wage jobs, who had finished their work, paid into the plan, made application, and were deserving of the benefits were frustrated and scared. They had to make a decision between putting fuel in the tank, or food in the fridge, or fill a prescription. That is a tough call at the kitchen table, and that was where a lot of people were.

The anxiety level in those households went through the roof. Whether it was a tactic or whether or it was an outcome that the government had not intended, and I am not sure, that is exactly what happened.

We hope to make those investments. We hope to fix those problems with the slate of changes we will come forward with. We understand and respect the intent of the changes identified in today's motion.

Business of Supply

We are committed to making the program more accessible. We believe the 920 hours needed for new entrance or re-entrance into the program is a detriment. It is punitive. If we go back to the different regions of the country that have unemployment rates, if we abide by them and make those the qualifying hours for first-time or re-entrance, that will certainly increase the number of Canadians who have access to the program. That levels the field, in many cases, and will be of great help. This is what we heard during the campaign. People believed this was necessary to fix the program.

When we talk about Canadians who work in low-wage jobs or in precarious employment, quite often there are concerns around numeracy and literacy. Certainly the cuts made by the past government to the LMAs to various provinces impacted directly. I know the minister at the time said that we were not running these programs, but provinces relied on those dollars, and they were delivering numeracy and literacy programs. These are our most vulnerable in society.

I see a great deal of merit in today's motion. I probably agree more so with the member for Kenora. I am very pleased with the Prime Minister and the minister coming forward with a solid slate of progressive changes that will help support a modern workforce in this day and age, and that will help Canadian workers.

We look forward to the time when we can present the government's changes to EI.

• (1540)

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I always enjoy hearing the hon. member speak. All the eight years I have been here, it has been a pleasure, but he did not have a rhyme on this one.

We keep hearing from the government side about the commitment. We hear from the minister that it is being worked on, but what my province, the premier of my province, and Mayor Iveson are looking for is a change more quickly for Alberta. I can empathize with the struggle for employment in the Maritimes. Certainly the resource sector in Newfoundland and Labrador has been hit, just like in Alberta. However, in the Maritimes people can claim with far less hours and get benefits for a much longer time.

Is it not fair that Alberta be treated better now? It is possible for the government to move expeditiously by simply changing the eligibility requirements and length of benefits for Albertans.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Madam Speaker, I know many Albertans are having a very difficult time. Atlantic Canadians have been part of the success of Alberta. They have worked rotations. I was at the airport the other day. Usually there are 10 rows of Ford F-150 stretch cabs parked at the Sydney airport. I parked in the middle of the second row. Alberta's pain is being felt across the country. It has long been the engine that has driven our economy.

I know the minister is absolutely engaged on the question around the time period and the qualifiers. As the unemployment rate rises, there are natural triggers within the system. Changes to qualifying and the period of time that one receives benefits are coming. I know our officials are in constant contact with the Alberta officials. I very much hope they will come sooner rather than later.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Madam Speaker, the member spoke earlier today and again just now about his appreciation for what was going on in Alberta. It is good to hear there is some support on that side of the floor. I hope he talks to the rest of his colleagues about the support that Alberta needs.

He is right that Atlantic Canadians have had a very significant impact on what has gone on in Alberta. We can see that with the number of flights leaving Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie. They have decreased to almost nothing in the last several months.

The Liberals have talked about agreeing with almost everything in the NDP opposition day motion, but one of the things that really concerns me is the thought of a 45-day work year. When the 45-day work year was first discussed in the House, I honestly thought somebody misspoke. I cannot believe we are supporting a 45-day work year. This is unsustainable. That leaves 320 days of the year that the government or other taxpayers are going to be subsidizing people on EI benefits. They have only paid into EI for 45 days and will claim for an entire year.

Could the member explain to me how a 45-day work year would be sustainable in the long term for the Government of Canada?

• (1545)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Madam Speaker, that would be the most concerning aspect of the motion. That was never in the Liberal platform and 360 hours was never something about which we talked. In our platform, we heralded the importance of increasing access, and we think we accomplished that by reducing the 920 hours down to regional standards. We think that can be done and we expect that to come forward, certainly when the package comes from the minister, very shortly. The issue of the 360 hours is of concern to this side of the House as well.

Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is always a pleasure for me to follow my esteemed colleague and to enter into a debate that is extremely important to all Canadians.

The opposition is concerned about the unemployment rate in Alberta. I come from a region in Northern Ontario. My constituents have been living with an unemployment rate of 13% for at least a decade under the Conservatives. People in my region have become so used to a 13% unemployment rate that they think it is normal. That is why I am in this debate.

We as a government work with Canadians to supply employment insurance and different programs and services. We have to remember there are many parts of our country that struggle continuously just to survive.

Business of Supply

I speak to this from the perspective of what government is supposed to do on behalf of Canadians. Our role as government and as parliamentarians is to protect the most vulnerable. How do we characterize the most vulnerable? For me, they are the poorest people in our society. They are the seniors who are struggling just to make ends meet. They are our veterans, who we should always support because they have done their share in defending the democratic interests of our country. Those are the vulnerable people who we speak about on a regular basis. We want to ensure we make programs and services available to them.

People in the workplace are also vulnerable, whether they be part-time employees or employees making minimum wage. Canada's minimum wage is not a working wage in this society. It needs to be looked at in a serious way. We need to think about the unemployed from the perspective of regions of the country like mine where there are a lot of seasonal employees who have no choice but to accept the fact that in any given year there will be periods of time when they will be unemployed. We as governments have put in place programs that we think will help these vulnerable people.

One of the reasons why I am interested in speaking to the motion is that the NDP has put it forward for reasons that are not genuine. Those members know darn well that this government is within days of making some serious announcements about some of the major changes that we want to make. We committed to making these changes during the election campaign. The NDP members know this will happen because they have heard it from all of us day in and day out in the House and they have heard it from the Prime Minister.

Let me just repeat some of this for members opposite.

I have been fighting NDP candidates in my region for decades now. I beat them pretty much every time I run against them, and I will tell the House why. I beat them because they are not realistic in the way they approach their campaigns, and here is an example.

The New Democratic candidates who ran in the last campaign told everybody that they would balance the books in the first, second, third and fourth year. We all knew that would never happen. It was easy on the hustings to talk about the NDP and some of its policies. Those policies have to be real if we want to convince Canadians to vote for us. I had the great pleasure of running against the ex-NDP leader in Ontario. I enjoyed my time on the hustings against him because he was talking as if he was still in the sixties, not 2015.

I tell the House that because it goes to the motion we have been presented with today. We on this side of the House would love to support the motion. The member for Malpeque and I were just talking about that. If the NDP had presented a realistic motion, we would be on our feet supporting it. However, we cannot possibly support it because of the way it has been crafted. That plays into the NDP's hands, that the Liberals do not care about EI or the unemployed, but that is not the case.

● (1550)

In the short time I have, I am going to give a quick list of what this government is prepared to do within a matter of days.

To that end, we are going to eliminate the discrimination against workers that are newly entering the workforce or re-entering the workforce. That was mentioned by the parliamentary secretary.

We are going to reverse the 2012 changes to the employment insurance system that force unemployed workers to move away from their communities and take lower-paying jobs. I represent one-third of Ontario's land mass. Moving away is a serious matter. That is like moving from one end of the Atlantic to the other and still being in my riding. So when people talk about moving away to take another job, I hope they do not mean the folks that I represent moving to Toronto, which would take 22 hours non-stop driving just to get there. We have to be realistic about the kind of things that the Conservatives brought in that just do not work.

I want to get a chance to speak about the rationalizing and expanding of the intergovernmental agreements, which is the labour market development agreement, and supporting training for unemployed workers.

I will stop with that list because it is exhaustive, but I want to speak to the really important commitment of this government. Those are going to be changes that we can make relatively quickly in the House, but the real interest from my perspective is the undertaking of a broad review.

If we know that employment insurance is so important to our constituents, and 40% of our constituents can qualify and the rest cannot, then we know we have a system that is broken, that needs to be looked at, that needs to be reviewed, that needs a broad review by government as to how we are going to get the other 60% of the people, who are not part of this system, into play if they need our help from government for employees and employers.

Keep in mind that this is a program that is funded by employers and employees. Keep in mind as well that we have a Canada Employment Insurance Commission, and we should be looking at the mandate of that commission. The commission should not have just the one job, the one role of looking at what amount each employer and employee pays into the system. We should look at the commission's role and responsibilities from the perspective of making sure that this program really does help Canadians; because if it does not, then we are just relying on the provinces to basically give these workers social assistance, when they may just need a step forward on skills development, on training, on opportunities for them to improve their lives and then potentially move on to another job.

When we made the commitment that we wanted to move from \$500 million a year to provinces and territories for workers who are not eligible for EI, to increase it by an extra \$200 million, so \$700 million a year, I think that was a good start. Those are the people we are talking about. We are talking about the 60% who do not qualify, and where do they get help? They get help under that tool, that part of the EI system. So the more we can do in that area, and help those folks, makes a big difference.

Then the whole issue of the LMAs and the \$2 billion of labour market programs, that is just a small amount in the system toward building the training structure and moving beyond the economy we have today and looking at productivity and how people would work in the new economy.

Business of Supply

I do not enjoy representing a region that has 13% unemployment. I am here to try to make a difference. When I left politics in 2004, the unemployment rate in my region was around 10% and it had dropped from about 17% during the major recession when the Mulroney government was in power. When I came here, we worked very hard to start moving toward an unemployment rate that might be a little more realistic for a region like mine. That tells me that this program that the government has announced, which we will see in a few days, is the right approach to improving a system that all of us think needs to be improved.

• (1555)

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Madam Speaker, I come from the building trades, and many of the people who are out of work across the country right now are tradespeople. It is frustrating for them, having paid a lot into the EI system, to now not be able to access those benefits when they need them. Their frustration increases in proportion to the amounts that they learn were taken out of the EI fund by successive Liberal and Conservative governments to use for other purposes, often corporate tax breaks, in fact.

The member for Kenora said there were aspects of the motion that he thought were unreasonable. We will have to agree to disagree on those. However, he certainly cannot think that the aspect of the motion is unreasonable that calls on the government to protect the EI fund from the whims of government dipping into it, taking money out of it, and using it for corporate tax cuts and other purposes. I would like him to stand up and let us know that he believes that is reasonable, and he will be calling on his government to ensure the EI fund is protected.

Hon. Robert Nault: Madam Speaker, I go back to what I said earlier. The NDP already knows that is a commitment we made in the last platform, that in fact we are moving toward a structure in 2017 where the government will not be able to use those funds in its general revenue. Everyone in this place knows that, but the NDP pretends it somehow never happened. That is a commitment we have made very clearly. The minister has made it. The parliamentary secretary has made it. We on this side have all made it.

I do agree with the member that there are some components of the motion that are good. That is important. One of the things I do not like about the present structure is the way the training structure works. I hope in the larger review, we will look at how the training process works for those skilled tradespeople who are doing apprenticeships and things like that.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am happy to hear that the Liberals will also not be supporting the motion.

My colleague from Kenora was mentioning earlier in his speech about one of the big issues we have, which is that we are forcing Canadians to leave and go to find employment somewhere else in a lower-paying job. However, the key to that statement is that they are employed. What we are really trying to seek here is to take people off EI and make sure they get a job.

When I was 17 years old, I left Saskatchewan, which was under an NDP government and went to Alberta, which was under a Conservative government, to find a job. That is what we do. We go and find jobs where they are.

I would like to ask my colleague why he sees keeping unemployed people on social assistance for long term as an issue, when the key should be trying to find them another job.

Hon. Robert Nault: Madam Speaker, this is the issue with the Conservatives. They think we should uproot a whole family for a job that is minimum wage or just above minimum wage. Imagine saying that to a family that is on EI, that has been structured and working in seasonal employment. That was what the Conservatives were trying to accomplish until everyone figured it out, and that is why they are over there.

The reality is that we do not move a whole family for a low-paying job. If individuals can get a job that pays a high wage, then in fact they will make that move. The problem with the Conservatives' program was they were trying to make people who were on seasonal employment move for low-paying jobs, and move their whole family, when in fact that would not work.

• (1600)

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I just want to remind members that, if they want to ask further questions, all they have to do is stand up and try to be recognized.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Malpeque.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the member for Kenora talked about his region and the high unemployment rate, but I know his region is like a lot of Canada. There is a lot of diversity in the country. In his area, there are certainly a lot of seasonal industries, such as mining, tourism, and other such industries. I wonder if he could spell out to the House how important the changes that the Liberal government is proposing are to the seasonal industries and their health and prosperity in our country.

Hon. Robert Nault: Madam Speaker, these changes and the larger review will allow us to look at the productivity and the opportunities that regions like mine have. We are a successful mining region. In the past, we have been successful in forestry, and we will be again once we move to new products and new structures. Therefore, this analysis and the work being done by the minister responsible will give us the opportunity to see how the new jobs in the future will be developed through the training and through the role we have with the provinces and the territories. That is why we are excited to see these changes coming forward.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for North Island—Powell River.

While it is an honour to rise in the House today in support of this motion, I cannot say that I am happy; rather, I am concerned, disheartened, and angered by the repeated abuse and neglect of our employment insurance program, which is one of Canada's key social programs, a cornerstone of our social democracy, and an important part of our social safety net. That abuse and neglect makes this motion brought forward by the member for Jonquière very necessary.

Business of Supply

We have experienced nothing but lip service and empty promises on the part of Liberal and Conservative governments who conveniently forget their promises as soon as they are in power, by restricting access to benefits for vulnerable Canadians and using the funds, built from the premiums of workers and employers, like a cookie jar that they can raid in order to continue corporate pandering and give the illusion of a balanced budget.

Let me remind members of the proud social democratic roots that are the foundation of our country, the foundation of programs like employment insurance in Canada, which were created to ensure fairness, equity, and that no one is left behind.

A social democratic society provides balance in a capitalist economy with the recognition that some core values, such as access to decent employment, health care, affordable housing, education, pensions, food, and union representation, among others, are not commodities to be marketed away at the whim of the corporate or government elites.

It was a Canadian, John Humphrey, who drafted the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948. It is a declaration that was subsequently enshrined in international law in 1976. I should add that it is a law that was and is endorsed by every province in this country.

In his autobiography, Humphrey was clear about the centrality of social and economic rights to the lives of ordinary people, and he stressed that other human rights have no meaning without them. This is the proud legacy we hold as Canadians; and the foundation of institutions, such as our employment insurance program, was created in the spirit of that legacy. We must not let the government tell us it cannot be done.

In a lecture on the future of social democracy by the Hon. Ed Broadbent in November 2015, he pointed out that the most stable and robust economy that the U.S. has ever experienced was in the 1960s, a period in which social programs were strongest in that country. When we think about it, this is truly what trickle-down economics should be, because that economic stability, a period in which the U.S. GDP was strongest, was the result of progressive policies and social programs implemented by Franklin Delano Roosevelt following the Great Depression and World War II.

Equal societies improve outcomes for everyone. A strong EI system in Canada not only benefits those whose employment has been interrupted, but it benefits dependent family members and children who are able to remain well fed, clothed, and adequately housed. It benefits the local economies, because even unemployed workers have money to spend in their community.

Our motion today calls upon the government to honour its campaign promises and throne speech commitment to strengthen the employment insurance system by taking immediate action to do the following: one, create a universal qualifying threshold of 360 hours for employment insurance, regardless of the regional rate of unemployment; two, immediately repeal the harmful reforms of the previous government, including those that force unemployed workers to move away from their community and take lower-paying jobs, and those that eliminated the extended EI benefits pilot program to help seasonal workers; and three, protect the employment

insurance account to ensure that the funds are only spent on benefits for Canadians, including training, and are never again used to boost the government's bottom line. We certainly saw that from the Conservatives and the Liberals.

● (1605)

In my community of London, Ontario, the unemployment rate is 5.8%. This is a bit of good news for a region that has been very hard hit in the last five years, but we cannot forget that this region has long been hard hit by the loss of well-paid and stable manufacturing jobs as a result of government's historical refusal to insulate our economy from globalization. It is becoming harder and harder for those who have not found a stable, lasting job to get help when they need it.

Currently in London, workers need a staggering 700 hours to qualify for employment insurance benefits. That amounts to more than four consecutive months of full-time work. Sadly, in a world where precarious, temporary or short-term contract jobs dominate the job market, many people find themselves in jobs that only last 90 days, leaving workers a full month short of eligibility for EI.

Let me tell the House about the situation faced by one of my constituents. Steve completed his training program last year, having returned to school to retrain as a machine operator. He successfully secured an apprenticeship and put his new-found skills to work over the summer and through the fall. He was laid off recently and did not qualify for unemployment because he fell 17 hours short of qualifying for EI benefits. Steve has always been a hard worker. He contributes to society. He pays his taxes. Now, as he has been unable to find any sort of job, he is left to live on social assistance of \$590 a month, much less than he would have been eligible for on employment insurance.

Steve is an example of why we need a 360-hour eligibility standard. If Steve is lucky enough to locate work, there is a good chance in today's economy that it will be a low-wage, temporary, or contract job. Even apprenticeships are precarious and all the retraining possible does not help workers who have taken the initiative to retrain themselves but remain ineligible for EI.

Another constituent, Chris Gerrits, wants this House to know about his wife whose employment was interrupted because she required two major surgeries in the past year. She went back to work between surgeries, and as a result, has been left without an income since August because she was not able to work enough hours between surgeries to qualify for further benefits.

These people are contributing to the EI program. In both cases they have contributed for many, many years before needing to turn to EI for help, only to find that the help was not there when it was needed. These are the people our current system is failing, and this is the reason we stand here today in this House calling for reform.

Business of Supply

The sad reality for Canadian workers today is the erosion of full-time, permanent, and well-paid work, and the need for people to work two, three, even four jobs in order to make ends meet. More and more Canadians must contend with precarious work conditions because our market cannot or will not provide better. We cannot ignore the fact that an intersectional analysis of this phenomenon reveals that subsections of workers, such as women, young people, seniors, immigrants, indigenous people, and disabled people are most vulnerable to the effects of precarious work.

According to the parliamentary budget officer, many Canadians who are not receiving EI have been unemployed for more than a year or were employed in precarious work that made it difficult for them to accumulate enough hours to qualify.

The New Democratic Party of Canada believes that higher levels of employment, gender and economic equality, social rights, civil liberties, and environmental economic sustainability can be achieved in this system where government plays a major role. That role is to strengthen social programs, ensuring their sustainability in order to fuel a thriving, robust economy.

Sadly, the legacy of Liberal and Conservative governments has been to weaken social programs such as EI. The systemic disregard of previous governments also ignores the reality that social programs provide infrastructure for a healthy economy. We have seen Liberals and Conservatives drastically slash access to employment insurance, leaving a majority of Canadians without benefits. This is simply not acceptable.

I hope this new government is listening and is ready to act instead of giving old promises. I have seen promises. I remember red books in the past.

•(1610)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to commend my colleague on her speech.

I had the opportunity to meet some of her constituents a few years ago. She is talking today and I would like people to listen to what we have to say because this is a really important issue.

People who are getting employment insurance benefits are already having problems. Imagine those who are waiting to get them. The number of people waiting for benefits right now is staggering. It does not make any sense that they all contributed to a program that they do not have access to.

When my colleague speaks about people, she refers to them by name because she knows them. I know how close this member is to her constituents.

Does she not find it appalling to see the cynicism of members who are saying that, of course, we need to reform the system, when in reality we all know that the Liberals signal left during elections and then turn right once they take office? They have been doing that for a long time. Is that not true?

[*English*]

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Madam Speaker, when I talk about the fact that I remember Liberal promises of the past, I remember the red books of 1993, 1997, 2000, and 2003. The Liberals promised all

kinds of things. In 1997, they promised that pharmacare was going to exist by January of 1998. They promised child care. They promised all kinds of supports for workers, and they never delivered.

I have this very terrible feeling that as this budget unfolds, we are going to see a pulling back, like we saw in the 13 years of Liberal government, a pulling back from the promises that Canadians depended on and believed in. As my colleague says, they signal left and then turn right.

Ms. Kate Young (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Lib.): Madam Speaker, as the representative of London West, I agree that people are suffering. They are hurting and struggling, and changes need to be made.

This government is working to fulfill commitments made in the campaign and in the Speech from the Throne on employment insurance. It is being reviewed and changes are coming very soon, as the Prime Minister has stated many times in the House of Commons and as I state again today.

•(1615)

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Madam Speaker, I have to tell a story, which I perhaps have told before. In 1997, then prime minister Jean Chrétien gave a speech at a \$250-a-plate luncheon to those very well placed in society, such as business corporations and those in the industry sector. He said, “You have slain the deficit. You are wonderful, you have slain the deficit that this country had.” That was not quite true. The deficit was certainly lower, but it was not that bunch who slew it, it was the workers of this country, because \$54 billion was stolen from the employment insurance account that those workers and employers had diligently put aside so that workers could benefit.

I have some concerns and this motion is absolutely directed toward the government. We are saying it should live up to its obligations and help the people of this country.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): I want to remind the member that she cannot, directly or indirectly, use the word “stolen”. I would ask her to be very careful when using that language in the House. No one can be accused of stealing something.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Repentigny.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Madam Speaker, I applaud the motion moved by my NDP colleagues because the Bloc Québécois has been advocating for years for the EI fund to be independent and for it to no longer be used to increase government revenue. I know my colleagues agree with that position.

One of the members who spoke earlier talked a lot about Liberal promises. However, one promise that the NDP made during the election campaign is that it would take \$7 billion from the employment insurance fund.

Business of Supply

Am I to take the party's change in position as an official apology to unemployed workers?

[English]

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Madam Speaker, we in the NDP stand by what we believe is going to be the solution for this situation.

In terms of the government acquiring \$54 billion by the Liberals and \$3 billion by the Conservatives, this money is owed to workers, and we would like to see it returned.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very happy to stand here in this House to talk about this very important motion. I would like to thank my colleague for bringing the motion forward.

This is an important issue across Canada and in my riding. It is about fairness and equity for members of all of our communities when facing the challenges of a changing economy. For this reason, I am very happy to speak in support of this motion.

In my riding of North Island—Powell River, we have faced multiple hits to our economy. With a large resource-based economy, the jobs have changed, and this has increased the mobility of our communities. Many people have to travel far away for work while leaving their families in our region. With the lack of flexibility of accessing EI, the stress on families has increased, leaving them struggling financially or forced to travel great distances for work.

EI should be a tool for people to use when work ends, to support new training to find work in their community, and to stop the growth of poverty during hard times, thus providing families with the security they need to move forward toward a positive outcome.

Before the Liberals desecrated the then unemployment insurance benefits program, over 80% of unemployed Canadians received support. After the Liberal reforms, cover fell to less than 50% of those same Canadians. This was tremendously hard for the people in my riding.

The people in my riding work hard and are proud of the work that they do. They are committed to their communities and work hard to remain there. This means taking work as it comes. In such a beautiful riding, tourism is a large part of this economy. However, with this sector, often seasonal work is a reality.

Now these hard-working people are faced with increased pressures. Some are left with just under the amount of hours required to be eligible for EI. Some are working jobs that do not pay well, and when they are left waiting for EI to start, face serious concerns with paying their everyday bills. People should not have to lose their homes or power, or go without food because they are waiting too long for the resources they require.

Then, in 2013, the Conservatives introduced harmful reforms that had long-term impacts on our communities. Seasonal workers have limited opportunities for short-term work when it is out of their normal work season. Working while on a claim has also been dangerously changed to limit flexibility for families.

Low-income workers used to be protected and be able to earn an amount to keep their families from poverty. This meant that families could survive, and people were encouraged to work and continue to

build their networks for future opportunities. Once the Conservatives changed the rules to have workers able to keep only 50% of their income, across the low- to high-income earners, low-income workers were penalized and higher-income earners were able to make more. This is shameful.

Low-income earners are getting further and further behind, and people are struggling. Negative outcomes on health, well-being, and stability are increasing. People are asking for help and need to be treated with respect during these hard times, not treated as if they are less than.

The Conservatives added to this, and fewer than four out of 10 unemployed Canadians were receiving regular EI benefits. The tool was largely destroyed, and the protection for Canadians during hard times continued to be reduced. No wonder income inequality is growing and Canadians are struggling to make ends meet.

In my riding, I received complaints about the accessibility of EI: the lack of a voice on the other end of the phone to support them while filling out forms; a lack of information to make informed decisions to support their next steps when their work ends; families unable to feed their children because of the long wait times; and as one constituent said to me, "I am made to feel like a person begging for a handout rather a person who has paid into the EI system for years and now needs help". This is simply not right. Immediate change is required.

The number of insured hours workers have to log before they qualify for EI benefits has sharply increased in the past years. The qualifying period is one of the major contributors in terms of limiting access for workers on this account. Today, the number of hours based on the regional rate of unemployment in an EI claimant's region can vary between 420 to 700 hours in the preceding 52 weeks before they make a claim.

● (1620)

In my region, the number of insured hours required to qualify for regular benefits is 560. This is simply too many.

According to the parliamentary budget officer, many of the Canadians who are not receiving EI have been unemployed for more than a year, or were employed in precarious work that made it difficult for them to accumulate enough hours. Instead of ostracizing workers, the NDP has proposed a threshold of 360 hours for workers regardless of where they live. The 360-hour threshold has been endorsed by 80 Canadian groups, including labour unions, anti-poverty groups, student groups, and women's groups. This includes the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor, and the Vancouver and District Labour Council. Based on the NDP's calculations during the campaign, the cost of this proposal would be affordable.

Business of Supply

The government committed to strengthening the employment insurance system by eliminating the new entrant and re-entrant rule. The Liberal government needs to honour this campaign promise. In today's job market, new entrants and re-entrants need 910 hours to qualify for EI regular benefits.

The government also needs to take immediate action to protect the EI account, so that the premiums Canadians pay are only used for benefits and for training. Employers' and workers' premiums should never be reallocated to general revenue. Yet, this is exactly what has happened. According to Justice Louis LeBel, employment insurance was effectively transformed from a regulatory scheme into a payroll tax. The Liberals spent \$54 billion of EI premiums on various programs and tax cuts for corporations, with no strings attached.

When the Conservatives came into power, they picked up where the Liberals left off and diverted another \$3 billion from the EI account. Then they made the theft official by closing the old EI account and wiping out the accumulated balance. In 2015, the Conservatives continued with this plan by using the EI account surplus to give benefits to wealthy Canadians instead of improving access to benefits. Workers saw it for what it was. As Jack Layton said, it was the biggest theft in Canadian history.

This needs to be stopped. Will the government take a principled approach and never treat the EI account like a government slush fund? Canada's precarious labour market is resulting in more and more unemployed people being left out in the cold. Let us not continue this Robin Hood in reverse scheme.

Let us look at another of the pilot projects that the Conservatives cut, the extended EI benefits pilot. This provided the addition of five weeks of EI benefits in regions where there was high unemployment. Without this pilot program, seasonal workers like the ones in my riding, no longer have the income to fill this gap. In 2010-11, some 313,000 workers benefited from the extended EI benefits. Today, this is having a real impact on rural communities. The Liberals promised during the election campaign to repeal all of the Conservatives' 2012 reforms, but their costing did not include the EI extended benefits pilot program. Will they confirm this funding?

The government needs to act swiftly during these hard times to support communities and families in accessing EI in order to prevent growing income inequality. EI is a tool, a savings to provide people a hand when they need it, a tool that allows people to have a sense of stability during times of economic change. This is why I encourage all members to support this motion.

This motion would make a difference for Canadians as we go through these trying times. It is a practical solution for all. Today, we are trying to deal with the most urgently needed changes. I hope we will stand together in this House in support of this motion and all Canadian workers.

● (1625)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I enjoyed most of the member's remarks. In fact, I agree with a lot of the motion that is before us. However, there is a glaring problem, and that relates to the 360 hours being universal.

The member said in her speech that the 360 hours, according to the NDP, is affordable. I looked everywhere for the calculations

behind the cost to the system of that 360 hours. Will it mean increased premiums? What will it mean?

The member opposite claims it is affordable. Could she give the exact cost figure for what the 360 hours would mean to the system as a whole?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Madam Speaker, I would like to remind my hon. colleague that we are entering a time of increasingly precarious work. Short-term work and part-time work are increasing, and families are struggling. They have to work two or three jobs, up and down, all over the place. When we look at a number like 360 hours, this is about giving a hand to those families who are facing those challenges. It is making sure that they get the things they need. It is affordable, in the sense that it will support those families to move toward their goals and have a positive family life.

Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have listened to the debate all day, and I keep hearing the same thing over and over. I want to remind all members of the House that EI is meant as a temporary measure to overcome circumstances. What Canadians want most is employment. They want to work. They do not want to be on EI.

The way that the NDP motion reads, it says that for 360 hours, which is a short period of time, people can collect employment insurance for 50 weeks a year. What people want to do is to work for 50 weeks a year. They do not want to collect employment insurance.

I ask the hon. member to provide us with a jobs plan. Provide us with some ideas on how we can get Canadians working, as opposed to putting them permanently on EI, as the NDP would propose with this motion.

● (1630)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Madam Speaker, I would like to start by saying that it is offensive to the people in my riding to assume that people would work for a short period of time just to happily sit on EI. The people I represent are hard-working people. They want to work. They want to get out there and do good things in their communities.

The plan is about supporting people when they need a hand-up; it is not about creating a handout.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her excellent speech.

Business of Supply

As an MP currently serving a second term, I would like to tell her how disappointed I am to hear the Conservatives attempting to tell us how to increase job opportunities. When they were reforming employment insurance in the Maritimes and other places where seasonal work is a fact of life, they had no ideas for extending the season. They never made any constructive proposals. All they did was punish people who needed employment insurance. That is scandalous.

I would like to hear her comments on that.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Madam Speaker, I want to thank the member for the question. This is my first term, but I thank him for thinking I am doing such a good job. It feels like I have been here for a while longer.

For my community, one of the biggest hardships has been the forestry industry and the changes around manufacturing. It is seeing all of those raw logs floating from our communities and we are not able to process them. All those people who were proud workers are no longer able to do their jobs.

We did see a huge decrease of jobs in our riding during the Conservatives time in government, and we were faced with multiple challenges. We continue to strive. I look forward to seeing jobs increase across this country for the hard-working people of Canada.

The Assistant Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Carol Hughes): Order. 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 Jonquière, Canada Post; the hon. member for Elgin—Middlesex—London, Taxation; the hon. member for North Island—Powell River, Fisheries and Oceans.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise in the House today to speak against the NDP motion. I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Carleton.

I listened to a lot of the debate today, and there are a few things that concern me with the NDP motion. Top of mind is asking Canadians to subsidize a 45-day work year. This is irresponsible and unsustainable. I have not heard in any of their speeches how much this would cost the Canadian taxpayer and how it would be sustainable long term.

Before I get into talking about some of the concerns that I have with the NDP motion, I would also like to highlight that the motion would repeal a lot of the good work that the previous Conservative government was able to achieve. I want to highlight some of that. For example, after we came into power in 2006, we emerged from the great recession with the strongest economy in the G7. We created 1.2 million net new jobs. That is 20% higher than most of our G7 counterparts. Those were incredible achievements. It is a little frustrating when I hear that the NDP wants to negate some of those great successes under our Conservative government. Our Conservative plan was working, and it worked.

We focused on something that has not come from the NDP members, or some of my Liberal colleagues on the other side either. One of the most important aspects of employment insurance is creating jobs and having policies in place where employers and Canadian businesses can grow and create jobs. That is what we

should be focusing on, not making it easier for people to go on long-term EI. That is not what Canadians want. They do not want a handout. They do not want to have a disincentive to work. They want to have jobs. That is the element that is missing from a lot of the debate here today.

For example, I want to go over a couple of the projects that we did as a Conservative government that were incredibly successful. We introduced pro-growth measures, such as the largest infrastructure plan in Canadian history. We legislated the federal gas tax and the infrastructure investment program. This gave municipalities long-term stable funding for the first time in Canadian history. We had more paid internships for recent graduates. We cut red tape for small businesses. We ensured that EI premiums were low for Canadian business owners, so they could invest in innovation and grow their business. When they grow their business that means they create jobs.

One of the concerns I have with the 45-day work year is that also increases costs on business owners. That is one thing we have not talked a lot about here today, the impact that this would have on business owners. This is in a time when our Liberal government is talking about increasing the CPP tax on businesses, following the model of a very dangerous provincial Liberal plan. It is also talking about a federal carbon tax. We would be adding yet another tax to our Canadian businesses. That cuts into funds available to a business owner to invest in his own company. What happens when he invests in his own company? It grows. What happens when a business grows? It creates jobs. That is the fundamental thing that we should be focusing on.

We were also focused on a few other things that helped Canadians, such as keeping taxes low. We cut taxes 160 times. That resulted in the lowest tax burden on Canadian families in 50 years. That is something that gets overlooked. What happens when we have low taxes? We have a strong economy. If we have a strong economy, we are creating jobs and less of a burden on the employment insurance system.

We made changes in 2013 to the employment insurance program. We focused on job creation and removing disincentives to work, while at the same time supporting unemployed Canadians in helping them match workers to jobs.

• (1635)

One of the programs the Conservatives implemented last year in economic action plan 2015 was the Canadian apprenticeship loan program. That is really where we should be investing taxpayer money, so that when there are problems in the employment sector, investments and programs are available for retraining and getting the unemployed back to work, with programs like the apprenticeship loan program.

Business of Supply

Last year, after speaking to men and women across the country, we heard that more than 50% of those who had entered apprenticeship programs had been unable to finish these due to financial constraints, such as paying mortgages and putting groceries on the table, when they were in training programs as part of their apprenticeship. As part of the apprenticeship loan program, we provided a \$4,000 interest-free loan for every term in the program. That was widely applauded by the trades sector, many schools, and those who were looking to learn a trade. It got people back into the workforce or, for those who were in the workforce, it allowed them to better their situations and get higher-paying jobs.

Last year, in a study, for example, on getting women into the skilled trades, we heard that women who went from, let us say, a sociology or psychology career—not that there is anything wrong with that, but sometimes it is difficult to find jobs in that sector, especially in Alberta at that time—into highly skilled trades, such as welding, heavy-duty mechanics, truck driving, after going through these apprenticeship programs, saw an average salary in the six figures, or \$120,000 a year or more. The programs that the Conservatives put in place for people to train and find better opportunities were not for minimum-wage jobs.

What this really comes down to is that Canadians do not want handouts; they want jobs. What we should be focusing on is putting policies and structures in place to provide people with the best opportunities to find jobs. We must have a social safety net in place when people lose their jobs, but, as we have heard from my colleagues today, the safety net is a temporary solution. Employment insurance is not intended to be a long-term fact of life. Unfortunately, the NDP opposition day motion is a disincentive to work. If I have to work only a 45-day work year and I know I am going to get a year of employment insurance, I am not sure how hard I will look for a job.

We have also heard from both sides of the House, the Liberals and NDP, that for some reason it is a hardship when people sometimes have to move to find jobs. The key to that statement is finding a job. That is the most important part: finding a job. Certainly, people may have to move. As I said earlier, I left Saskatchewan when I was a young man and went to Alberta to find a job. That is what many thousands of Canadians have done over the years.

Look at Alberta. This has been talked about a bit today. Alberta companies have had people from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador arriving on a regular basis. Why are they going there? It is because there are jobs there. They go home when there are breaks in the season. When there are breaks in the oil industry, they will go back to their homes in the Maritimes and Atlantic Canada, and when they go back to Alberta, there are jobs.

We also heard from New Democrats today that they are very concerned that without these programs in place, people who are unemployed will lose those skills. In Alberta right now, with the downturn and 125,000 Albertans who have lost their jobs, there is a real concern that they will go back to Atlantic Canada and never return. I do not think the argument is valid that they will not have the skills. The best option is to find jobs for the people of Atlantic Canada so they can continue to work and not have to collect EI.

New Democrats are claiming that this motion would strengthen the employment insurance program. A 45-day work year is asking

Canadian taxpayers to subsidize employment insurance for the other 320 days of the year. I do not find that to be sustainable in any way. I would like NDP members to tell me how much it would cost. What it comes down to is that the Conservatives made a real effort to create jobs. That was our plan, and we did it.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karine Trudel (Jonquière, NDP): Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

In my riding, Jonquière, there are a lot of seasonal industries and workers who have a hard time making ends meet during the off-season. Many of our communities are remote and small, and they depend on regional economies in which a single industry, such as forestry, is sometimes the only source of jobs.

In my colleague's opinion, why did his government take away the five extra weeks of benefits? In our region, where jobs are hard to come by, that meant a lot. It helped people get through the so-called black hole and support their families. It was really important to them.

[*English*]

Mr. John Barlow: Madam Speaker, the essence of my speech is that we cannot have a system where someone only has to work 45 days, or 360 hours, to collect a full year of employment insurance coverage. I certainly sympathize with some of situations in sectors across the country. I come from a very rural riding, a very agricultural and energy-based riding, where there are seasonal workers.

However, the whole focus of our changes to EI was to provide incentives for people to find work, to get a job. If people have to move to a community to find that job, then that is something Canadians have done for generations. I understand that some people do not have those opportunities.

The social safety net is there for them when they need it, but the most important thing is for people to find a job.

Mrs. Alaina Lockhart (Fundy Royal, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank the hon. member for recognizing the hard-working people of Atlantic Canada. My riding is in New Brunswick, and we have certainly faced some employment issues in the area.

Business of Supply

The reality is that it is not a matter of seasonal workers, but a matter of having seasonal work in Atlantic Canada. How does the member propose that businesses in our area find and maintain their workforce if we do not make some allowances for the fact that there is a time of the year when these people will not work? We do need them back when the work starts again. I would appreciate the member's perspective on that.

• (1645)

Mr. John Barlow: Madam Speaker, I appreciate that. Again, I would like to say what an impact Atlantic Canada has had on Alberta. We have talked a lot about that in the House over the last couple of weeks.

The downturn in the energy industry is not an Alberta-alone problem. This is something that impacts constituencies across the country. I am glad the member asked the question.

Energy east, for example, would diversify the economy in Atlantic Canada. I am fairly certain that my colleague across the floor voted against our motion to support energy east. A project like that would certainly benefit New Brunswick in terms of employment opportunities there.

Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Madam Speaker, I would like to thank my friend and colleague from Foothills for his passionate advocacy in the House. He is one of the hardest working members and one of the by-election club members that a few of us belong to.

I had the privilege of working with some of his constituents years ago as they recovered from the horrible flood in the High River area. His constituents are passionate and hard-working folk.

He mentioned the social safety net. A lot of NDP members in their speeches here today talk about people who have suffered from accidents and a whole range of things. There is a whole range of social safety net programs, including CPP disability, both at the provincial and federal levels, for that. The EI program is about job insurance for long-term jobs that people have lost.

Could the member speak for a moment about how some members are talking about programs that help in other circumstances, that EI should not be the catch-all, and how the number of qualifying hours of work proposed by the NDP would change the system?

Mr. John Barlow: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague for coming to High River and helping with the flood. My community appreciated that greatly.

There are other programs that are available. Employment insurance is meant to be a temporary solution to losing a job. Other programs are there for help with a family member, caregiver support, etc. There is a multitude of other programs available for those who are in times of need.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a great pleasure to rise here to discuss an issue that I am very passionate about. As the former minister for employment, I had some occasion to work on these subjects in the past.

Today, I would like to address the motion before the House of Commons to bring in a 45-day work year in Canada. Let me unpackage how we come to that 45-day or two-month period people

would be required to work under the proposed changes the NDP has put before the House.

The NDP has suggested that we should lower the entrance requirement or qualifying period to 365 hours for Canadians right across the country, regardless of the labour market in which they find themselves. Three hundred and sixty-five hours in qualifying time based on a 40-hour work week equals about nine weeks, or two months. In other words, under the proposal before the House right now, people would work for two months and then collect employment insurance for 10 months. That would be available in every region of the country, regardless of the unemployment rate. In other words, even in places where there are labour shortages and employers are having difficulty recruiting workers, we would be paying people not to work.

The result of this would be an increase in the costs of the employment insurance program. That would be evident by virtue of the fact that in order to fund the additional benefits under this proposal and to compensate for the fact that fewer people would be working because more people would be on EI, the government would have to increase premiums. All the benefits paid out from employment insurance come from the premiums paid by employers and employees.

The estimates for the cost of going to a 45-day work year or two-month work year range from about \$1.5 billion to \$4 billion a year. As we can imagine, all of that burden would need to fall onto the shoulders of taxpayers, both workers and the businesses that employ them, through increased premiums. If we increase the employment insurance premiums, we make it more expensive to hire and thus discourage hiring. We would be punishing people for the work they do, particularly low-income workers, because employment insurance premiums are a regressive tax. They do not increase in percentage terms based on the income people take. This would be a very regressive tax increase that would disproportionately target small businesses and low-income workers and would detract from the government's stated goal to help the middle-class and those who "want to join it".

Furthermore, it would impose new burdens on the Canadian workforce. Imagine if in every place in the country there were large numbers of people who worked only two months out of a year and then used the employment insurance system for the remaining 10 months. What would that mean for our workforce? I will let the House use its imagination. I suggest that instead of taxing people who work and the people who hire them in order to pay people not to work, we should encourage job creation. I have some practical suggestions for the government and the NDP on that score.

Business of Supply

First, we have a growing surplus in the employment insurance account and the NDP is quite right in suggesting that that money does not belong to the government. I propose that we use it to cut employment insurance payroll taxes by 21%. That reduction in taxes was laid out in last year's budget. It is booked as part of the fiscal framework and it can be afforded based on the surplus that had been growing in the employment insurance fund when the Conservative government left office. That would make it less expensive for employers to hire and it would reward workers by letting them keep more of what they earn.

Second, we need to continue to re-profile our training program. For too long we trained people in this country for jobs that did not exist.

• (1650)

I was able to work with the previous government in order to re-engineer some of those training programs to connect people with available jobs. We worked on a labour market development agreement that was signed by British Columbia and Saskatchewan. Other provinces supported the agreement. That would have seen the employment insurance training dollars, of which there are about \$2 billion a year, directed toward connecting people with jobs that actually existed. When they go into a provincial or territorial employment office, their training is not funded until there is an employer with which they are matched up.

Instead of having people coming in and saying that they would like to study accounting and having training dollars immediately available, the employment worker at the job training centre would check the local hiring registry and ascertain if someone is hiring accountants in that area. Employment workers do not want to send people to training programs until they know it will result in a job. By involving employers at the front end and ensuring that the unemployed train up for an available opening, then we increase the success rate.

We created something called the job bank over the years. That job bank is available to help people ascertain what openings are available. Now the goal should be to match the employer seeking the employee with someone who is unemployed, and to use EI training funds to bridge the gap between the two. The money is already there. We just need to deploy it in a more targeted and precise fashion.

In addition to training, though, which is great for developing credentials, we need to do a better job of recognizing credentials. That is the case in the professions, mostly for newcomers, but also in the trades.

When I was in British Columbia meeting with business leaders, I met several very well-trained tradesmen who had been in the workforce for 20 or 30 years as welders and an electrician, but who had never received a Red Seal ticket or any occupational designation to go along with their work because their work had always been informal. Those types of people have difficulty moving between provinces and opportunities because they do not have their ticket, even though they are equally skilled as the many people who do.

One of the things on which the government should work with the provinces is to quickly recognize the credentials of long-tenured tradespeople who have not done formal apprenticeships and

therefore have not received their formal ticket. That would allow them to get a certification that would permit them to move between provinces.

We need to complete the work of apprenticeship mobility. The Atlantic provinces signed an agreement that allowed their apprentices to move around the region in the middle of their apprenticeship program. However, because apprenticeships vary, even within occupations, from province to province, oftentimes a third-year apprentice pipefitter, for example, who might have been working in Alberta under an employer, under a journeyman or woman there, but has lost their job because of the downturn, cannot then pick up and move to a new opportunity that might have opened up in, say, Ontario, because the apprenticeship systems in the two provinces are different. We need to do across Canada what the Atlantic provinces have done out east, which is to try to harmonize completely the apprenticeship program.

We have done so for ticketed tradespeople. In other words, under chapter 7 on the internal agreement on trade, a tradesperson with a ticket in one province is recognized in all provinces, and that is also the case for most professions. If individuals get themselves certified in, say, Alberta, but then they need a new job in another province, they can use their certification there. We need to finish that work for apprentices now that it has largely been done for journey people.

Finally, we need to streamline the process for recognizing the credentials of newcomers, particularly professionals from abroad.

We have an enormous number of foreign trained professionals who come to our country. If we could get them licensed to practise more quickly in their field, they would fill important needs in our workforce at very low cost to Canadian taxpayers, and it would allow them to fulfill their extraordinary potential when they get to our country.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to take a moment to correct a few things that the member has said repeatedly, even though he should know better, since he was once the minister of employment and social development. This same information has also been repeated by the former MLA for Calgary—Foothills, and even by the Conservatives in the previous Parliament.

When the member says that we want to reduce the eligibility threshold to 360 hours, he knows very well that that number of hours is about nine weeks. Those nine weeks would give workers access to EI for 21 weeks, not for the rest of the year, as the member has been claiming since last year.

What is more, he seems to be suggesting that unemployed workers are going to abuse the system by working for just two short months and then collecting EI. He must know that, if an employee leaves her job voluntarily, she is not eligible for EI. If an employee is fired due to incompetence, he is not eligible for EI. There is a lot of misinformation here. I wanted to take a moment to “correct the record”, as the Prime Minister often says.

Business of Supply

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Speaker, what I have been trying to tell the member is that we should be encouraging people to work. There are a number of ways to do so. First of all, I said that our training programs need to connect people with jobs that are actually available. Second, we need to recognize the skills and competencies that our workers have already acquired and help them obtain their certificate or work permit for regulated occupations. Third, we need to lower taxes for those who hire our workers and create jobs. I prefer that over a system wherein people work for two months in order to receive EI for the rest of the year.

• (1700)

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Parliamentary Secretary for Sport and Persons with Disabilities, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to say that my colleague across the way mentioned three very important points, including help returning to work, training, and working with the provinces. That is what we are committed to doing.

We talked about this in our speech. The government is committed to improving the employment insurance program so that it may better reflect today's reality. Our government will continue to enhance existing tools and services.

We are not going to reinvent the wheel. We are going to improve existing services, and continue using the national job bank to help unemployed workers get back to work.

What more does our government have to do to satisfy my colleague's demands?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Speaker, first, the government announced it wanted to partially eliminate the tax cuts we announced when we were in government. We, as a Conservative government, had proposed reducing EI premiums by 21%, thereby allowing small and medium-sized business to hire more people.

The current Prime Minister announced that he will cancel in part this tax cut for our small and medium-sized businesses. That is a mistake.

Also, the work to recognize workers' credentials and professional credentials will never stop. This work began a few years ago and we made a lot of progress, but I encourage the government to keep at it until newcomers in Canada can have their credentials recognized.

Every month, I meet an extraordinary professional who immigrated to Canada and is having a hard time getting recognized. As a result, he has to work at a job that does not meet his expectations. When doctors or engineers come to Canada, they should be able to work in their field. Recognizing these credentials should continue to be a priority for every government.

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will begin by informing you that I will be sharing my time with the excellent member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot.

I rose in the House on several occasions during the last Parliament, between 2011 and 2015, and especially after 2012, to talk about employment insurance. The reason is simple. The reforms implemented in January 2012 by the former Conservative government were extremely harmful to several Canadian regions, especially eastern Quebec and the Atlantic provinces.

The reforms implemented in 2012 created new categories of claimants, including frequent claimants, who, upon becoming recipients of employment insurance, had to accept jobs paying 70% of their previous salary. Frequent claimants often include those who accept seasonal jobs, which is still quite often the case in eastern Canada.

The Conservatives also removed the definition of “suitable employment” from the legislation. Previously, workers could refuse a job if it did not match their field, skills, or training. The Conservative government eliminated the definition of “suitable employment”. If a worker refused a job that did not match his training, his benefits could be suspended or denied. The previous government forced workers to accept any job within 100 km of their home. Travelling one hundred kilometres is not the same in an urban area as it is in a rural area. In a rural area, it takes one hour to travel 100 km for a job that quite often pays 70% of the worker's previous salary. Naturally, the cost of gasoline is not included in the salary or the benefits. Many workers were thus forced to move and, in particular, to leave rural municipalities, which were greatly affected by this decision.

Various articles and publications then revealed that a system of quotas had been imposed on employment insurance as part of the reform. Public servants were forced to meet savings quotas to recover benefits that had been paid, finding virtually any excuse to meet that quota. This forced public servants, most of whom did not agree with such measures, to conduct extremely invasive inspections. They were often forced to catch claimants on a technicality in order to deny benefits. This often affected some of the most vulnerable Canadians, people who had just lost their jobs.

One other thing that was very damaging was that the government eliminated the boards of referees. These boards were made up of employer, union, and government representatives who understood the local realities in each region and could act as an appeal tribunal for cases where a claimant was denied employment insurance. These boards of referees worked very well but they were eliminated. Instead, the government created the Social Security Tribunal, which has so far been a dismal failure.

It should also be noted that outside of this very specific reform that was implemented in 2012, the Conservatives ended the pilot project that had helped partially fill the spring gap. What is the spring gap? I invite my Conservative friends to listen because they seem to be out of touch with the reality in the regions where there is a significant number of seasonal jobs.

Business of Supply

Take the Lower St. Lawrence for example. A worker has to work 720 hours in order to get employment insurance. That means 18 weeks of seasonal work in tourism, forestry, the maple syrup industry, or agriculture. For working 18 weeks, the worker is entitled to 21 weeks of employment insurance benefits, which is the minimum. It is not for the rest of the year, as the Conservatives keep saying. It is 21 weeks, which is the minimum. If we add 18 weeks plus 21 weeks we get 39 weeks. That means that the worker who was laid off because of a seasonal job, has no earnings or opportunity to receive income. The pilot project partially filled that gap in the regions with a high unemployment rate, where a vast number of jobs are seasonal. Again, that is very much how it is in eastern Quebec and eastern Canada.

No one wants economic diversification in my region more than I do, so that the economy does not have to rely on seasonal employment so much, but that is the reality right now. The reform had a major impact on my region. When the reform was implemented, I toured my riding and organized information sessions in Rimouski, Lac-des-Aigles, Dégelis, and Pohénégamook. Those information sessions drew 300 to 400 people who had been directly adversely affected by that reform.

• (1705)

What people told us was that the reform affected not only unemployed workers, but also employers. Earlier, the members for Carleton and Foothills talked about ways to innovate and improve training programs. Currently, the 2012 reform is hurting employers because they have to cover most of the cost of training their employees. Training a brush cutter in the forestry industry costs about \$10,000. That is seasonal work. When those people get a job offer, they feel they have no choice but to leave and go elsewhere. That is a net loss for the employer, which then has to hire other people, train them at that same cost, and then watch them leave too because they cannot collect benefits if they get a job offer somewhere else. Those are the stories I heard.

I heard all kinds of stories from the maple syrup, agriculture, and forestry industries. I heard about a woodworking business in Saint-Jean-de-Dieu in my riding that had to close its doors for two months and is closed now because there is no work. It has been paying its employees to do nothing for two months so that it will not lose them because they are highly skilled workers. Those are the kinds of things the Conservatives are refusing to see and accept. They think that job training is a miracle solution for regions with high rates of seasonal employment. That makes no sense.

The employment insurance reform was implemented from coast to coast to address what was then a worker shortage in Alberta and Saskatchewan, but it was at the expense of the other regions, such as eastern Canada, where the reality is completely different.

Another example that has really affected my community is the fact that small municipalities that cannot afford a full-time general manager are forced to hire them for just four, five, or six months of the year. Of course, those individuals then receive EI until they can return to the job, because there is not enough money in the budget. I have seen examples of small municipalities that have lost their general managers to jobs in places like Rimouski or Rivière-du-Loup, because they are less than 100 km away. All that person's

knowledge of the municipality and its entire culture and history are lost all at once. The municipality is then forced to hire someone else and train them, only to see them leave again afterwards.

In my riding, we have had to deal with a number of cases. Since the 2012 reform, roughly 500 people from all across my riding have come to my office in Rimouski, and my staff there have helped those people with their fight against the government regarding the loss of their benefits.

A very recent case that we managed to resolve shows how overly harsh the public service is in these cases. I am talking about Pierre Bérubé, who decided to quit his job as a seasonal worker, in order to go into business. He bought a truck and became a truck driver. Employment insurance demanded that he pay \$5,000, between the time he purchased his truck and the end of his benefits, since they deemed that he was ready to start working as a truck driver. However, because of the capital investment he had made, he could not go into business right away, and he was preparing to do so. Employment insurance considered that he could start work immediately and imposed a \$5,000 penalty on a man who was just trying to get by. This is the kind of overzealousness we saw under the Conservatives.

Today's motion is extremely relevant, because the Liberals made a lot of commitments about EI. Members are familiar with their commitment to reduce the waiting period. However, they also committed to cancelling the EI reform that the Conservatives imposed in 2012. My concern is that the Minister of Families and the Minister of National Revenue, who is also the member for Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine, a region that has been seriously affected, are already indicating that there will not be any significant changes to EI until 2017 or even 2018.

• (1710)

People are in desperate need now. The government made these commitments and we do not need consultation, since we have already seen the consequences of the reform. The government could repeal the reform immediately, and I encourage it to do so. It could start by voting in favour of our motion and immediately bringing down the next budget to move forward with repealing the EI reform.

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to go back to a point that was made by the Conservative member for Carleton earlier. I was sitting here almost fuming listening to his remarks.

Business of Supply

The member for Carleton talked about 360 hours, and I disagree with that setting in the NDP motion, but the member's remarks were nothing but disingenuous to workers in this country. To claim that the NDP proposal of 360 hours would be paying people not to work, and that they would work nine weeks and draw 50 weeks is malarkey. What it goes to show is that it comes from a mentality that existed within the previous government that if people were penalized enough, they would be forced to work, and if they were left without income, they would be forced to work. That is not the mentality that I know the NDP has or this party has. We believe in incentives.

Does the member opposite feel the same way, that the party over there is disingenuous to workers in this country, who deserve better respect?

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Speaker, I could not agree more. The member called it malarkey; I would call it baloney.

It is completely misleading for the Conservatives to say that we want people to work for only two months and then sit at home and do nothing for 10 months.

First, that is false. It does not work like that. People are required to work for a minimum of 360 hours, or nine weeks, so that they can access employment insurance benefits based on the nine weeks of earnings. They will not receive 100% of their wages. They already receive 55% of their wages for 21 weeks. Based on the current method of calculation, they will not even receive the full 55%.

What the Conservatives are saying makes no sense. It is disinformation that makes the unemployed, those people who are seasonal workers and are often laid off, appear to be lazy and only looking for a way to stay home. I find that extremely insulting.

To answer the question about the 360-hour eligibility threshold, I think that it is reasonable, and I would remind the member that the Minister of National Revenue and member for Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine promised during the election campaign to decrease the threshold to 420 hours, which is not that much more.

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to see that the second opposition party is seeing the light with respect to employment insurance.

During the election campaign, it was proposing instead to take more than \$7 billion from the fund. If it no longer has a copy of its platform, the Bloc Québécois can provide one.

Could my colleague explain what has led the NDP to do an about-face on this?

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

Maybe I should introduce her to Yvon Godin, a former MP who was a staunch defender not only of employment insurance, but also of an independent employment insurance fund, which is something else we fought for.

She is of course referring to the ridiculous argument the Bloc Québécois made during the election campaign that we wanted to

take money out of the employment insurance fund, which is totally false.

Right now, the employment insurance fund is part of the federal government's consolidated revenue fund. In our election platform, we planned for a surplus that was higher than the employment insurance fund surplus. We had no intention of using that surplus; we would have had a surplus anyway.

What the Bloc Québécois did not understand and refused to understand was that we even introduced a bill to create an independent employment insurance fund. That bill was introduced by my colleague, Robert Chisholm, who was defeated, unfortunately.

The NDP intended to have an independent employment insurance fund, and that was clear in our election platform. I should point out that the Liberals did not have that in their platform.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wonder whether my colleague would pay for a private insurance policy that insured less than four out of 10 people. In his view, would most people want that kind of insurance policy? Could he put that into the context of employment insurance?

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Speaker, this insurance policy covers very few people when they lose their employment. I saw that in my riding.

People who worked hard and paid their EI premiums through their work and ended up unemployed were denied employment insurance benefits for some reason or another. It was either because the employment insurance processing service was too harsh, and I am not blaming them because they were only following government guidelines, or for other reasons beyond the worker's control.

To top it off, when those workers want to appeal a decision, they often have to wait six, eight, or 10 months before their appeal is heard by the Social Security Tribunal of Canada, which is a total disaster. The system is just not working.

The government promised to reverse the reform and we encourage it to do so.

• (1720)

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, of course I support the motion. After 20 years of Conservative and Liberal reforms, the EI system is in a pitiful state and cannot provide families with the support they need. The government needs to take action immediately, specifically in the areas of eligibility and the EI fund.

In their election platform, the Liberals promised to clean up the mess in the EI system by repealing the Conservative reforms. Understandably, a program that is meant for workers is problematic when it is the employers who are criticizing the reforms, which is what is happening right now.

Before I became a member in the House of Commons, I was a municipal councillor. The Union des municipalités du Québec, an organization of employers, had adopted a resolution calling on the federal government to suspend the EI reform until economic impact studies were conducted. Here is what the president of the Union des municipalités du Québec had to say:

Business of Supply

This reform will have a major negative impact on the social and economic fabric of the regions. It will drive seasonal workers and their families out of the regions. We will lose skilled labour power and entire families. In Quebec, we have been working for years on policies and projects promoting jobs and prosperity in the regions. We cannot sit idly by in the face of this reform. We urge the Government of Canada to suspend the reform until it assesses its real economic impact.

In the 1990s, more than 80% of unemployed workers received unemployment insurance benefits. The Liberals destroyed this program and, after their reforms, only 50% of unemployed workers had access to benefits. It was at that point, in the mid-1990s, that I decided to become a member of the board of directors of Saint-Hyacinthe's Mouvement action chômage. I found the reforms to be completely unacceptable.

Last December, the most recent data showed that only 39.9% of unemployed Canadians were receiving benefits.

I would like to talk about the impact that 20 years of Liberal and Conservative reforms have had on my region. I am very proud to be the member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, Quebec's agrifood capital. Agrifood products and seasonal work go hand in hand. In my region, many seasonal workers were affected by the Conservative and Liberal reforms. These workers are considered frequent claimants and, during periods of unemployment, must accept work that is 100 km from their homes and pays 70% of their usual salary. The City of Saint-Hyacinthe has set an objective of growing its population to 60,000 by 2020. As I just mentioned, municipalities are worried that their residents will have to move in order to look for work elsewhere.

This may mean that seasonal workers have to find a permanent job during periods of unemployment, and these jobs are often lower-paying. When seasonal workers are called up in the spring to go back to work for the agri-food companies, many of them will not return to their seasonal employers, for fear that Service Canada will indicate on their file that they voluntarily left their employment without just cause and they will lose their right to EI. As a result, seasonal employers constantly lose their experienced workers who do not return to work for them when the new season comes around.

As I mentioned earlier, employers are now the ones complaining about the reforms. In my region, the Fédération interdisciplinaire de l'horticulture ornementale du Québec is requesting seasonal employer status and asking that its workers not be penalized because they work for seasonal companies.

HortiCompétences, an ornamental horticulture sectoral workforce committee in Saint-Hyacinthe, has been critical of the fact that its employees seem to be considered second-class workers. This is not a good way to encourage these workers to remain in the field they have chosen and for which they were trained.

The Quebec Produce Growers Association said the following:

"This sector is currently vulnerable"...the employment insurance reforms are hurting produce growers. "We already had a hard time recruiting local workers, but it has become even more difficult with the reform."...Many seasonal workers went back to the same employer year after year. Now, they are penalized by the employment insurance rules.

• (1725)

It is clear to us that a universal qualifying threshold is the best solution. Regional unemployment rates vary widely. In a region like mine, where the unemployment rate is low, seasonal workers are

penalized because they will have a hard time qualifying for employment insurance year after year. It is unacceptable that 60% of unemployed workers do not qualify. That impoverishes whole regions. Employment insurance beneficiaries spend their income locally. Employers have made it clear that, when their workers have no income, they lose customers.

As my colleague mentioned, we switched from boards of referees to the Social Security Tribunal of Canada. Many more people were comfortable with the complexity of the previous system. The Liberal and Conservative reforms made it impossible for ordinary mortals to navigate the labyrinth of the new Employment Insurance Act and its appeal system. In my region, there were significant delays in setting up the social security tribunals, and, as a result, many workers had to wait more than a year to collect benefits.

I have to wonder about this situation. What do we say to a worker who is let go after the company where he has worked for 25 years undergoes restructuring? This honest worker will submit an EI claim that will take several months to be approved. Under the new guidelines, he will be called to a job search session before he even receives his first payment. He will be pressured to accept any old job, even if it is not suited to him and has nothing to do with his qualifications. After just a few days, he will be forced to quit that job in order to find suitable employment.

As we know, this honest citizen will automatically be deprived of his right to receive benefits. Why? Because he is now considered a repeat offender by the employment insurance officers. This will then lead to interminable delays due to disputes.

Without support, his chances of getting his benefits back are almost nil. In the best-case scenario, he will receive his first payment between three and six months later. Is that how an honest worker deserves to be treated? I do not think so. That worker could be one of us, or one of our children, a parent or neighbour.

In my region there is an advocacy group for workers with or without a job, called Mouvement action chômage. That organization kept a record of the ramifications of abolishing the boards of referees in our region. It noticed that with the new Social Security Tribunal very few workers are able to make an appeal. Many workers wait months or even an entire year before being heard by the new tribunal.

According to Mouvement action chômage in Saint-Hyacinthe, only four out of seven cases heard in the past few months resulted in redeterminations and only because they were backed by Mouvement action chômage. Those who defend themselves have no hope of getting anywhere.

The directives the employment insurance officers receive are wreaking havoc on seasonal workers. In agri-food, in my region, those who apply for EI more than once in less than two years face stricter eligibility requirements, and for no good reason. Often the reasoning provided in the workers' file is just ridiculous. We know that.

Business of Supply

In closing, unfortunately, if the decisions being made by the Employment Insurance Commission officers are any indication, then *Mouvement action chômage* in Saint-Hyacinthe will have its work cut out for it in the coming months.

• (1730)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, after listening to the tenor of the debate today, I thought it might be appropriate to highlight the fact that many, if not all, Liberal caucus members can recall going through the last federal election and talking a great deal about reforming and making changes to the program. Employment insurance, for years, has been very high on our agenda. The member for Cape Breton—Canso has been a very strong advocate for the program. We incorporated it into the election platform.

The minister has taken it on and said that we will be coming forward with reforms to improve the program. This is wonderful. Canadians from coast to coast to coast, I believe, will get behind the project. We recognize the differences in the different regions. There have been visits, whether by the Prime Minister or the minister, to the province of Alberta to address the concerns about commodity prices in that province and Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador. We should anticipate that we will see some very positive changes.

Would the member want to comment on the changes that I know she is aware of that are not far down the horizon and that will, in fact, improve the program?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to hear that the Liberals want to repair the damage they caused to employment insurance in the 1990s. A fine way to make positive changes to employment insurance would be to support our motion.

I invite my colleague to do so because it will make eligibility rules fairer for all regions and set up an independent employment insurance fund, which will make it possible to reinvest in training. Workers and employers contribute to the employment insurance fund, which can be used to provide fair benefits and training to workers. The next step is to repeal the Conservatives' reforms, which penalize workers.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her speech and her in-depth knowledge of this subject and of her riding in particular. I have to admit that it was difficult listening today to a number of Conservatives rise in the House to talk about employment insurance. It was very reminiscent of the speeches we have heard over the past few years in the House.

To put things into context, not only has the previous prime minister used the term “lazy”, but a number of members who continue to sit in this House have used fairly egregious language.

For example, as recently as 2014, the member for Lac-Saint-Jean said, “We often pay people on employment insurance to sell...well, they're not always good substances. I want it to stop. I want the people that we're paying not to work to find a job.”

The member for Haldimand—Norfolk and a former minister also said, “We do not want to make it lucrative for them to stay home and get paid for it”. In 2013 she also said, “Once again, the NDP is protecting the bad guys”.

Another former Conservative member from Nova Scotia, who was not re-elected, said, “all those no-good bastards sitting on the sidewalk in Halifax that can't get work”.

I quoted some Conservatives. I would like the member to talk about the Conservatives' attitude and about the unfortunate trend we are hearing in speeches from this party, which was fortunately not re-elected.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

These are the kinds of comments that really get to me. I spent a large part of my career as the executive director of a social reintegration organization for young people experiencing family problems. I saw a large number of young people who were trying to get back into the job market and trying to find their place. They were constantly being penalized by the EI rules.

For many young people who are entering the job market and who have an unstable job with irregular hours, it is almost impossible to accumulate the minimum of 910 hours required to file an initial claim for benefits. They often work on call. These are young people who want to help themselves, but the EI reforms do not help them at all.

• (1735)

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Central Nova.

I am quite pleased to speak to the motion that suggests certain changes be made to the employment insurance system. I agree with many of the changes that are in the NDP motion, with one major exception, and that is the 360-hour component.

I tried to find out from a number of sources what that 360 hours would cost the system. If a government is going to make decisions, it has to make them in a reasonable and responsible way. I asked members opposite the question, but they did not have an answer. I have not been able to find it in any of the material related to the NDP motion. Someone could perhaps get up later and give us the numbers. Stating 360 hours, without having the numbers to go along with that, is not the proper way to change legislation.

Beyond that, many of the points that the NDP made in the motion were in our election platform, and some of them are in the mandate letter to the Minister of Employment. We will be moving forward on those points.

People who have to use the EI system want it to be as efficient as possible, and that is why I am opposed to 360 hours. In our discussions with workers, their concern was related to the initial qualifying hours of over 900. We will be moving to allow regional rates, which are lesser hours and dependent on the regional EI or job rate, to be the qualifying areas. In that way, workers will be treated more fairly.

Business of Supply

The difficulty that the economy is facing at the moment has put a lot of pressure on the employment insurance system. The Minister of Finance announced the new numbers in his mini economic update. Difficulty in the energy sector in this country is putting pressure on the system. Therefore, there is a greater need for the employment insurance system to operate effectively to get a social and economic safety net into the hands of workers. What is really unusual is that we are hearing calls from Alberta on the need to have the employment system work effectively.

I want to turn to Alberta for a minute. The duration of EI benefits has increased in four economic regions in Alberta. The number of weeks available in hard-hit regions in Alberta has increased by five weeks, to the maximum entitlement nationally of 45 weeks. If we compare December 2014 to February 2016, qualification for EI regular benefits in the northern Alberta EI region has dropped, while the maximum entitlement has increased to 45 weeks, matching the highest level of support in the country.

I want to make sure that the House and everyone knows that the energy difficulty in Alberta, the falling prices, is being caused by many global factors, and also in part by the fact that Alberta is landlocked in terms of getting our energy to market. That is posing greater difficulties for workers in a lot of regions of Canada, and mine in particular. There are a lot of people from Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, who work in the oil industry in Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and in the Peace River area of B.C. They are all being impacted as well, as a result, and they need to qualify for employment insurance.

● (1740)

When we look at the Alberta EI numbers, we really have to factor in the cost to workers in the rest of the country, not just in that threshold of numbers. The number of people without work in Prince Edward Island and other areas of the country who travelled to work in Alberta and elsewhere are in the other regions' numbers.

It is important that we do everything we can. That is what the Minister of Employment is trying to do with the changes we will be bringing in. Many of them are in the NDP motion.

As we said in our platform and the mandate letter for the minister, we will reverse the 2012 changes to the employment insurance system that forced unemployed workers to move away from their communities and take lower-paying jobs. We will change that. We will develop more flexible parental benefits. We will be easing access to EI support for caregivers. The list goes on.

However, there is one point I want to make with regard to my region and an absolutely pathetic move by the previous government. In trying to support the regional minister at the time, from my province, the government created two EI zones in Prince Edward Island. That has to be fixed too. I am encouraging the government to fix that along with the rest. It is not in the mandate letter I note, but it has to be fixed.

Here is an example of what happens in a situation like that. We are a country of seasonal industries. Some talk about the need to work year round. It would be great, but we are in a country where it snows, freezes, and gets too cold for some industries. Therefore, they

have to shut down for a while. The employers of those industries need their workers to come back and start when the season kicks in again, because they are the skilled workers who are trained and know how to work in their field. They want them back. The employment insurance system that these workers pay into is there to give them the safety net so they can have income, provide for their families, and spend their money in their communities in the off-season.

That is what the employment insurance system is there for. It is not, as the Conservatives try to pretend, because people are lazy and do not want to work. People lose their jobs for many reasons. As well, when businesses shut down they need that safety net. These workers are very important for seasonal industries.

I will give an example of the two zones. On Riverdale Road in my riding, one worker is in the Charlottetown zone. He needs more hours and gets less benefits. A worker on the west side of Riverside Road is in the rural zone. What happens? They both work at the same plant. They both work in a seasonal industry in New Glasgow. The one on the rural side qualifies for EI. The one on the Charlottetown side does not. That is a sad situation that the previous government put in place, which I am asking my government, my party, to fix, to get back to one zone in Prince Edward Island.

Let me close. I know my time is limited. I will quote from the Progressive Economics Forum. There are a lot of labour groups who are part of that group. In its point number one, it says this:

Repeal the 2012/13 EI changes. This includes but is not limited to the punitive and discriminatory job search rules, a detrimental 'best weeks' calculation for low income workers, removal of the extended benefit pilot project, erosion of the 'working while on claim' benefit for those taking casual work while unemployed, and the politically-motivated addition of new EI regions in Prince Edward Island and Canada's North.

That includes a list right across the country. It is asking the government to do most of what we said we would do in the election.

The NDP motion does not even go as far as we said we would in the election, but it includes that 360 hours, which is a mistake. Otherwise, I could support the motion.

● (1745)

I cannot support the motion, but I support the principle of it. As we move forward with this party and this government, we will indeed make the changes that we committed to in the election and that are outlined in the mandate letter.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform my colleague that the 360 hours were, indeed, costed. It would cost \$1.2 billion, a hit that the EI fund could easily take, in light of its existing surplus.

Business of Supply

The 360-hour threshold was supported by 80 groups of Canadians, including unions, anti-poverty groups, student groups, and women's groups.

I am happy to hear my colleague say that our proposal does not go as far as he would like.

Would it not make sense to support the motion and then do more?

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, finally we get the numbers, or maybe. I do know sometimes the NDP's math leaves a little bit to be desired.

However, in the context of the 360 hours, \$1.2 billion, this is something that the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour will have to grapple with.

We look at the number of things we have said we would do under the Employment Insurance Act: the parental care leave, the caregivers, the doing away with the five-week pilot project, and the list goes on. The minister and the government cannot be locked into hours when we start. We said we would go to the regional hours for qualifying, but we do not want to be locked into that because we want to be able to do all the other things that we have committed to do and we have to prioritize those.

For that reason I still cannot support the 360 hours.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Monique Pauzé (Repentigny, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my colleague put a very fine point on the economic difficulties that Canada and a group of other countries are currently experiencing.

The Bloc Québécois believes that employment insurance has a stabilizing effect when countries are going through hard economic times. It also enables those who lose their jobs to maintain a certain level of buying power.

As my colleague correctly stated, that is what we call a social safety net. To maintain it, we have to make sure that the employment insurance fund serves workers who lose their jobs, and the best way to do that is to make the employment insurance fund independent.

Will the government remove the employment insurance fund from the consolidated fund so that it can be used for its true purpose?

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, the reason it was put in the consolidated fund in the first place is because that was the recommendation by the Auditor General and we had to do it.

There is a book calculation as a result, following that, but we are here for the workers. We are here to try to create growth and prosperity in the country, and that is what we will continue to do.

Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask my colleague to speak a little bit about the 40% threshold, the fact that we have an employment insurance program that just benefits literally close to 40% of men and women who are working out there who could use a program like this.

One of the commitments made by this government is on the issue of dealing with those who are not part of the labour force, but in fact,

could be on welfare, could be on some form of social assistance, and the skill development that would go with that and the training.

I am just curious as to how the member sees us developing a strategy to deal with those people.

• (1750)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, part of our strategy outlined in the election campaign is for those people who contribute to the employment insurance system. We have to try to strive to increase the number of people who qualify. Some cannot for various reasons.

Beyond that, when we look at the total package that the Liberal Party ran on, we find that there is greater advantage for skills training. The list goes on in terms of trying to find other means of ensuring that those people who do not fall under the system have the social safety net and the economic means to be able to look after their families.

Mr. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the employment insurance file is an important one across our entire country, and is of particular significance in the small towns and rural communities in my home riding of Central Nova.

There is some common ground between the proposed motion and my views. In fact, I campaigned on a number of the points that found their way into today's motion. However, to two preliminary objections will prevent me from supporting the motion.

The first is that there are ongoing efforts by the minister and by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities to conduct a review of the employment insurance portfolio. I fear the rushed process will lead to an incomplete result that will undermine these positive initiatives.

It is in the best interest of Canadians, and my constituents, to allow the government to deliver on its ambitious campaign commitments after a proper and fulsome review is complete, which considers how Canadians can derive the maximum benefit from the program in communities all over our great country.

In addition, the imposition of a universal qualifying threshold of 360 hours will not create regional equity that recognizes nuances that exist within regional economies.

EI is a critical program to support Canadians faced with job loss or challenging life events. In my own backyard, we have an economy that was historically built on primary industry, such as fishing, forestry, and farming. Being on both the eastern shore and the Northumberland Strait, the riding naturally relies on tourism as well.

Business of Supply

Each of these industries relies on a talented group of hard-working seasonal employees who need a strong EI system to protect these historic economic drivers of our region. The disrespect that these workers receive when seeking benefits can be astonishing at times. They form the backbone of a regional economy that supports year-round workers and should be treated with the respect that they deserve.

Moreover, when seasonal workers are forced to leave their jobs or leave their area, it causes an increase in the cost of business because the requirement for employers to train new employees who may only be around for one season.

The timeliness of this discussion is also very important to me in light of some recent developments at home. One of the historically largest employers in my community closed just a week ago. These economic challenges may be present in my riding, but I know Central Nova does not have a monopoly on difficult economic circumstances.

Different regions have different challenges, but all Canadians depend on a strong safety net to help workers deal with changes in their careers and their lives during difficult times.

The EI program is specifically designed to respond to economic changes like this. There is flexibility built into the program that allows it to respond to deteriorating economic conditions and changes in our local labour markets as measured by regional unemployment rates.

When a region's unemployment rate rises, the entrance requirement is reduced and the duration of benefits increases. There is built-in flexibility, but we know that we can do even better. We can do more to make the program more relevant and responsive to the needs of Canadians today and in the future.

In addition to reacting to changing life circumstances, a strong EI program can help employers avoid layoffs and protect the jobs of local workers through proactive measures, such as the work-sharing program. The work-sharing program, under the EI system, is in place for precisely this purpose. It is an adjustment program designed to help employers and employees avoid layoffs when there is a temporary downturn in business that is beyond the control of the employer. The program provides income support to eligible employees who agree to work a temporarily reduced work week while their employer regains financial footing. The goal is for all the participating employees to return to normal levels of working hours by the end of the work-sharing agreement.

Work-sharing allows employers to retain valued skilled employees and avoid unnecessary rehiring and retraining costs when their business returns to normal levels. At the same time, the program helps employees keep their jobs and maintain their skills, as well as an income during difficult times.

I am very proud to support the government's agenda to improve the quality of service that Canadians have come to expect and will receive from the EI portfolio. Our government is committed to improving access and flexibility the EI program to better support the needs of all Canadians.

● (1755)

We are moving forward with initiatives, such as eliminating discrimination against workers who are newly entering or re-entering the workforce, by changing the requirement that new employees work 910 hours before accessing benefits. This policy has a disproportionate impact on young people; those who are recovering from serious illness; and women, who more often than men make professional sacrifices to raise young families before re-entering the workforce. The appropriate threshold needs to be responsive to the regional realities that reflect the needs of people on the ground in their day-to-day lives.

Of course, we are committed to reversing the prior government's 2012 changes to the EI system, which force unemployed workers to move away from their families and out of their communities to take lower-paying jobs. These challenges have a dramatic impact at home for my friends and neighbours. In Central Nova and much of Atlantic Canada, out-migration of youth and working-age community members is a major social demographic problem. Out east, we love our communities as much as anyone in this country. The previous government's policy would exacerbate this negative social trend by kicking people when they are down, by demanding that when they lose their job they have to leave their home as well.

When young people back home are told they need to leave their community, they often leave the province or the country instead, in search of greener pastures, rather than leaving their home town to take a lesser-paying job 100 kilometres away. This phenomenon leaves fewer tax-paying and hard-working workers in a region with an aging population, which has the effect of putting an additional social strain on the province's health care systems.

The government's agenda has also contemplated how the program can help Canadian families. We have pledged to develop more flexible parental benefits and to ease access to EI support for caregivers through the compassionate care benefit, when a family member is suffering from a serious illness. We also plan to reduce wait times to assist families who experience the stress of not knowing where the next rent cheque will come from when faced with difficult changes in their lives and their careers. In addition, we plan to reduce EI premiums to allow employers and families to keep more of their money, to promote a fair and more efficient Canadian economy.

Improving the EI system is not an easy task, so we want to give it the attention it deserves and get it right the first time around. It is important that any program changes be founded on a sound analysis of the evidence, and that careful consideration be given to labour-market impacts and the costs of individual measures. The government is planning to evaluate the success of the EI system and it will assess whether it is delivering its core mandate to provide income security to workers in an ever-changing labour market.

Business of Supply

My constituents and Canadians across our country deserve a policy that is informed by the hon. minister's thorough review of this important file, so they can access a system that effectively identifies and responds to their needs, to help build a strong economy that works for all of us. We want a better future for the economy and the country.

I look forward to working with my colleagues from every party in this House to develop a policy that works for all Canadians. If we all work together, we can build on the work already under way and ensure that all Canadians have a real and fair chance at success.

• (1800)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Karine Trudel (Jonquière, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his speech.

The NDP motion is about the 360 hours of work, the universal qualifying threshold that would really help workers, particularly those in my region, where communities are really spread out.

Since my colleague does not feel that the 360-hour threshold is acceptable, I would like to ask him what exactly his plan is and whether he can share some details.

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Speaker, I cannot stand here and say that 360 hours is absolutely inappropriate either. One of the points that I tried to emphasize during my remarks is that there are positive ongoing initiatives that are conducting a review of the system at present, both through the minister's office and through the applicable standing committee. In the member's region, 360 hours may be determined to be an appropriate qualifying threshold, but in mine it may not be. However, after a thorough review by the hon. minister and the applicable standing committee, we will have a better idea of what the appropriate qualifying thresholds should be in all regions across our country.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the NDP motion is a good one, and I will certainly be voting for it, but I think we ought to also look at the larger issue of income inequality. I have been encouraged to hear that the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development is showing an interest in what we must do to ensure that we eliminate income inequality and poverty in Canada, and that is moving to a guaranteed livable income.

I wonder if my friend for West Nova has any thoughts on that as the next major plank in protecting our social safety net.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for the question from the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands, who I will note has some experience in Central Nova as a candidate in a prior election.

Income inequality is one of the major economic problems that our country, in fact the developed world in the 21st century, is facing. The notion of a guaranteed basic income is one of the most exciting potential social reforms that is being discussed.

At this time, I do not know if there is enough information, through proper studies that have been conducted, to say that the time is now; the place is here. However, I think we are certainly at a time and place where we should be chatting about it. We should be exploring

more information, because with more information we can make a better educated decision.

I am looking forward to the exciting reforms that the minister the member referred to may propose, and I look forward to working with him so that we can help the most vulnerable people in our country. Whether it is through that program or another, there would be severe administrative savings on programs like EI if we chose to go a different route.

Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am absolutely thrilled with the valuable debate that we have had in the House.

I would like to ask my colleague if he has given some thought about what people in his riding are looking at for those individuals who are not in the system but are now called “vulnerable workers”. There is a growing number of people who are choosing to work part time, and seasonal workers, who have fallen outside of the parameters of the existing EI program. Where does the member see Canada moving toward supports for people who are not the typical nine to five full-time worker? That is a growing trend, and it looks like it is going to accelerate.

In general, I want to thank the House for some very insightful debate, and I appreciate the well thought-out comments.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question.

The minister has identified a key sector of the population that is present across our country, and certainly within my riding as well. One of the pieces of the greater EI program that I find quite exciting is the focus on skills development, in addition to helping people who have come across difficult times. This is going to help people help themselves.

We are going to be investing in programs like labour market development agreements with the provinces and territories. That is going to provide over \$2 billion in funding to the provinces and territories to support programming for skills development and employment services, such as counselling and job searches.

In addition, the Canada job fund agreements are going to invest \$500 million a year to support training for all Canadians, regardless of employment status, through the Canada job grant and other employer-sponsored training initiatives, as well as employment supports and services, with priority given to unemployed persons who are not eligible for EI—

• (1805)

The Deputy Speaker: We are out of time. I would remind hon. members to address themselves to the chair, which helps us to give time signals and so on to help members stay within the time allotment.

Before we go to resuming debate and the hon. member for Edmonton Strathcona, I will let her know that there are approximately seven to eight minutes left in the time remaining for the debate on the business of supply this afternoon.

The hon. member for Edmonton Strathcona.

Business of Supply

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately this has eaten into my time, and I will do my best to squeeze what I should have had into a shorter time period. I would, if time allowed, be sharing my time with the member for Regina—Lewvan, but it is sounding as if we have been cut short, sadly. I would have loved to have heard him.

Statistics Canada has reported that in 2015 Alberta lost 51,000 full-time jobs, the worst loss since the 1982 recession. Alberta's unemployment rate has almost doubled to over 7% and the layoffs have continued, in large part in the resource sector. A huge majority of these are well-paid professional jobs impacting middle-class families. The number of Albertans receiving EI has doubled in just one year from more than 31,000 to more than 62,000.

The very purpose of employment insurance is to assist workers who have paid into the program when they lose their jobs through no fault of their own. Regrettably, over several terms of Liberal and Conservative governments, changes have been made not to the obligation to pay into EI but rather to limit access to the funds. We have been told that only four out of 10 workers who pay into the system are qualified to file claims.

In a letter to the Minister of Finance, Gil McGowan, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, pointed out that only 37% of employed Albertans qualify for EI benefits. Alberta workers must work 630 hours to qualify, compared to 420 hours in Newfoundland and Labrador. It may be noted that both regions are experiencing significant job losses in the resource sector. Mr. McGowan also expressed concern that over the past decade accessibility by Canadian workers to EI benefits declined from 50% to 38%. He reminded the minister that the Liberals campaigned promising EI reforms and respectfully suggested that unemployed Canadians cannot wait a year for a review.

As my colleague, the MP for Trois-Rivières, pointed out, surely no one in this place would agree that only four out of 10 Canadians should qualify for universal health insurance. Then why support that only a small percentage who pay into EI can claim? He also reminded us of past misappropriations of the EI fund to pay down deficits.

Employment insurance has historically offered greater benefits to the jobless in the most economically challenged regions. Benefits have been less generous to workers in Alberta or Ontario, who were prospering. There is growing support for reform of the program to establish a single, universal, national standard for access to claims.

During the election, the Liberals committed to support this change and now say they are studying the program. We prefer an action verb. However, increased access to workers, including those hard hit in Alberta with the massive cuts in the resource sector, could easily be expedited in advance of a complete overhaul of the system.

As pointed out in a recent *Globe and Mail* editorial, quick action was taken in 2009 in response to that economic crisis. Why not now? In response to the significant downturn in Alberta's economy, both Alberta's Premier Notley and Edmonton's Mayor Iveson called on the government to intervene to revise EI eligibility rules to ensure more equitable access by unemployed Alberta workers.

The premier has requested the government to make two adjustments to the EI program: one, offer a longer period of EI benefits for Alberta workers; two, require a shorter period of eligibility for Alberta workers in line with other Canadian workers.

Mayor Iveson, in a February 16 letter to the finance minister, raised concerns with the current eligibility rules. He said that regime places the unemployed in our city at a considerable disadvantage in accessing the EI program and exacerbates the personal and social distress associated with job loss.

I received a letter today from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, which told me that its younger members are experiencing extended periods of unemployment previously unheard of, and they are struggling to make ends meet. An immediate extension of EI benefits and a lowering of the eligibility hours in Alberta would certainly help in relieving stress and anxiety, not to mention increased divorce and family breakdowns.

This is a serious matter requiring action. Yes, some new jobs have been created, but by and large, they have been part-time positions paying minimum wage. As my colleagues have pointed out, part-time employment creates a major disadvantage for workers in accumulating working hours. This must be considered.

Would Alberta workers, like all Canadian workers, prefer a job? Absolutely, they would. Are they welcoming the promised infusion of dollars for infrastructure and housing projects? Yes, they are. However, in the meanwhile, federal action is needed to address the inequity in accessing EI and the distress for families who have been laid off through no fault of their own.

● (1810)

In summation, we have heard all throughout this debate today that the Liberal government is thinking, consulting, and proposing to bring forward a reform of EI sometime in the future. However, at this very moment we have workers across this country, and certainly also in my province of Alberta, who are suffering through no fault of their own. Many of them have been working in the resource sector, which has been filling the coffers of the federal and provincial governments across this country.

My premier, my mayor, the workers of Alberta, and I think that it is time for the government to step forward and take expeditious action with respect to Alberta workers. They have worked hard and have contributed for many years to the EI fund, and they deserve a break, as occurred in 2009.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Parliamentary Secretary for Sport and Persons with Disabilities, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her speech.

She spoke at length about Alberta and we understand the situation. The government also understands that the current decline in the price of oil in Alberta is one of the main factors. This situation is also found in Saskatchewan, Newfoundland and Labrador, and elsewhere. It is a very unusual situation and truly disastrous for those regions.

However, we also have a pan-Canadian platform. We have a responsible government that must consider all requests. It would not make sense to hastily make a poorly thought out decision.

Should we change the employment insurance program to meet the needs of just Albertans or of all Canadians?

[English]

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question, which I find quite untoward.

I am a representative of Alberta. I am speaking for all workers in Canada, however, I feel an obligation to speak for my constituents and Albertans.

Our premier has spoken out. She has written to the Minister of Finance. My mayor has spoken out and has written to the Minister of Finance.

The current government has said that it would reform EI and make it more accessible to workers who have lost their job through no fault of their own. The plummeting oil price has greatly hurt my province and this country. Many of the workers who used to commute from the Maritimes, Ontario, and so forth, to Alberta have had to go back to their provinces because they can possibly claim greater EI. Some of them would probably like to stay, because they own homes in Alberta and would be given the opportunity of equal access to the benefits that they have paid into.

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. It being 6:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

The question is on the motion.

Shall I dispense?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

[Chair read text of motion to House]

The Deputy Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Adjournment Proceedings

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Deputy Speaker: In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Call in the members.

● (1815)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault: Mr. Speaker, we request that the division be deferred until Monday, March 7, at the end of the time provided for government orders.

The Deputy Speaker: Accordingly, the recorded division stands deferred until March 7, 2016, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I believe if you were to seek it, you would find the unanimous consent of the House to see the clock at 6:30 p.m.

The Deputy Speaker: Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[Translation]

CANADA POST

Ms. Karine Trudel (Jonquière, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise to discuss the question I asked in the House on February 28 regarding Canada Post.

Over the past year, many community mailboxes have been installed. In many cities and municipalities, mail delivery was completely halted, and we have seen these boxes imposed on communities everywhere, without any consultation. The cities and citizens were not given an opportunity to have their say.

During the election campaign, this was a very popular issue. The government promised to restore home mail delivery and return the service to the people. However, the government is now backing down from its commitment and has imposed a moratorium. Everyone is wondering what is going to happen. Again today, staff at my constituency office in Jonquière had a visit from someone with reduced mobility who is having difficulty accessing his community mailbox, in light of today's harsh weather conditions. We are having freezing rain.

Adjournment Proceedings

These situations are unacceptable. In 2016, there is no reason why we could not provide home mail delivery service to Canadians. Canada Post is a profitable public service and we must make it accessible to everyone. We are the only G7 country that does not provide home mail delivery service to its citizens. That is unacceptable.

There are many ways to make mail service profitable. For example, Canada Post could introduce postal banking to generate additional revenue. It could also promote same-day delivery in order to increase revenue. There is no reason why we could not provide home mail delivery to Canadians.

The public has raised a number of concerns, for example about safety. The community mailboxes were installed any which way and without consultation. In some places it is even dangerous because the boxes are on hillsides. No thought was given to people with reduced mobility or our young families, for whom it is difficult to get the mail.

It is also a matter of service. The government was talking about declaring a moratorium and holding consultations. However, what will the consultation strategy be? That is what I want to ask the minister this evening.

I think that considering how to consult Canadians is a big issue. Will they be consulted randomly, or will the government go directly to municipalities and cities to hear from mayors and residents?

How do people with reduced mobility live without home delivery? They already have a hard time getting around to do their errands and pick up their medications, and now they are being forced to go pick up their mail. They could get mail delivered to their homes, as was the case before. In fact, the letter carriers were a comforting presence to these individuals.

This is a big concern for me because the government is going back on its promise. I want to know how the consultations will be held and whether they will be held directly in municipalities, with groups across Canada, including mayors.

• (1820)

[English]

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to continue this evening in the debate on the future of Canada Post. I am inspired by the enthusiasm and the engagement of Canadians on this subject.

During the election, we committed to end the further installation of community mailboxes that began under the previous government. We also committed to conducting a review of Canada Post to ensure that it provided high quality service at a reasonable price to Canadians no matter where they lived. This is what we are doing.

One week after the election Canada Post announced it was suspending the conversion to community mailboxes pending the review.

[Translation]

Now, about that review. We made a clear promise to review Canada Post to ensure that it provides the high-quality service that Canadians expect at a reasonable price.

According to the mandate letter that the Prime Minister wrote to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement, details of the review are being finalized. However there are three things I can say about it tonight.

[English]

First, this review will gather together all the pertinent facts around Canada Post in line with our government's commitment to evidence-based decision-making.

Second, these facts will be shared with Canadians, because our government has set a higher bar for openness and transparency.

Third, through this review, the opinions and views of stakeholders, groups, everyday Canadians right across the country will be sought. This is in line with our government's commitment to consult widely and to pursue goals collaboratively. In other words, Canadians will have a say in the future of their postal service. Their concerns will be heard through what will be a thorough evidence-based process.

I hope all parliamentarians will encourage and be part of this national dialogue. I look forward to working with my colleague on this important subject.

[Translation]

Canadians have valued Canada Post highly for a long time. From a practical standpoint, this organization helps us connect with each other across our vast country. The government believes that, if we want to have a useful discussion on the future of Canada Post, Canadians should, as consumers, have a better understanding of the services offered by Canada Post, of the pressures the corporation is facing, and of its financial reality.

The review will ensure that Canadians have access to information about Canada Post. The corporation will also have a chance to participate in an informed discussion. Canadians and the government will make decisions about the future of Canada Post together.

Ms. Karine Trudel: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech. Consulting the public directly is perfect. What worries me, however, is jobs. With the installation of community mailboxes and the new technology that has been brought in, I am worried about people's jobs.

Can my colleague reassure me that there will be no job cuts at Canada Post?

• (1825)

[English]

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Mr. Speaker, Canada Post's plan to convert door-to-door delivery has been suspended since last fall pending the outcome of a review of the corporation.

Adjournment Proceedings

This government is committed to an open, transparent, evidence-based review that will cover all aspects of Canada Post and will allow all Canadians to have a say in the choices that are made concerning Canada Post.

[*Translation*]

The review will help ensure that Canada Post is providing the high-quality services that Canadians expect, at a reasonable price.

[*English*]

TAXATION

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to rise this evening to discuss my question of December 9 regarding the Prime Minister's use of taxpayers' dollars for two nannies to care for his three children. Before I begin, I would like to thank my wonderful colleagues for sitting with me tonight, and for all their support and encouragement.

At the outset, I do understand the Prime Minister's needs for child care and I do not want to negate that fact. However, throughout the 2015 election, he campaigned against the universal child care benefits and said that he would donate any monies received through the universal child care benefit to charity.

He stated numerous times, both in this chamber and during the recent election, that the child care benefit should not go to rich families like his. Then immediately after the election, without consultation with Canadians or Parliament, he backpedalled, and decided instead that a rich family like his should indeed have child care paid for by Canadians.

I understand that the Prime Minister has a special budget to pay for these types of household expenses, and I do respect that. However, throughout 2015, he constantly carried on about the universal child care benefit and how wealthy families should not receive it, and then moments after the purse strings were handed over to him, he doled out the money for nannies.

In fact, many Canadians contacted me after my question to support these concerns. One comment in particular specifically asked that I never stop fighting this outrageous spending with no regard for Canadians who could not afford to pay for this spending.

As a member of the official opposition, I will continue to hold the government to account for the spending and misspending of taxpayer dollars. I will continue to work on behalf of my constituents and all Canadians to ensure the government is held accountable.

As members of Parliament, we must not waste taxpayers' money. Just because a benefit is available to an MP or in this case to the Prime Minister does not mean we should take advantage of tax dollars and spend Canadian taxpayers' hard-earned money.

Even when running my own household, I know that a few extra dollars here and there should not just be spent for the sake of spending. It should be money spent well, not just spent, as we see in this situation.

The Prime Minister's lack of accountability is more apparent each and every day. Whether it was his campaign promise that deficits would be no more than \$10 billion per year for three years, which we now hear may be over \$30 billion for next fiscal year alone; or that

he would balance the budget by 2019; or that the debt-to-GDP ratio would go down every year; or that the promised refugee resettlement plan that has now ballooned to 50,000, the Prime Minister is clearly unable to keep his promises.

How can Canadians trust the government and the Prime Minister to manage the country when the Liberals have proven that they will say and promise one thing and then do the complete opposite?

As elected officials, we must respect taxpayer dollars. Promising and campaigning on one thing then doing another is not respecting taxpayers or their dollars.

As my colleague, the member for Battle River—Crowfoot asked earlier this week in the House, why is the Liberal plan to spend, spend, spend?

Mrs. Celina Caesar-Chavannes (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand in the House this evening to respond to my colleague's question. The Prime Minister and his wife have three young children. As such, the needs of his family are very different from those of the former prime minister's family. The roles of the staff who support the Prime Minister and his family have been altered to better suit the family's needs and priorities. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that the changes to the staffing structure will not result in an increase to the household budget.

As a mother of three myself, I am proud to be a member of this government. We have committed to helping Canadian families who need it most. In the upcoming budget, the Minister of Finance will introduce the Canada child benefit, which would put more money into the pockets of nine out of ten families and help them raise their children. It would also help lift more than 300,000 children out of poverty. Unlike the previous government's unfair policies, which favoured higher-income families, the Canada child benefit is larger, monthly, tax-free, and tied to income, so it would provide the greatest support to low-income families and single-parent households.

I also want to stress that ensuring all families have access to affordable and quality child care is a priority of this government. In case the member opposite is unaware, I would like to inform her about the meeting that the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development had earlier this month with his provincial counterparts to move forward on this important issue. This government understands the need to work with our provincial and territorial partners to design a framework for child care that meets the needs of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. In the absence of past federal leadership, the provinces have been required to move forward with crafting their own child care programs. I am proud to say that they now have a partner with this government.

Adjournment Proceedings

Like the Prime Minister, I am a parent and understand all too well the pressures of raising children while juggling a busy career. I hope my colleague across the aisle can agree that we can and must do more to support modern Canadian families. I invite her to join us in this important work.

●(1830)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Mr. Speaker, I totally respect where this member is coming from. I am the mother of five children, so I too understand the balance we need to have, as not only a mother but a family member, to ensure that everybody has this.

My point, though, is that the actions of the Prime Minister were extremely hypocritical. If this is someone who I entrust to running this country, I need to believe his words. I believe that the Prime Minister's words were empty at the time that he was criticizing the previous government and our universal child care benefit.

As I indicated earlier, it is not just about the funds being there. It is about the Canadian taxpayers who are funding this, and it is about money being used wisely and respecting Canadian tax dollars. That is one thing I have a concern with. If this were something that all Canadians had, I would fully respect it. However, my biggest issue, as I said, is the Prime Minister's lack of respect for the universal child care benefit that he constantly criticized. Yet, when the opportunity came for him to dole out money for himself, he was able to do so. I respect the need for child care, especially for hard-working families, and I respect the Prime Minister. However, at the same time this is not due action.

Mrs. Celina Caesar-Chavannes: Mr. Speaker, the changes in the structure of the Prime Minister's household staff reflect the needs of his young family. The Prime Minister values the Canadian taxpayer. As such, the changes will not result in an increase to his household budget.

As I said before, I am proud of the work that our government is undertaking to better support Canadian families. The Canada child benefit will give more money to nine out of ten families and lift hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty. We are also working in partnership with our provinces and territories to address the critical issue of providing high-quality affordable child care.

As a parent herself, I am sure the member opposite agrees that it is our responsibility as elected officials to do all that we can to support Canadian families. I would repeat my invitation for her to join us in this work by supporting the Canada child benefit.

●(1835)

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Comox MCTS is the third busiest marine traffic centre in Canada, handling an average of 900 marine accidents and emergencies per year, behind only Victoria and Halifax's.

When the government talks about consolidation of the Coast Guard, do not be fooled. It is talking about cuts, cuts to people's livelihood, cuts to safety, and cuts to service that would impact smaller communities across the beautiful riding of North Island—Powell River and the B.C. coastline.

When such a drastic change is made, I would assume that the homework is done, that a plan is made, stakeholders are consulted, and personnel changes are taken into account, and the risks are assessed.

I want to take a minute to talk about the associated risks and the necessity of risk assessments in this case. Prince Rupert and Victoria, the two projected remaining MCTS centres, both lie in tsunami hazard zones. The Comox station is in a safe zone and during an earthquake would not face an evacuation due to a tsunami. The Liberal plan would leave the two communication stations to be evacuated during a major earthquake, potentially leaving the entire B.C. coast without any Coast Guard communications coverage.

Risk assessments are generally a simple calculation of two components: the magnitude of the potential loss and the probability that the loss will occur.

The coast of British Columbia is on the ring of fire. Earthquakes happen frequently up and down the coast. Being prepared for the potential of a large earthquake and the resulting likelihood of a tsunami is part of our makeup. British Columbians know the probability of a tsunami.

Within this context, I want to make sure that the government is doing its homework. The Comox MCTS base should be staffed for the emergencies inherent in a seismic event. When the Conservatives decided not to do a risk assessment, common sense went flying out the window and the voters voted them out.

Will the government make sure that a risk assessment is done before the closure? Will it protect communications coverage in B.C. in case of a seismic event?

I am proud to have met the members of the Coast Guard; I know the excellent work they do day and night.

I also wonder if the government has assessed the reality that the radio sites are limited on the screen. This means that the radio coverage cannot be expanded to watch all the sites. We have heard that the staff have been trained and have the appropriate resources. However, when the Tofino centre was closed, only two of those three positions were moved to Prince Rupert. This is simply about logistics. If there are not eyes, if there are not enough screens, and the screens do not hold all the images, how are we safe? How are our ocean and coastline protected? The new government had a chance to review the Conservative decisions, consult with people, and make decisions in that context.

The British Columbia coast offers some of the most breathtaking scenery in this country. I love my riding. The coastline that I represent is full of many islands and remote coastal communities, which are populated. Often, for the small and remote communities, the communication station is their only connection, as there are not phone lines or cellphone access in that area. Local knowledge is key when faced with these challenges.

People on the coast want to see strong safety and emergency measures in place. The specifics of living in this part of the country expose us to some hazards, but we know we can count on the Coast Guard to be there. Our very lives depend on it.

I represent people in these communities. We have grown up with a very proud sense of local knowledge. This cannot be lost. The local Comox MCTS amassed an understanding of our region, observed and understands local weather.

How can the minister claim that this is not a big loss for our region?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the top priority of our Canadian Coast Guard is the safety of mariners, recreational boaters, and fishers.

The Canadian Coast Guard marine communications and traffic services centres monitor for distress calls and safety calls and broadcast maritime safety information such as weather and navigational warnings. They also provide information and advice to regulate vessel traffic movement, and take the appropriate action to ensure the safe and efficient movement of vessels.

• (1840)

[*English*]

The modernization and consolidation of our marine communications and traffic services centres has brought our Coast Guard communication control equipment into the 21st century alongside other developed nations.

[*Translation*]

The Government of Canada invested in the Coast Guard's infrastructure to take advantage of today's technology in order to deliver marine communications and traffic services at strategic locations across the country.

Navigational and communications technologies have changed a lot over the past decade. Even though the control equipment at the marine traffic centres was still working, it had become outdated.

The services provided by the centres are now more reliable thanks to the new technology that replaced the 1980s technology, which had become too difficult to maintain.

These investments help optimize resources while ensuring offshore safety.

[*English*]

Although there are fewer centres, coverage remains exactly the same, but is now supported by the 21st century communication control equipment. At present, we have successfully consolidated nine of 10 marine communications and traffic services centres.

[*Translation*]

The centres do not need to be physically located near the coast, since officers at these centres collect information through radio and radar rather than line of sight.

Adjournment Proceedings

The consolidation efforts and the marine communications and traffic services operations are moving along as planned, and officers at the centres are more effective. Marine communications and traffic services officers are certified professionals with a high level of training. Before they begin monitoring, officers go through a rigorous six-month training course at the Canadian Coast Guard College and study different geographic areas of responsibility. They then receive intensive training on the ground and must demonstrate their professional expertise, skills, and knowledge before moving on to active service.

The Canadian Coast Guard increased staffing levels at many of the modernized centres, which are all staffed by professionals who provide rescue services to mariners 24 hours a day.

[*English*]

I would like to thank the professionals for the incredible and difficult jobs they do each and every day.

[*Translation*]

We are also pleased that the committee will carry out a study of the marine services centres.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mr. Speaker, the minister seems to have already made up his mind on the imminent closure of the Comox MCTS. Why does he not just level with the House?

Last week, the fisheries committee approved a study on this issue. Why are the minister, his staff, and the Coast Guard not interested to find out the different implications of the closure? Clearly they do not want to do their homework. Why can they not wait for the findings of the committee before deciding on the future action for this vital centre?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier: Mr. Speaker, once again, our marine communications and traffic services centres have been modernized with 21st-century equipment, which is more reliable and helps officers provide vital safety services more efficiently.

[*English*]

This new technology is essential for the highly skilled and professional team of the centres and provides them with the tools that they need to continue delivering essential services to mariners.

[*Translation*]

I visited some of these centres with the minister a few weeks ago. I was very impressed by our visits and the competent staff at these centres. They showed us that the new technology is important to them and works well. I believe that the centres, as they currently exist, benefit from this new technology, which will be very helpful for mariners, boaters, and the people who use the waterways daily.

[*English*]

The Deputy Speaker: The motion that the House do now adjourn is deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:45 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Thursday, February 25, 2016

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS			
Government's Response to Petitions			
Mr. Lamoureux.....	1357		
Transportation			
Mr. Garneau.....	1357		
Citizenship Act			
Mr. McCallum.....	1357		
Bill C-6. Introduction and first reading.....	1357		
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1357		
Interparliamentary Delegations			
Mr. Brown.....	1357		
Committees of the House			
Physician-Assisted Dying			
Mr. Oliphant.....	1357		
Liaison			
Ms. Sgro.....	1357		
Transport, Infrastructure and Communities			
Ms. Sgro.....	1358		
Excise Act, 2001			
Mr. Lobb.....	1358		
Bill C-232. Introduction and first reading.....	1358		
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1358		
National Strategy for Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias Act			
Mr. Nicholson.....	1358		
Bill C-233. Introduction and first reading.....	1358		
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1358		
Canada Labour Code			
Ms. Trudel.....	1358		
Bill C-234. Introduction and first reading.....	1358		
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1358		
Criminal Code			
Mr. Bagnell.....	1358		
Bill C-235. Introduction and first reading.....	1358		
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1359		
Payment Card Networks Act			
Ms. Lapointe.....	1359		
Bill S-202. Introduction and first reading.....	1359		
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1359		
Candidate Gender Equity Act			
Mr. Stewart.....	1359		
Bill C-237. Introduction and first reading.....	1359		
(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1359		
		National Strategy for Safe Disposal of Lamps Containing Mercury Act	
		Mr. Fisher.....	1359
		Bill C-238. Introduction and first reading.....	1359
		(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1359
		Fairness in Charitable Gifts Act	
		Mr. Falk.....	1359
		Bill C-239. Introduction and first reading.....	1359
		(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1360
		Income Tax Act	
		Mr. May (Cambridge).....	1360
		Bill C-240. Introduction and first reading.....	1360
		(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed).....	1360
		Canada Labour Code	
		Mr. Lamoureux.....	1360
		Motion.....	1360
		(Motion agreed to).....	1360
		Petitions	
		Democratic Reform	
		Mr. Nater.....	1360
		Mr. MacGregor.....	1360
		Mr. Bagnell.....	1360
		Geographical Names	
		Ms. May (Saanich—Gulf Islands).....	1360
		The Environment	
		Ms. May (Saanich—Gulf Islands).....	1361
		Poverty	
		Mr. Cuzner.....	1361
		Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship	
		Mr. Lamoureux.....	1361
		Questions on the Order Paper	
		Mr. Lamoureux.....	1361
GOVERNMENT ORDERS			
Employment Insurance			
		Ms. Trudel.....	1361
		Motion.....	1361
		Ms. Mihychuk.....	1362
		Mr. Julian.....	1362
		Mr. Lamoureux.....	1363
		Ms. Ashton.....	1363
		Mr. Cuzner.....	1364
		Mr. Brassard.....	1365
		Mr. Aubin.....	1365
		Ms. Mihychuk.....	1365
		Mr. Aubin.....	1367
		Mr. Barlow.....	1368
		Mr. Cuzner.....	1368

Mr. MacGregor.....	1368
Ms. Watts.....	1368
Mr. Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis).....	1369
Ms. Quach.....	1370
Ms. Mihychuk.....	1370
Mrs. Vecchio.....	1370
Ms. Quach.....	1372
Mr. Lamoureux.....	1373
Mr. Aubin.....	1373
Mr. Lamoureux.....	1374
Mrs. Vecchio.....	1375
Ms. Moore.....	1375
Mr. Oliver.....	1376
Mr. Arnold.....	1376
Mrs. Shanahan.....	1377
Ms. Boutin-Sweet.....	1378
Mr. Oliver.....	1378
Ms. Ludwig.....	1378
Mr. Brassard.....	1379
Ms. May (Saanich—Gulf Islands).....	1379
Mr. MacGregor.....	1380
Mr. Cuzner.....	1381
Mr. Sopuck.....	1382
Ms. Hardcastle.....	1382
Mr. Long.....	1383
Mr. Aubin.....	1384
Ms. Ratansi.....	1384
Mr. Duvall.....	1385
Mr. Cuzner.....	1385
Mr. Amos.....	1386
Mr. Barlow.....	1386
Ms. Hardcastle.....	1387
Mr. Cuzner.....	1387
Ms. Ramsey.....	1387

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Freedom of Expression	
Ms. Pauzé.....	1389
Coldest Night of the Year Fundraiser	
Mr. Peterson.....	1389
Black History Month	
Mr. Nuttall.....	1389
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship	
Mrs. Nassif.....	1390
Indigenous Affairs	
Ms. Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona).....	1390
Khalsa Community School	
Mr. Grewal.....	1390
Richmond—Arthabaska	
Mr. Rayes.....	1390
Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia	
Mr. Massé (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia).....	1390
Boris Nemtsov	
Mr. Wrzesnewszky.....	1391

WestJet	
Ms. Rempel.....	1391
Dunbarton High School	
Ms. O'Connell.....	1391
Special Olympics Canada	
Ms. Hutchings.....	1391
Defibrillators	
Mr. Reid.....	1391
Franco-Ontarian Community	
Mr. Drouin.....	1392
Jack McFarland	
Mr. Duvall.....	1392
The Economy	
Mrs. Stubbs.....	1392
March First Movement	
Mr. Ehsassi.....	1392

ORAL QUESTIONS

The Economy	
Ms. Ambrose.....	1393
Mr. Bains.....	1393
Ms. Ambrose.....	1393
Mr. Bains.....	1393
Taxation	
Ms. Ambrose.....	1393
Ms. McKenna.....	1393
Finance	
Mr. Bernier.....	1393
Mr. Garneau.....	1393
Mr. Bernier.....	1393
Mr. Garneau.....	1394
Indigenous Affairs	
Mr. Angus.....	1394
Mr. Duclos.....	1394
Mr. Angus.....	1394
Mr. Duclos.....	1394
Ms. Boutin-Sweet.....	1394
Mr. Duclos.....	1394
Democratic Reform	
Ms. Boutin-Sweet.....	1394
Ms. Monsef.....	1394
Taxation	
Ms. Raitt.....	1395
Mr. Champagne.....	1395
Ms. Raitt.....	1395
Mr. Champagne.....	1395
Regional Economic Development	
Mr. Berthold.....	1395
Mr. Bains.....	1395
The Environment	
Mr. Fast.....	1395
Ms. McKenna.....	1395

Natural Resources			
Ms. Bergen	1396		
Mr. Carr	1396		
Taxation			
Mr. Poilievre	1396		
Mr. Bains	1396		
Justice			
Ms. Quach	1396		
Mr. Blair	1396		
Mr. Rankin	1396		
Mr. Blair	1396		
Ms. Leitch	1397		
Ms. Khera	1397		
Mr. Nicholson	1397		
Mr. Blair	1397		
Physician-Assisted Dying			
Mr. Carrie	1397		
Ms. Khera	1397		
Mr. Deltell	1397		
Mr. Casey (Charlottetown)	1397		
National Defence			
Mr. Weir	1397		
Mr. Sajjan	1397		
Ms. Laverdière	1398		
Mr. Sajjan	1398		
Pensions			
Mr. Sarai	1398		
Mr. Duclos	1398		
Ethics			
Mr. Gourde	1398		
Mr. LeBlanc	1398		
Mr. Strahl	1398		
Mr. LeBlanc	1398		
Mr. Calkins	1398		
Mr. LeBlanc	1398		
Mr. Calkins	1398		
Mr. Tootoo	1398		
Gasoline Prices			
Mr. Masse (Windsor West)	1399		
Mr. Bains	1399		
Canadian Coast Guard			
Ms. Blaney (North Island—Powell River)	1399		
Mr. Tootoo	1399		
Ethics			
Mrs. Vecchio	1399		
Mr. Tootoo	1399		
National Defence			
Mr. Paul-Hus	1399		
Mr. Sajjan	1399		
Mr. Paul-Hus	1399		
Mr. Sajjan	1400		
International Trade			
Mr. Lefebvre	1400		
		Ms. Freeland	1400
		Transport	
		Mrs. Block	1400
		Mr. Garneau	1400
		Canadian Heritage	
		Mr. Nantel	1400
		Ms. Joly	1400
		Ms. Dabrusin	1400
		Ms. Joly	1400
		Transport	
		Mr. Warkentin	1401
		Mr. Garneau	1401
		Aerospace Industry	
		Mr. Barsalou-Duval	1401
		Mr. Bains	1401
		Air Canada	
		Mr. Plamondon	1401
		Mr. Garneau	1401
		Points of Order	
		Special Joint Committee on Physician-Assisted Dying	
		Mr. Genuis	1401
		Business of the House	
		Mr. Scheer	1402
		Mr. LeBlanc	1402
		PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS	
		Income Tax Act	
		(Bill C-222: On the Order: Private Members' Business)	1402
		The Speaker	1402
		(Order discharged and bill withdrawn)	1403
		GOVERNMENT ORDERS	
		Business of Supply	
		Opposition Motion—Employment Insurance	
		Motion	1403
		Mr. Masse (Windsor West)	1403
		Mr. Cuzner	1404
		Mr. O'Toole	1404
		Mr. Cuzner	1405
		Ms. Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona)	1406
		Mr. Barlow	1406
		Mr. Nault	1406
		Mr. Blaikie	1408
		Mr. Barlow	1408
		Mr. Easter	1408
		Ms. Mathysen	1408
		Mr. Nantel	1410
		Ms. Young	1410
		Ms. Paupé	1410
		Ms. Blaney (North Island—Powell River)	1411
		Mr. Easter	1412
		Mr. Brassard	1412
		Mr. Nantel	1412
		Mr. Barlow	1413

Ms. Trudel	1414
Mrs. Lockhart	1414
Mr. O'Toole	1415
Mr. Poilievre	1415
Mr. Caron	1416
Mr. Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation)	1417
Mr. Caron	1417
Mr. Easter	1418
Ms. Pauzé	1419
Mr. Dusseault	1419
Ms. Sansoucy	1419
Mr. Lamoureux	1421
Mr. Dusseault	1421
Mr. Easter	1421
Ms. Sansoucy	1422
Ms. Pauzé	1423
Mr. Nault	1423
Mr. Fraser (Central Nova)	1423
Ms. Trudel	1425

Ms. May (Saanich—Gulf Islands)	1425
Ms. Mihychuk	1425
Ms. Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona)	1426
Mr. Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation)	1427
Ms. Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona)	1427
Division on motion deferred	1427
Mr. Lamoureux	1427

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

Canada Post

Ms. Trudel	1427
Ms. Alleslev	1428

Taxation

Mrs. Vecchio	1429
Mrs. Caesar-Chavannes	1429

Fisheries and Oceans

Ms. Blaney (North Island—Powell River)	1430
Mr. Cormier	1431

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