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Ms. Raymonde Folco

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•(1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): We are holding meeting 36 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, today, Thursday, May 19, 2005, from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

On the agenda, pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), we are considering the Main Estimates 2005-2006: Votes 5 and 15 under Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, referred to the committee on Friday, February 25, 2005.

First, I would like to welcome Mr. Joe Fontana, the Minister of Labour and Housing. This is not the first time you have appeared as a witness. I would first ask you to introduce the people with you.

Mr. Minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing): Thank you, Madam Chair and colleagues.

It is a pleasure for me to be here. I am joined with Maryantonett Flumian, the deputy minister, as well as Karen Kinsley, the president of CMHC, and Mr. Terry Hearn. I know that you will be speaking with Mr. Harry Arthurs in the second hour with regard to the part III review.

Let me indicate again how much of a pleasure it is for me to be here. I know that we've had some great discussions in the past with regard to labour and housing, so I'm pleased again to appear before the committee and talk a little bit about what's happened since we met in November, and again in March.

The Chair: Before you start, I would point out to members of the committee that the minister's text should be before you. There is a French version and an English version.

Please go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair, when I met with the committee last November and again in March, we discussed both the labour and housing aspects of my portfolio. At that time I signalled my intention to do a major review of part III of the Canada Labour Code, the part dealing with labour standards. I believe I even invited the committee to be engaged in such an issue, and I hope you will.

That review is now under way, with the capable direction of Professor Harry Arthurs, who is here with me today to bring you up

to date on his work. Professor Arthurs is serving as an independent commissioner and is conducting the review with the assistance of three expert advisers. Commissioner Arthurs will make his presentation during the second hour of this meeting.

To begin with, however, I will first revisit my responsibility on housing, and then look at some key issues being addressed by the labour program. As you know, when the Prime Minister appointed me as Minister of Housing, he made me responsible for both the national homelessness initiative and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

[*Translation*]

That is why the Government of Canada now more than ever favours a holistic approach to addressing the problems of housing and homelessness.

[*English*]

I strongly believe that we must address housing as a continuum. Along that continuum we find Canadians with various needs, from emergency shelters to transitional, assisted, and affordable housing, all the way to the market availability of rental housing and home ownership.

Most Canadians, as we all know, are well housed. Currently, more than 80% of Canadians have housing that is affordable, uncrowded, and in good condition. However, some 16%, or 1.7 million households, including many aboriginal people, are still without adequate housing. Canadians expect the federal government to play a leading role when it comes to housing. The provinces and the territories have also reaffirmed the expectation that the Government of Canada must be a partner in finding lasting solutions to households in need.

Last December I announced our government's plan to consult with Canadians on the development of a new national housing policy. Why is a new housing policy framework important? The answer is simple. Canadians and our partners, the provinces, the territories, the municipalities, and the voluntary and private sectors, need to know that the federal government will be there, not only in the short term, but more importantly, in the long term. And we need to know what form our partnership will take.

In January and February of this year we held a series of nationwide consultations to obtain the input of a wide range of stakeholders on developing a new partnership-based Canadian housing framework. Community consultations and expert forums were held in cities across the country and provided Canadians with an opportunity to share their views and their ideas. These consultations have resulted in the policy document that I plan to take to cabinet soon. I also plan to discuss it with my provincial and territorial counterparts by the end of June of this year, and hopefully even with this committee, if you so desire. The housing framework we are creating together will serve as a guide for the federal government to make strategic use of our 2005 budget commitments. Most importantly, it will focus on the government, fostering new partnerships with various sectors to address our common housing challenges and to meet the housing needs of Canadians.

We have a good base to build on. Successes achieved in communities across Canada under programs such as the national homelessness initiative, the residential rehabilitation assistance program, and the affordable housing initiative demonstrate that we can bring partners from different sectors together to collaborate and find solutions to the housing needs of Canadians. The result of this collaboration can be seen in communities across the country. As of the end of March of this year, approximately \$425 million of the \$1 billion that we had committed for affordable housing initiatives in support of some 19,000 units, as well as an additional nearly 3,000 units for other projects across Canada, has been allocated. This government recently offered flexibilities to get the program moving more quickly in all parts of Canada. Progress has been greatest in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Nunavut, and the Northwest Territories.

Since 1999, communities across Canada have undertaken more than 4,000 projects funded wholly or in part by the national homelessness initiative. Through this initiative over 60 communities in Canada, representing over 75% of our population, are participants and avid partners in making sure we all have a place to stay at the end of the day. All of these initiatives show we are making a positive difference in what matters for Canadians.

On the international housing front, Canada has been chosen, as you know, to host the World Urban Forum, in Vancouver, in June 2006, which will bring together public and private institutions, experts, and decision-makers from around the world to discuss the key urban challenges facing the world today. Held every two years, the World Urban Forum is a signature international event of UN HABITAT, the program of the United Nations leading the global efforts on housing, shelter, and healthy communities. Canada is a country that has a long history of supporting UN HABITAT in promoting socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities and helping to pave the way towards providing adequate shelter for all. In cities throughout the developing world, Canada has contributed to numerous projects that support improved quality of life. In fact, Canada is also a member of the UN HABITAT governing council this year, which provides us overall policy guidance and direction to the program. I want to thank some members of this committee who accompanied me to that conference in Nairobi, namely Ed and Christian, for their assistance and great help in that endeavour.

Now I would like to talk to you or update you on our labour program issues. As members of this committee know, federal labour law regulates about 10% of Canada's workforce, or about 1.5 million workers. But it's important to remember that our actions and decisions can have a significant influence on the provinces and territories, often in other parts of the world as well. Today the labour program continues to meet the needs of workers and employers, as it has for over a hundred years.

Another continuing responsibility is the promotion of equal rights for all Canadians, in both the workplace and community, and the assurance of a fair and representative workforce, a responsibility we address through the Employment Equity Act, a pillar in the Canadian model of inclusion and participation. As Minister of Labour and Housing, I am mandated by the Employment Equity Act to remove barriers to employment and advancement of all visible minorities and aboriginal people, to provide education, and to disseminate information.

In our government's recent announced action plan to combat racism, the labour program has an important role to play. The action plan establishes a horizontal approach across several federal government departments and agencies and outlines a number of important commitments to combat racism.

● (1110)

This government views the elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance as a key priority and as a central objective in our international human rights agenda.

Budget 2005 includes some \$56 million to the action plan over five years with \$13 million of the total committed to the labour program's implementation of a racism-free workplace strategy. Building on existing employment equity program requirements, the strategy will develop measures, practical tools, educational materials, and best practices with the objective of overcoming discriminatory barriers in Canadian labour markets and promoting upward mobility in the workforce for visible minorities and aboriginal people.

I am also very proud of our government's proposed wage-earner protection program, which I announced in the House on May 5. There has been a longstanding recognition by everyone concerned about bankruptcy reform that the situation for unpaid wage earners in bankruptcy was unfair and that the insolvency process needed to be rebalanced to improve the protection of workers. In fact, three independent commissions had recommended the establishment of a wage protection program. The majority of our G-7 countries provide government programs to protect workers whose employers go bankrupt.

The workers this program will protect are often the most vulnerable, working in low-wage jobs predominantly in the service, restaurant, retail, and wholesale industries. They are workers in small business who have no benefit packages, no pensions, no savings, and nothing to fall back on when they don't get paid. They are women and new immigrants who have no other recourse at their disposal when their jobs are lost due to bankruptcy. The wage-earner protection program is designed to help protect workers when their employers go bankrupt, and will provide workers with guaranteed payment of wages owing. Payment will no longer depend upon the amount of assets in their employers' estates, and that is a very crucial point.

Workers will get an assured amount, a payment of the full amount owed to them up to \$3,000, rather than waiting up to several years for a fraction on the dollar of what is owed to them. The program will also ensure that workers get paid their lost wages quickly so that they will get their money when they need it most.

On the international front, Canada continues to play a leadership role in labour affairs. Canada is a founding member of the International Labour Organization, and we play an active role in the ILO and many other international organizations that are concerned with labour affairs.

We work actively with our colleagues in the United States and Mexico to support the North American agreement on labour cooperation as well as similar bilateral agreements with Chile and Costa Rica, and we work on many other fronts to promote best practices in labour affairs and workplace health and safety with our colleagues in Canada and around the world.

The mission of Canada's labour program at home is to promote a fair, safe, healthy work environment, and we bring the same commitment to our work in the international community.

Now let me turn just briefly to the review of part III of the Canada Labour Code, which has not been reviewed in a comprehensive manner in over 40 years. We have amended part III of the code in recent years to include new measures such as maternity and parental leave and compassionate care leave, but its overall framework is still based largely on the world of work that existed in 1965. When we consider how dramatically our society, our economy, our workplaces, and our workforce have changed since 1960, we can appreciate the need to review and update part III of the code, just as we have reviewed and updated part I on collective bargaining and part II on health and safety.

As I mentioned, the review of part III is being held by Professor Harry Arthurs. Professor Arthurs is one of Canada's leading labour law experts. He has distinguished credentials as a world-renowned scholar and as a labour arbitrator and mediator in Canada. He and the members of the review panel have been hard at work since December last year. Their task is to explore issues like the changing nature of work, the growth of the knowledge-based economy, pressures on the workplace, productivity and responsiveness, increased diversity in the workplace, new forms of workplace structures, and new forms of employment relationships. They are examining the needs of Canadian workers and employers through research, international comparisons, and a series of nationwide public hearings about what Canada's workplace and, more

specifically, federally regulated workplaces should look like in the 21st century. Their work will lead to recommendations for both legislative and non-legislative measures aimed at producing practical solutions to the difficult questions of regulating workplaces in a modern economy.

•(1115)

I would hope that this committee will be fully engaged with me on that exercise.

[*Translation*]

Every Canadian who is interested in modernization of federal labour standards is invited to take part in the process.

[*English*]

I have asked Professor Arthurs for an interim report this fall. I am looking forward to receiving this report, and I will be pleased to share it with the committee when I do.

This concludes my presentation. I thank you very much for your time and your attention.

The Chair: Mr. Minister, I'd like to say how much I appreciate the fact that you have suggested a number of subjects this committee could look at, possibly in the fall, and we will take good note of it. They sound extremely interesting and they would certainly get us into some areas of great interest. Thank you very much.

There are a number of questions now. For the first round of seven minutes we'll start with Mr. Forseth.

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam, CPC): Thank you.

Welcome, Mr. Minister. I appreciate your comments today.

Related to the issue of housing, I appreciate the programs that are being provided, but I will keep coming back to a theme that I have repeated and that perhaps you've heard from me in the past. I see the evidence in my community, despite all the grand plans of the province and the press releases and the commitments you've made today and at other times about seniors housing. I just observe the landscape in my community. I see that low-cost seniors housing was being built to a great degree in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; since then, the incentives have been changed, and the housing building has stopped. I look at the demographic shift in our community, and we see we need more of that housing than ever before—yet, even with the combination of what CMHC and the federal government and provincial governments have put together, that is just not happening on the ground anymore.

There are a few innovative projects. I've seen a condo unit attached to a church. They had something like pre-paid rent; someone placed perhaps \$60,000 down into a society, got the use of a condo for as long as they lived, and when they died or left, got that money back without interest.

But in the main, I see we have projects built by the Kiwanis, by... I saw the Connaught Villa at 2222 Edinburgh being built in my community, and those are not being built any more. When I look at the demographics, I say we need to do some forward planning to respond to that. I think we're doing the best we can on the issues of homelessness and street people and shelters and those things, but as for the main focus—there seems to be a hole there. I'm wondering what you can do to perhaps revive something that used to work, rather than trying to invent a whole new program in that area.

• (1120)

Hon. Joe Fontana: Paul, I couldn't agree more with your assessment of our need to make sure that seniors are looked after in the community. Our population and our demographic imperatives point to the fact that we need to take a look at a number of things with regard to seniors. There are a number of different programs. I don't think we need to create more programs. I think we have to build greater partnerships and a sensitivity around what it is we need to do.

I know British Columbia has made seniors a priority. Consider our affordable housing initiative and the \$130 million that the federal government has put towards B.C. We've built in different flexibilities for every province because every province and every community is a little different. So from the ground up, the provinces can pick and choose the programs and the kind of housing they want to support, based on the needs analysis they've done.

Of the 1.7 million Canadians in core need—meaning those people who have to pay more than 30% of their income towards housing—800,000 or so are seniors. Some seniors are actually only one or two months away from becoming homeless.

So Paul, you are dead right. We've changed the residential rehabilitation assistance program for persons with disabilities. If a senior is independent, why shouldn't we help them stay there by providing some assistance for them to renovate their own homes?

Also, we've just introduced secondary suites. We want to encourage municipalities to say, "What is wrong with seniors having a secondary unit in their house, thereby increasing their income?" This allows them to be able to stay in their own homes. What is wrong with changing municipal by-laws to allow families to have secondary suites so they can look after their parents?

We also looked at the affordable housing initiative. There are programs targeted towards seniors. There are rent supplements that make rents or affordable housing more affordable by providing a shelter allowance to either the person or the landlord. There are a number of different programs.

I would agree with you, Paul, that we need to make sure that seniors and those who are disabled are looked after even in private-market housing. We have \$1 billion, of which \$700 million or \$800 million has now been allocated. We're moving. We're starting to build new seniors housing complexes throughout the country, through the service clubs, the volunteer organizations, the co-ops, and not-for-profits.

Bill C-48 will give me an additional \$1.6 billion to spend over two years in housing. That's an incredible opportunity for all of us, if this budget passes, to be able to build a lot more houses, especially for

seniors. I didn't mean to be facetious. It's a reality. If we pass the budget, I've got a heck of a lot more money to spend on housing.

Mr. Paul Forseth: The comment was, if it was such a great idea, why wasn't it in C-43?

Hon. Joe Fontana: Well, it was; it is. It was in our five-year fiscal framework. We just advanced it a few years.

Mr. Paul Forseth: I see a briefing note here on the flexibility related to RRAP. Perhaps you'll be able to give me some kind of bulletin, or some additional material, about my main focus—providing mainstream housing for seniors at reduced cost. There are, for example, a number of wonderful facilities in my community, but they are just not being built any more.

• (1125)

Hon. Joe Fontana: We are going to be building, though, under the affordable housing initiative.

Mr. Paul Forseth: We will have to look at that formula.

Hon. Joe Fontana: It's already there for British Columbia to take advantage of. I was just talking to Alberta, to the minister there. They have three or four proposals—the Vietnamese seniors proposals, the francophonie proposal. There are a number of provinces and communities now putting an emphasis on seniors housing.

Mr. Paul Forseth: What about replacement workers? It's in the current legislation, but then there's a private member's bill. Where are we going with that?

Hon. Joe Fontana: The replacement worker private member's bill was defeated in the House. But I'm happy you asked that, Paul. When we looked at part I of the code in 1999, there were significant changes made to the collective bargaining, part I. It essentially says that we have replacement worker legislation, though it might not go as far as some members would like. But here is the catch: a company, either on strike or lock-out, cannot use replacement workers for the purposes of undermining the collective bargaining process.

I made an undertaking—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Paul Forseth: I'm getting big trouble from Telus employees in British Columbia around that issue.

The Chair: Perhaps we can come back to this at another time, but we've gone way over time.

I would ask you to address your questions and your remarks through the chair, please. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Simard, welcome to our committee.

Mr. Christian Simard (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Minister.

I can't criticize you because you have the same fault as I do: you answer questions with passion, sometimes at length. I'm going to make a pact, not with the devil, but with you: I'll ask brief questions and you'll answer them briefly. That will enable my colleague to ask you one or two questions in the time left to us.

First, I'd like to know where negotiations stand on transfer of the non-profit and cooperative housing stock.

The Chair: Please address your question to the Chair, Mr. Simard.

Mr. Christian Simard: Then my question goes through you, Madam Chair. I would like the minister to tell us where the negotiations stand with Quebec on transfer of the non-profit and cooperative housing stock.

The minister announced to us that these negotiations resumed last September or October. Are they moving along well? When do you think they will wind up? What are the stumbling blocks in the discussions?

[*English*]

Hon. Joe Fontana: Christian, thank you very much for that question, and I want to thank you—

The Chair: Monsieur le ministre.

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair... I should know, because I've been a chairperson and I used to do exactly the same thing as you.

The Chair: I know you've been a chairperson for many years, and that's why I call your attention to it. You would never let it go. I remember. I was a member of your committee for some time.

Hon. Joe Fontana: I know.

Well, through you, Madam Chair, to Christian, I want to thank him publicly for his support for housing. I know that his background has been in co-op housing, and I know that most of the people around this table firmly believe in housing.

My answer with regard to the social housing transfer that's been available to Quebec since 1997 is that it's going well. I believe we are very close to finally reaching an agreement. I met with my counterpart, Nathalie Normandeau, two weeks ago, when I was in Quebec. I'm happy to report that the negotiations between CMHC and the Government of Quebec are going very well.

As you know, it is about a \$300 million annual expenditure, I believe, on behalf of the Government of Canada that supports tens of thousands of people in Quebec who are living in social housing. It is a significant investment that the Government of Canada makes throughout the country—about \$2 billion.

We're hopeful that we will complete those negotiations in the not too distant future.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Simard, you have enough time to ask other questions.

Mr. Christian Simard: Why has CMHC accumulated a \$3.4 billion surplus in recent years without having to reinvest that amount, whether to renovate the housing stock, to build social housing or to cut mortgage insurance rates further? How is it that a public corporation is not required to try to rectify the situation by

reinvesting funds in the right place, that is to say where people's needs are?

● (1130)

[*English*]

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair, as you know, CMHC has been an extremely successful mortgage insurance corporation. In fact, it's been sought after by a lot of countries in the world...to replicate what we've done. Let's not be mistaken: the reason it is successful is that more and more people are buying homes and remortgaging at very low interest rates. The fact is, it is a success story.

But to answer Christian's question, is there a public interest for CMHC, besides being a very profitable and successful mortgage insurance company, it also happens to be the social housing agency of this government and therefore delivers a lot of programs on behalf of the federal government. This year, as an example, it had a \$1 billion surplus after paying \$400 million in taxes to the government.

What did we do in recognition of that success? We reduced premiums for home ownership. We reduced premiums and in fact waived them for not-for-profit and co-operative housing. We reduced premiums to the private marketplace, so that they in turn can build more and more housing. So we are being responsible.

But let's not forget this is a mortgage insurance company. In the event there is a significant downturn in the economy—and we have to forecast for that—you need to have retained earnings, and the company has to be capitalized. We had certain obligations to capitalize that corporation, and now it is fully capitalized. That essentially means, in the most dire circumstances, that we can pay for those mortgages for people who might lose their homes because the economy has gone into recession.

It doesn't look that way. In fact, the economy looks like it's going to be very buoyant and upward in mobility for the next five years. But we have to be very prudent. These are moneys that people are paying for an insurance policy, and that's why I think it's important to maintain that balance and prudence.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Simard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christian Simard: I see, on page 64 of your report, in Chapter 14, under the heading "Other Expenses", that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is already paying the Canadian government \$21 million to ensure it.

The Government of Canada Fees are incurred in recognition of the Government's financial backing of CMHC's Insurance and Securitization Activity and are recorded at the exchange amount, which is [...]

If I understand correctly, we're paying \$21 million for the Canadian government to ensure CMHC in the event of loss. In my view, maintaining an amount of that size amounts to double insurance. Earlier, you did not really answer my question: why has CMHC accumulated \$3.4 billion without reinvesting it? You told me about recent cuts in interest rates, and perhaps a cut of \$200 million in interest rates, but that explains nothing. Hanging on to \$3 billion in order to guard against bad years amounts to double insurance. You're already paying the Canadian government in order to assure you in that regard. Am I mistaken?

[English]

Hon. Joe Fontana: Merci, Christian. Perhaps I could have Madam Kinsley answer that.

The Chair: Madam Kinsley.

Ms. Karen Kinsley (President, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): Thank you.

The response to this is that it's not a double coverage or guarantee. We're obligated, to the extent that we do not have full capitalization, to pay the Government of Canada for the contingent liability associated with the deficiency with respect to capital. So to the extent that we're capitalized through our retained earnings, that takes or reduces the government's risk; to the extent that we're not fully capitalized, the Government of Canada is at direct risk and we have to pay the government for that obligation. So it's on the deficiency of what the retained earnings do not cover that the fee applies.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you. I now turn the floor over to Mr. Martin.

[English]

Hon. Joe Fontana: And we'll get you a further report on that, through the chair.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and through you to the minister.

I just want to note the newly converted attitude of the government to affordable housing, given that there has been really no significant affordable social housing program for probably more than ten years now in the country.

And it was interesting to hear Mr. Forseth speak about what he's seeing in his own community. Certainly that happened across Ontario when the Conservative government of Mr. Harris summarily shut down all the excellent affordable social housing programs that were happening in Ontario back in the early nineties, a lot of them co-sponsored by organizations like the Lions Club, like the Croatia Club, like the credit union. And as a matter of fact, in 1995, when the Conservative government of Ontario of that day shut down those programs, there were several that were either holes in the ground or half up in my own community that were mothballed. And we had to fight with the government to recover some of the investment that was made there. The Conservative government of that day referred to them as boondoggles. Well, they were housing for people who needed housing.

So with that in mind, and the fact that I couldn't find in the budget that was tabled in February—and I talked with other analysts—any commitment to affordable housing, which budget are you referring to on page 4 of your notes when you say, “The housing framework

that we are creating together will serve as a guide for the federal government to make strategic use of our 2005 Budget commitments”? Was that the NDP budget or the Liberal budget?

•(1135)

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair, I will speak to his question specifically.

As you know, when we introduced the budget in February, while there was no specific allotment for housing for 2005-2006—I think I might have said this—I had over \$670 million that was still unspent by the provinces for the past three or four years. I'm happy to report now that in fact we've signed with all the provinces—especially Ontario, where in fact they had \$3 million sitting in the bank. We have now signed that historic agreement. For northern Ontario—I don't have to tell Tony, we're fellow northern Ontarians—that's going to be incredible, because the needs in northern Ontario specifically are very, very great.

I can tell you, though, that in our budget speech, in the budget documents, and in subsequent indications made by the Minister of Finance, within the five-year fiscal framework, the Government of Canada had committed to an additional \$1.5 billion for affordable housing. Now I'm happy to give some credit to the NDP, which in our negotiations on Bill C-48 was able to look at our five-year plan, Bill C-43, and we were able to make changes that are now reflected in Bill C-48 that in fact will advance the commitments that we had made that were in for five years and bring them forward for the 2005 budget as well as for the 2006 budget. And of course we would applaud them for assisting us in helping drive the point that housing is a very, very, important issue for Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: I'm very interested in the announcement you made of secondary rental and garden suites, and I would guess apartments and houses. I find that a rather exciting initiative. As a matter of fact, again, going back to my time in Ontario when we brought in a similar proposal in 1995, when the Harris Conservative government came into power, it was thrown out. It was immediately dismissed as not necessary.

I'm glad to see that the federal government is now looking at this and wanting to enable the creation of these kinds of units. They certainly are needed, and they would be an excellent contribution, particularly to seniors who now are empty nesters, who have homes or property, or to families of seniors who would like to build a garden unit and have their parents live beside them.

Again, we're short here on detail. I'd like the minister to maybe, if he could, share some further detail on this: When? How much? How is it going to roll out?

Hon. Joe Fontana: Rather than take up the committee's time, it's an important issue, and I think you've addressed the fact that there are a number of different programs and creative solutions that we have to find in order to find the holistic approach to housing and how we can engage the partnerships far broader and deeper to the private sector to make sure that we're looking after seniors.

Don't forget that housing is a provincial jurisdiction, yet an awful lot of what municipalities do impacts on housing costs, such as development charges, educational levies, how you deal with land, zoning policies, and so on—the Canadian housing framework. I would invite this committee, if it feels housing is very important, to have you fully engaged in talking about the range of options and opportunities that we have where the Canadian government can be a partner.

I'll provide Tony and this committee, if you didn't see it, with a full package of everything that we've done in the past six or eight months as it relates to affordable housing, the RAP initiatives, and the mortgage insurance programs that we brought in, so that this committee is fully apprised of the range of things we've been working on over the past number of months. I think it might be helpful as we look to the future and at what we're going to do.

Thank you for those questions.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll certainly take that into account.

You do have a tiny bit of time left, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin: On the homelessness initiative, apparently there's been no mention of what's going to happen after March 2006. Is that going to be renewed? We have to continue to house these folks and to move that forward.

Hon. Joe Fontana: In the budget speech and again in the budget documents we committed to renewing and enhancing SCPI and also to renewing and enhancing the residential rehabilitation program. Both are two excellent programs, and I think we've touched on why.

Let me talk a little about SCPI, which is the homelessness initiative. I need your input and I'll tell you why. Since 1999 we have spent \$1.15 billion on homelessness initiatives. We now have an infrastructure of care through emergency shelters, which we didn't have before, so people now have a place to go. Emergency shelters are not the way you house people; we need transitional and supportive housing. The big piece, of course, is this. A lot of people are still in our shelters. Why? They can't go anywhere else because there isn't affordable housing.

The new SCPI, in my opinion, ought to represent prevention, and it ought to help to put the services around people. I've always said housing is much more than shelter. It's about health care, it's about education, it's about good environmental policy, and so on, and it's about looking to people and the services they require, especially those who are mentally ill or who perhaps have some health issues. RAP services around shelter would be the new way of the SCPI model. Preventing homelessness from ever occurring I think would be an incredibly important investment.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Adams.

Hon. Peter Adams (Peterborough, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to talk about cooperative housing for a while, on two themes. First, you know from our caucus that the cooperative housing sector has been in touch with us. They seem to be very satisfied with several of the things that have been done. My understanding is there's one thing outstanding, at least in their minds, and I'd be grateful, Minister, if you could discuss that. Secondly, while you're doing that, you were mentioning the role of CMHC, and its social role, and the agreement of May 3 of this year, which provides portfolio management services for federally administered cooperative housing. Perhaps you could talk about that agreement, but initially perhaps you could summarize where we are with the co-ops, particularly with respect to the outstanding item.

Hon. Joe Fontana: Thanks for that easy question, Peter.

Madam Chair, I think we've done some incredible things with co-op housing. As you know, some 30 years ago it was our government that believed in co-op housing. We all know that co-op housing is a lot more than shelter. In fact, it's communities looking after people. The whole notion of co-op housing is an incredibly unique housing solution, which is in fact being shared around the world. We want to do more with co-ops.

We've entered into an historic arrangement with CHF. In fact, they will be our administrator. We've entered into an agreement that will allow them to be partners with CMHC in terms of delivering and administering some of the 79,000 units that we have across the country. I think that partnership is going to bode well. They're great advocates. Secondly, they know the co-op housing situation and they have the insight that we want. We're looking forward to the historic partnership that we've created.

I should point out to you a number of things that we've done to advance co-op housing. It's not only the question of whether we should build more. Of course we should. Are there unique ways of being able to use co-op housing to achieve some of the objectives that Paul and everybody have talked about in regard to seniors? Of course there are.

The co-op model, as you know, works on 50% market rent and 50% rent geared to income. That's an area where in fact, if we believe in mixed-income communities, we can use up the capacity.

There was a problem under section 95 of the co-op program and some issues. As we renewed mortgages for some of the co-ops, an unintended consequence happened with lower interest rates, and that's good news. But because we were able to provide them with lower mortgages and lower financing costs, the subsidies dropped. I'm not sure that's the way the system was supposed to work. Essentially, some of the co-ops found they either had to charge clients more or the subsidies had been reduced and were causing some difficulties.

Two or three weeks ago I announced to those section 95 co-ops that the bleeding would stop and we would stop that unintended consequence. There is a vehicle by which CMHC can work independently with individual co-ops to look after those financial pressures. We do that on an ongoing basis. As far as the policy decision, I've stopped that from happening.

Obviously, the co-ops now want to retroactively look at what has happened in the past to see how many units of subsidy we've lost. Is there a creative way of being able to find the money in order to in fact help more and more people? We are looking at those initiatives very closely with the CHF.

• (1145)

The Chair: Merci.

Mr. Adams, you still have some time.

Hon. Peter Adams: Minister, with regard to the—

The Chair: Through the chair, Mr. Adams.

Hon. Peter Adams: *Madame la présidente*, through you to the minister, with regard to this agreement, do you already have plans to assess it? It's a change. We all understand that. I applaud it as it stands. But do you have any plans to assess it as its influence grows and to measure in some way what its influence is on the cooperative sector and on the evolution of this very important area that you've described? If you have such plans, how do you intend to measure the impact?

Hon. Joe Fontana: In fact, I think that we know some of the impact. The CHF, Cooperative Housing Federation, has already given some numbers. Their estimation is that perhaps 10,000 rent supplement units or arrangements have been lost.

We are looking at those statistics. We are looking individually at how we can continue to help and to make sure that the inventory of co-op housing and not-for-profit housing were equally affected. I should tell you there was not-for-profit housing under section 95. It wasn't only co-ops that were affected.

We're well aware of the situation. We want to fix the problem. In fact, section 95 co-ops and not-for-profit units may very well be the answer to finding some affordable housing initiatives because the buildings are already there. We should be able to take advantage of the capacity that exists within the co-ops and not-for-profits on that basis of fifty-fifty. Why wouldn't we do that?

We're looking at all the options. I'm happy to have a partner such as CHF that is prepared to work with us to find innovative and creative solutions. You can't ask for any more than having a whole bunch of people working together with the same aim and for the same end. I think that's incredibly useful to a government.

Hon. Peter Adams: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank you on behalf of the three co-ops in the Peterborough riding.

The Chair: We're now into the second round of five minutes each.

Mr. Komarnicki, please.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the minister's multifaceted approach to the housing and homelessness situation. I think he's on the right track.

I have some specific questions for him with respect to CMHC involvement in its insurance and securitization program. He has indicated that the significant surpluses that are being generated year by year have been utilized to reduce the premiums to some extent, and he said they're there to meet liabilities. I understand that. But when we look at the planning and priorities portion as well as the summary of the corporate plan, they show that these surpluses continue to increase year by year; they're projected to reach over \$1 billion in 2009. My concern is that these kinds of surpluses are not being passed on to the people who are paying the insurance premiums but are slowly starting to go into social programs. It concerns me that a greater effort isn't being made to reduce those premiums in the first place.

Why is it that projections for 2009 are going to be over \$1 billion, Mr. Minister, and what are you going to do about reducing that surplus?

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair, I'm happy to hear that Ed, for one thing, believes we're on the right track. Second, I think that on a going-forward basis the questions he just asked are very relevant, and I'll say why.

I think there is an incredible opportunity, if you look at the going-forward CMHC success. Is there an opportunity? Of course I don't have total authority, as you know, to use all of those retained earnings, because, for one thing, you need to capitalize the company, and for another, all of those retained earnings, or call them what you will, are in fact part of the fiscal framework of the Government of Canada. You just can't grab \$3.8 billion and think you can use the money for whatever purposes you want, because it's a much more complex issue.

But on a going-forward basis, as I just mentioned, \$200 million has been offered up as a way of dealing with that surplus. CMHC—the board of directors and the president—are looking at a number of different and innovative ways we can use prudent amounts of those retained earnings, after capitalization and after taking everything into account with respect to the fiscal dynamics of the government, to be able to do exactly what you said, Ed, and that is to generate more for affordable housing and to drive the premiums even lower.

We've waived them for not-for-profits and co-ops. Should we continue to reduce premiums to encourage home ownership and more private development? I say yes. We're looking at all of those options, including some very creative ones, to make sure that the insurance portfolio is balanced. It's not as if we're trying to make so much money that there is no public purpose.

• (1150)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I want to ask a couple of further questions.

The Chair: The proverbial minister... We'll ask for shorter answers so we can ask more questions.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: And I have a series of them. I probably won't get there, but one question is this. I notice—

The Chair: Ask several questions at once. That way, you'll get the same length of answer, but to several questions.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: But not necessarily an answer.

The minister talked about worker protection legislation. Interestingly, the problem has been around here as long as the minister has. It was only when the non-confidence motion came to light and the NDP deal came about that the social conscience was pricked and \$100 million was assigned in this agreement. But I don't see it in the actual budget, Bill C-48, that we're speaking about; the \$100 million is not there.

The second question I have is, even if it were there, where is it coming from? Is it coming from general revenue? And what happens next year and year after year?

I made an announcement about what our worker protection fund was, and the minister announced his hours later and took some exception to where we were getting it from. I'm saying, Mr. Minister, where is your \$100 million coming from? Why is it not in Bill C-48? How is it you've been around eight years and haven't done anything about worker protection? Where are you getting your money from, and what do you intend to do next year?

Hon. Joe Fontana: Well, you know, Ed is right: why haven't we done it before? I can tell you, though, it has been in the planning since I became a minister. So to suggest it only happened three or four weeks ago, or a month ago, would be wrong, because this is a very complex issue. It comes under wanting to reform CCAA bankruptcy. We need to change, as David Emerson will do, the super-priority or limited super-priority of workers, so that in fact they are higher up the ladder than the government, than the banks, because we fundamentally believe workers and their value of work ought to be respected. So we're going to be introducing changes to the CCAA.

The worker protection program is about wages, which, as I said, has been on the drawing-board since I've been here. But you're absolutely right: it has been thought of before, and nobody could ever drive it.

I'm sorry to take some of the credit. I'm happy to say that without the support of other political parties, I couldn't have got it done. So I want to applaud my colleagues for making it possible for us to introduce legislation that has been, believe it or not, before Parliament—or not before Parliament, but maybe inside government—for a number of years. You know what? We finally succeeded, and I want to thank my colleagues for making it happen, but we've been working on it.

The \$100 million has absolutely nothing to do with Bill C-48, the wage earner protection program, because it was something we had already telescoped and put in place.

I should tell you, on our wage earner protection program—this is a very complex issue, and I hope that Ed will allow me to finish—we believe, taking the worst-case scenario, the cost of the program will be something in the neighbourhood of \$38 million to \$40 million. We will recover some of those wages, not from the workers but from the estates of the bankrupt businesses, so that the net cost to the treasury....

It's public money. It's not going to go through the EI system like a payroll tax, like the Conservative Party would suggest. We're going to take it from the public, because we believe there's a public interest

there as to what we need to do it. So the net cost on an annual basis, according to us, is \$20 million.

The other piece that I should tell you, which is equally as important, is what Mr. Goodale is doing with regard to finance and this whole issue of pensions, which we believe is fundamental. People, companies and employees, want to make sure that their pensions are secure. After you work for 30 years, you want to make sure your pension is there.

I want to tell you that the finance minister is looking at a comprehensive view of how, on a proactive basis, we can make sure that pensions are viable. It's an extremely complicated area because it's federal-provincial jurisdiction and private jurisdictions, but we are determined as a government that there is a third piece, the third leg of that stool: wage earner protection; bankruptcy changes; and thirdly, to protect pensions for workers to make sure they have it when they decide to retire.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I will now go on to Madame Yasmin Ratansi.

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

Minister, thank you for being with us.

This gives me a good segue into what Mr. Komarnicki was saying.

Minister, I appreciate the fact that we have the bankruptcy protection, or the wage earner protection program. My question was, would they be the preferred creditors over the banks themselves? You had answered that it would go to the industry.... The Minister of Industry is going to address it.

Hon. Joe Fontana: He will address it, but I should tell you, the wage earner protection program will fall under my jurisdiction.

The Chair: Let the question stand, please.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: He clarified it, so that's okay.

Minister, I also appreciate that your management tools are going to be the risk management tools that will give you an opportunity to do your strategic risks, your infrastructure risks, and specific risks to transfer wherever the priorities are.

Regarding the industry itself, bankruptcy occurs because we're not competitive in the world market, or a business is non-competitive. I can see from your report that you're trying to make the labour force competitive, that our labour code is being reviewed, but we are competing in an international market where those international standards are not applied—specifically, countries like China and India, and in the IT area. I'd like to have your thoughts on how we can win back that market.

Our not having jobs—for example in my riding—impacts on those newcomers who would like to get into the workforce but can't find the jobs, so they become the underemployed. It leads to poverty. It leads to housing issues. I can see that you have assigned \$56 million to Canada's action plan against racism.

I am taking a holistic approach, saying everything is interconnected. So what are your thoughts about our having agreements with places like China or India, which are our biggest competitors? In my constituency I have had a lot of feedback saying, "What about the garment industry? What about the shoe industry? What about the IT industry? We're losing those jobs."

Thank you.

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair, Yasmin has asked a very complex question. I'm not sure I can do it justice by speaking for about two minutes. I think she's raised a number of issues that are very much interconnected, between the workforce and the workplace and how we make sure our workplace is the most inclusive.

As you know, an examination of Canada's demographic imperatives shows we are going to have to do a number of things to make sure we have the workers of the future to sustain our economy and to sustain our social programs. Whether or not it be immigration, whether or not it be more training, or whether or not it be to make sure the workforce is the most inclusive it can be for women, for aboriginal Canadians, for the disabled, and for visible minorities, we need to make sure the Canadian worker population is the most inclusive it can be, and we're looking at the major fronts.

With regard to bankruptcy, there are a number of reasons companies go bankrupt. It could be management and it could be lack of capital. My interest very much is, how do I protect the workers who go to work each and every day? They work, and all of a sudden, 30 days thereafter or six weeks thereafter their little restaurant or little company goes bankrupt—and this is across the country, not jurisdictional—and they don't have a paycheque. That's who I'm really concerned about.

I want to make sure they get their money, and now we're going to make it possible that they don't have to wait for years and they don't have to wait for months. The Government of Canada will give them their cheque, up to \$3,000, and then we will worry about whether or not we're going to get it back from the company and so on and so forth. Wages will in fact come from the assets that are available, and that's a far cry from what happens now, where only 25% of workers get their money after a bankruptcy. I think this is an incredible move we're making.

On the international front, when we enter into a free trade agreement with the United States, Mexico, Chile, Costa Rica, and the China and the India of the future, part of that free trade agreement talks about labour standards and environmental standards. Why? We believe not in driving to the bottom but in making sure the standards are driven to the top. That's how we can ensure a level playing field for all of our industries and ensure workers are not being exploited in India and China to the detriment of our own Canadian industries.

In fact, we're helping move the standards up internationally, and we are very respectful of those international labour covenants we've signed with regard to workers' rights and so on. We continue to promote those as much as we possibly can.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now at the third round, which will be a round of three minutes each, and it will be the last round.

[*Translation*]

So there are Mr. Lessard, Mr. D'Amours and Mr. Martin and Ms. Bakopanos.

Mr. Lessard, would you like to ask a question? You're on the list, Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Simard is going to continue.

The Chair: You're giving Mr. Simard your allotted time? Very well.

Mr. Christian Simard: Madam Chair, ...

According to the minister's 1992 report, 1.4 million Canadians, households, had housing problems. Now the figure is 1.7 million.

CMHC has a surplus of \$3.4 billion, which is enormous. We could build several thousands of housing units with that money.

We also have a program for the homeless, which will terminate in March 2006. It will take months and months to renew it. Even if Bill C-48 were passed, it would take months before this was realized. There's a risk that there will be a one-year period in which the homeless will have no more resources.

In the short term, couldn't the minister use the CHMC surplus or the money set aside for expenditures not made to its department to at least ensure that, in March 2006, there is no one-year interruption in services for the most disadvantaged people in our society? This government is collapsing under surpluses, when there are real needs. Wouldn't it be appropriate to take an emergency measure to prevent any interruption in services?

The Chair: Mr. Minister.

[*English*]

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair, Christian again raises an important question. I've already indicated that we intend to and will renew SCPI, there's no question. I would agree totally that we need to get on with the renewal, and I am bringing forward the renewal of SCPI to cabinet fairly soon, but it's all predicated on money. Now we are looking at creative ways of being able, within both the homelessness initiative and CMHC, to put together that whole continuum of housing. That's why we created a ministry of housing, because you can't do one without the other.

But I'll tell you what would be helpful, and Christian knows this: in the budget we will talk about tonight is \$1.6 billion, into which the next five years of SCPI is incorporated. If he wants to promote housing and wants to make it easy for the government to move forward, then he and the Bloc should do the right thing, and that is to support the budget tonight. Then we can get on with making sure the renewal of SCPI is there, as is the renewal of RRAP, to build co-op housing, to build affordable housing.

It's easy. It takes a simple little three-letter word: yes. It's simple.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

Ms. Simard, you have only eight seconds left. I gave you more time the first time, so I'm trying to restore the balance.

Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Chair, I'm going to use those eight seconds.

It wasn't the Bloc Québécois that was at the bottom of those budget cuts made starting in 1992 that have since led to an additional shortage of 500,000 housing units. It's not today's budget that's at fault, it's what the Liberal Party has done...

Mr. Christian Simard: When you have \$3.4 billion at CMHC...

The Chair: Thank you. The eight seconds are up.

Mr. D'Amours, over to you.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Minister.

Madam Chair, I would like to ask the minister a question. When negotiations take place between the provinces and the federal government in order to reach funding agreements, sometimes there are periods when there's no funding. That can also be due to the fact that few initiatives are put in place.

I have a specific situation in my riding. We're waiting for an agreement to be signed between the federal government and New Brunswick. A corporation that builds housing for independent and semi-independent seniors simply wanted to build housing units. The project was carried out. However, in view of the fact that the agreements weren't yet signed, it was impossible to get access to funding.

Mr. Minister, I'd like to know whether, in similar situations, files could nevertheless be assessed, even if they're completed once the agreement has been signed, not at the start.

• (1205)

[English]

Hon. Joe Fontana: Thank you, Madam Chair.

There are two things. One, we were finally able to sign with New Brunswick the phase two, and that's a welcome initiative. I should tell you, though, that New Brunswick still has an awful lot of money in phase one. I know our New Brunswick caucus has been working very hard on making sure we can move some of these programs and some of these projects as quickly as possible. Each province is a little different, but now that we've managed to give provinces the flexibilities they require—the toolbox approach; they can pick and chose—I think what you will find now that we've signed phase two, and both phase one and phase two have been rolled into one, is an incredible amount of activity in New Brunswick with all the tools available to them to move forward.

I should tell you something, though. I think an important issue has been raised, and I'll say this within the context of Quebec, using it as an example. As you know, Quebec has been at the forefront of housing. In fact, we've delivered both phase one and phase two. Quebec now is in a position of wanting more, and we want to. Part of

the budget will allow us to be able to move and not penalize provinces like Quebec and B.C. They have done some remarkable stuff on housing, and they need some additional money. That's why this budget is so important for Quebec and B.C. It is to make sure we can move and not have any gaps between the end of one program and the beginning of another, because the need doesn't stop; 1.7 million Canadians just don't stop needing tomorrow or yesterday—they need it today, and that's why we want to move on this as quickly as possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[Translation]

There's no more time.

[English]

Mr. Martin, you have three minutes.

Mr. Tony Martin: Thank you very much.

It is interesting to hear the Conservatives talking about wage protection all of a sudden, in light of the bill our caucus has tabled to protect pensions and the wage protection agreement negotiated in the recent round of negotiations with the government. Also, when the New Democrats were government in Ontario, we brought in a wage protection plan that was working very well, but in 1995, when the Conservatives took over, they threw it out, along with the affordable housing program that we had in place. Hopefully, if they have some influence on the next government, we will see them continue to support this kind of initiative.

My question actually is in the area of housing and our first nations people. We have, as you know, some critical issues there. I know my colleague from Timmins—James Bay is dealing with the tragedy that's happening in Kasechewan, where they have floods and their sewers backed up. The housing was inadequate to begin with; they need to be moved. I was up in Attawapiskat a couple of Februaries ago, and again, there were terrible housing conditions. Across the country.... We've been noted by the United Nations in terms of our support of our first nations and their desire for a better standard of living. What are we doing there, specifically? What are the plans for housing in first nations communities, going forward?

Hon. Joe Fontana: Madam Chair, we are on the brink, I believe, of entering into a very historic relationship with the aboriginal leadership in this country—the first nations, the Métis, and Inuit. Not only did our budget propose \$295 million...and I know that Tony and everybody around this table has talked about the dismal condition of housing for aboriginals. I've been given the responsibility of housing, both on reserve and off reserve. So we in fact have been meeting with aboriginal leaders. We're going to have a retreat at the end of May for the purposes of talking about how we move forward. I believe it's time that aboriginal leaders started to deliver their own homes, build their own homes, work as true partners, and I think we are on the brink of an historic arrangement where we will look at a new governance model of creating new institutions for the purpose of building not only on-reserve and off-reserve housing, but more importantly, market housing. There are a lot of opportunities where aboriginal Canadians want to own their own homes on reserves. So there are some unique and creative things.

I can also tell you this is how important this budget is. Out of the \$1.6 billion, \$500 million will be earmarked to aboriginal housing. That's why this budget is so important. If we get it passed, we can do the incredible things that you all want to do and that we need to do as a country, because it's shameful what's happening in on-reserve or aboriginal housing and in the homeless situation in many cities across this country that aboriginals have to be subjected to.

• (1210)

The Chair: Before Mr. Simard goes—and I will give the floor to Madam Bakopanos—

[*Translation*]

I'd like to point out to committee members that everyone has seven minutes in the first round. Let's not forget that these are rules that our committee has set, rules on which we all agreed at the outset.

I'd also like to point to Mr. Simard that it was he who spoke in the first round and that I allotted him more than seven minutes. In fact, since the Clerk has noted it, he had seven minutes and 23 seconds. Consequently, when he spoke in the third round, as we came to the final seconds of the three minutes to which he was entitled, I felt entirely warranted in saying that he couldn't ask any questions or hear any answers in the few remaining seconds.

I would simply like to tell Mr. Simard that each committee is responsible for its own rules. I tried to be as flexible as possible, but it seems to me it's hard to ask a question and hear an answer in three seconds.

Thank you.

Ms. Bakopanos.

Mr. Christian Simard: Do I have a right to answer, Madam?

Hon. Eleni Bakopanos (Ahuntsic, Lib.): Madam Chair, I'm going to make an offer.

No, Mr. Simard. Sit down.

I'm going to skip my turn because Mr. Martin has already asked my question. Please, let's take the time available to us.

The Chair: Mr. Simard is a guest at this meeting.

Mr. Simard, I find it odd that you haven't inquired into the rules of the committee and that you dispute them even before knowing what they are.

Mr. Christian Simard: You challenge me a lot, Madam, something I didn't ask for. However, Madam Chair, I see you can also allot five minutes in the second round, at your discretion.

Those are your rules; I'll abide by them, and I didn't bring the subject up again. When I said I thought it was unfortunate not to have five minutes, I indeed had not inquired about the committee's rules, but I didn't bring the question up again. The Clerk informed me about it, and I'm satisfied with the information she gave me.

Now, if by means of the committee's rules, you want to present... However, in terms of natural justice, if all committee members have five minutes, it would be fair to grant me as much. I don't see the minister very often. And I'm very pleased to have met him. However, I don't think a limit of three minutes and seven minutes, for a total of 10 minutes, is much time to ask him a few questions on an extremely important report on housing.

Those are the committee's rules; I'll abide by them and I'm not challenging them.

The Chair: Mr. Simard, I'd like to respond to you, with your permission.

Mr. Christian Simard: I have to leave.

The Chair: You disputed them; you came to me to ask me a number of questions, and I sent the Clerk to give you a clear explanation of our committee's rules.

I find what you've just told me insulting, Mr. Simard. The members of this committee have asked me to chair it. I'm performing my role to the best of my ability, and I'm trying to perform my duties in a manner respectful of all committee members. I also request the respect of all committee members.

Thank you.

Ms. Bakopanos.

Hon. Eleni Bakopanos: I'm going to make a comment without asking any questions, since we'll soon be finished.

I believe the minister has offered to come back. We very much appreciate that offer. I also feel that Mr. Simard is also welcome in this committee to ask his questions now that he knows the rules.

I simply want to congratulate the minister, and it'll be over.

[*English*]

I'll switch to English.

I'm sorry, Madam Chair. Through you I want to say that the process the minister has set up in terms of consultation, in which I had the pleasure of also participating, is a process that is very helpful and one that should be used as a model in other departments, where we get the different stakeholders, including the various levels of government, including experts in the field, coming together and actually advising the government in terms of the direction we should go in with these programs. That process was very useful for me to participate in.

I'm wondering if the minister has any comments to make in terms of the next step after the consultation. There's a document. Is that document going to be part of a process that all parliamentarians can in fact participate in?

Hon. Joe Fontana: Thank you.

One of the things that I have heard for a long time.... In fact the Prime Minister and I, when I was the housing critic—and he was the housing critic back in 1989—wrote a report. As I said, housing is a provincial jurisdiction, and we have to be respectful of that, but I think Canadians want the three levels of government. The incredible partnership that I've learned of across this country is very committed and very deep and broad. Everybody wants to come to the table to solve housing challenges. Therefore, it was great to be able to convene an actual housing consultation, bring the experts in. We have an incredible partnership in this country of devoted people who are determined to fix the problem. The least I can do is look at that partnership and how we can bring together big labour, private sector, along with three levels of government to help solve the big challenge of 1.7 million Canadians.

We are in the process of digesting all of what we've heard. I'd like very much to share that, and I have to with my federal-provincial counterparts, with the stakeholders who were good enough to input into the system, with this committee. And I hope we will do something that this country hasn't had, and that is an actual housing strategy. We're calling it the Canadian housing framework. It is an approach, a long-term view as to where the federal government and all of its partners need to go with regard to housing.

I can tell you that all of the questions you've raised today are the ones that we want to answer within that. I hope to call that document HOPE, which is "housing options for people everywhere". That is the objective we have.

•(1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Minister and other invited guests, I appreciate very much your coming before this committee. We will certainly take the opportunity, depending on how long this session goes, to call you back to be able to answer and possibly make another presentation. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Thank you to everyone.

The meeting is suspended for about two minutes as we go into the second part.

•(1216)

(Pause)

•(1219)

The Chair: Ladies and gentlemen, if you'll take your seats please, we'll go on to the second half of our meeting.

[*Translation*]

Today, Thursday, May 19, we resume the 36th meeting of the committee.

[*English*]

Where is our witness?

I think Mr. Arthurs must have stepped out for a moment.

[*Translation*]

Madam Clerk, please inquire where our witness is. We'll suspend the sitting for a few moments.

•(1220)

The Chair: We resume our sitting. We are in the second part of the 36th meeting of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

[*English*]

Mr. Harry Arthurs appears before us as a witness. As an individual, Mr. Arthurs is Commissioner of Federal Labour Standards Review.

I notice that you are accompanied by another witness, if you'd like to present him, Mr. Arthurs.

Mr. Harry Arthurs (Commissioner of Federal Labour Standards Review, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to present Neil Gavigan, who is the chief of staff assisting me with the review of part III of the Canada Labour Code.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Arthurs, before you begin, do you have a paper?

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Yes, we've provided that.

The Chair: You've provided everyone with the paper in both languages? Please go ahead.

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm very pleased to have this opportunity to meet with you and your colleagues today, though I have to say it's just a little bit odd for someone who is conducting an independent inquiry at arm's length from the ministry to appear, especially at this very early stage in my work.

That said, Madame la présidente, my remarks will provide you with some sense of how I'm going to go about the work that Minister Fontana has asked me to undertake. My mandate is defined in the commission's terms of reference. I've provided those for you. You will see that it involves three elements: first, the review of the specific labour standards, which are set out in part III of the Canada Labour Code, and again, we've provided a summary of those for your convenience; second, consideration of two very large, very important social issues, the working time issue and the issue of access to learning opportunities; and then a third, open-ended part of the mandate, other matters that may be related to the first two. Of course, this being a federal commission, it focuses on employment standards within federal jurisdiction, but we of course do hope to learn from the experiences of the provinces and of other relevant jurisdictions.

While I'm the sole commissioner and have sole responsibility for writing the report, I'm working with two panels: one comprising labour and employer stakeholder representatives, the other comprising experts. I've provided you with their names and affiliations. I'm happy to recognize in the audience today Don Brazier, of FETCO, the federal employers association, and Andrew Findlay, of the Canadian Bankers Association, who are two of my four stakeholder representatives, the other two being on the labour side.

Acting in close consultation with these two panels, the expert panel and the stakeholders' panel, I've launched a number of initiatives to ensure that the work of the commission benefits from high-quality, objective, and user-friendly research, and that it's informed by the views of Canadians across the whole federal domain of employment and right across the country. These initiatives are described in the highlights document, which we've provided to you. I'm also working closely with employer and worker organizations so that my recommendations at least speak to their concerns and so that they'll be viewed as somewhere in the range of the practical, the reasonable, even if we're unable to secure total agreement on specifics.

You'll see that we've also initiated ongoing technical consultations among people who work with part III on a daily basis so that we can identify what works and what doesn't work with the present legislation.

Because we've received only a very few submissions so far, and only just launched our research program, I obviously don't have any findings or recommendations to share with you. At most I can identify a few of the large themes that are emerging for my consideration.

The first theme concerns changes in the social and economic environment since 1965, when part III was originally enacted. As we all know, the demography of the workplace has changed, technology has altered the content and the organization of work, and globalization has generated new opportunities and challenges for federally regulated enterprises. I'm going to have to consider how part III might be reconfigured in light of these developments.

A second issue on my agenda is to get a better grip on who's covered by part III, where they work, and what their labour conditions are. We've commissioned a major study by Statistics Canada, which should help us to answer these questions.

•(1225)

A third issue has to do with ensuring that, whatever part III labour standards might be, they are complied with. Employees have the right to be protected against substandard working conditions; employers who obey the law have the right to be protected against unfair competition from those who do not obey the law.

A fourth issue involves balancing respect for statutory standards against the desire of workers and employers for a degree of flexibility responsive to their individual needs and circumstances.

These and other themes that frame up our consultation paper—which again we've distributed to you, and of course, across the country—are going to be very important as we go about our research and our consultations. But I want to reiterate that I am expressing no views on any of the substantive outcomes yet, nor will I do so until I present my final report in 2006.

I thank you for your attention. I would appreciate members of this committee telling their constituents about our work and encouraging them to participate in it and make submissions, and of course I would welcome your suggestions as to how we might go about our work.

I would be very pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arthurs.

We'll go to the first round, with Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you, Mr. Arthurs.

I noticed that among both the experts you have and the stakeholders on your committee there hasn't been a specific representative dealing with small business. I'm wondering about that and also wondering whether you'll be looking at small business otherwise than you will business generally. I'm speaking of those firms or employers who have two or three employees. They're largely represented by the Canadian independent business organization. The labour code will have a significant impact on a large proportion of those smaller employers, and what may apply to the larger corporations or larger businesses might not apply equally or as well to the smaller ones. I wonder if you'll be looking at a dual type of approach in your studies, and whether you will have someone who will actually represent the interests of the smaller business as we go.

I have a couple of other questions about some other areas.

•(1230)

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Thank you.

Madam Chair, may I answer this question before going on to the other questions? I'll answer, if that's agreeable to you.

First of all, as I mentioned, we are operating in a federal jurisdiction, which of course is dominated by some of Canada's largest enterprises. We're not entirely sure how many small businesses fall within our jurisdiction. We hope we'll know a lot more about that when the Statistics Canada study is completed.

One area where we're almost certain there are a number of significant small businesses is in trucking. We have been and are currently in discussions with the association that represents the trucking industry, with a view to doing a special study of that industry. We hope we can agree on some terms of reference and general parameters for our work, but we certainly intend to look at that.

As the final point, to make it very briefly, I think I mentioned the fourth theme that's coming out very clearly. It's sometimes colloquially described as "does one size fit all?" I think that's the question you're asking me. It's very much on our research agenda.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: The other thing, and you allude to it somewhat, is that there are, of course, provincial labour codes dealing with certain kinds of issues, and these might be different from the Canada Labour Code. On top of that, you have collective bargaining negotiations that take place from time to time. Internationally as well, there are some labour issues to face. They all inter-relate somehow, eventually, in negotiations or otherwise. How do you see the Canada Labour Code, in terms of what its main objective is, relative to the labour codes provincially, internationally, and more specifically in relation to these very issues you're dealing with that are being bargained on a continuing basis? And what's the relationship of all of that to your study?

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Perhaps I can respond to the interrelationship between labour standards and collective bargaining first. As you know, labour standards, by and large but not exclusively, represent a floor. There's always room for people to negotiate over that floor. Of course, that's the aspiration, I think, of most people who sit down at the bargaining table: to achieve higher standards.

There are a few situations where there appears to be some tension between collective bargaining partners regarding the definition of certain kinds of working conditions—I believe that hours of work might be one of them—where it will be suggested to us that the statute prevents collective bargaining partners from achieving the particular outcome they would prefer to have. So we're looking at that as an issue.

I think that's the major point of intersection between the collective bargaining regime and the labour standards regime.

We've been in very close touch with the provincial jurisdictions. Many of them have been experimenting quite usefully, I think, quite importantly with a variety of labour standards. We are currently attempting to develop a comprehensive view of how federal labour standards compare to those enforced in all Canadian jurisdictions.

We have, to touch on your other point, a wide variety of global trading partners, against whom we can measure how Canada's federal labour standards compare to those in other comparable countries. We're attempting to get hold of that in our research.

As far as international labour standards are concerned, once again we're alert to those. We have a research program advising us of where we stand relative to international labour standards. So our first task is simply to inform ourselves. Then, of course, we'll have to come to the difficult task of asking how these various regimes relate to the one I've been asked to report on.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: How do you deal with trying to modernize the Canada Labour Code and make it more relevant to where we are today? There are a lot of things you'd like to do. Perhaps parties might like to bargain. Provincial jurisdictions may want to enhance. When you're looking at a floor, or sort of the lowest entry level in this issue, what kind of a principle are you using? What basis are you using if you're saying this is how we will approach this to sort of nail down the bottom side of standards, as opposed to what you would like to see or the direction you might think they should take?

Mr. Harry Arthurs: At this stage we haven't articulated a principle. We're at the very early stage, as I say, in our consultation and our research.

My ambition is that the research and consultation will provide us with parameters and strategies, and that we will be able to come forward with recommendations at the end of the process and which will be perceived by all the relevant parties as reasonable. That may be an idealistic approach, but that's the one I'm starting off with.

•(1235)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Komarnicki, you've already gone past your time.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I wondered about the website. They said it will be posted on the website. The website is functional. Will all of the meeting dates and places be there?

Mr. Harry Arthurs: We're just finalizing our list of hearings. They will be posted, I hope, within the week.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Lavallée, you're sharing your time with Mr. Vincent, are you not?

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): I'm going to ask a first question. If there's any time left, Robert can ask one in turn. Otherwise he'll have to wait for the second round.

The Chair: All right.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: First, I'd like to ask you a few logistical questions which you may answer briefly. Then I'll ask you a question that you may answer in a more detailed manner.

The first parts of my question are...

The Chair: Ms. Lavallée, to make it easier for the interpreters, could you please slow down a little?

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: Pardon me, I'll try to speak more slowly.

I'd like to know your schedule. First, you had a research phase. I get the impression you're starting a consultation phase, and then you'll move on to drafting and submitting preliminary reports and the final report. I'd like to know that schedule.

As regards your consultation phase, I saw you were consulting certain groups. Do you intend to hold public consultations? Do you intend to ask the public to tell you what it thinks of your paper? If that's the case, I'd like to know who, when and how?

My other question is in response to your remarks. You referred to a survey conducted by Statistics Canada. Will the results of that survey be made public? How will they be made public, and when?

I also have a substantive question on your consultation paper. It states that employers are also facing numerous challenges. It also states that, as regards federal regulations, employers want to ensure that labour standards reflect their various needs. Many people in the work place say that you're being lobbied by large businesses asking you to relax labour standards and to ensure that their enforcement depends on the type of business and timing. I'd like to hear your answer on that.

[English]

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Madam Chair, I would respond in the same order as the questions were asked.

Our schedule looks approximately this way. In September and October we will be holding public consultations. They will be well advertised, as I think I said in response to the last question. We hope to finalize those dates very shortly. They will be advertised in newspapers, on our website. We've just been discussing this morning other strategies, but already we have been in touch with everybody who's on the mailing list, if I might put it that way, maintained over the years by the labour program.

All of the organizations that are involved and that we've identified, whether they're trade unions or employers' associations, have been warned that these hearings are coming up, and we are now looking for ways to bring the same news to ordinary Canadians across the country to give them an opportunity to contribute.

When we hold our public hearings we're hoping, for example, to have a bank of laptops available so that people can submit their views right on the spot. Our website is set up in a user-friendly fashion so that if there is some particular point they want to make, they can go directly to that point and we'll have people on site assisting them in making submissions. Of course, large organizations will be preparing, we hope, over the summer to make their formal submissions.

That phase, as I said, will take us through probably until the end of October. That's roughly the date at which we expect our research program to be completed. Aside from the Statistics Canada survey, our research by and large attempts to use existing databases and existing studies, of which there have been many—some of them sponsored by provincial governments, some of them academic, some of them in the federal domain. We hope to make full use of those studies rather than re-inventing them. Of course, we will be subjecting them to critical evaluation, but that will be the focus of a good deal of our research.

All of the research we commission, including the Statistics Canada study—subject only to some technical issues that we're trying to sort out—will go onto the website and will be available to everyone. We think that's very important, not only for transparency in terms of our own work, but so that this research on an ongoing basis will inform discussion among the parties and within the public domain.

Finally, you're perfectly accurate in saying that large organizations, be they employers or for that matter labour organizations, will want to be heard from. I don't apologize for the fact that I've been speaking to the CLC. I've been speaking to a bankers' association. I've been speaking to FETCO, the federal employers group, and will be speaking to numbers of other organizations. For example, one of the consultations that we're presently organizing will bring us into discussions with the first nations, to whose governments part III applies directly. It will bring us into consultation with advocacy and community groups that represent workers who find themselves in difficulty in labour standards matters.

What we're trying to do is identify groups of people, because, as you can imagine, there's an enormous difficulty for ordinary workers to inform themselves, to put themselves in a position to make a significant technical contribution to our work. In addition to the public consultations, we've identified a lot of stakeholders, the ones represented directly on the stakeholders' panel and numbers of others right across the country—some of them just local organizations—so that we are sure we get the benefit of people's experience and try to take everyone's views into account, both those of business and those of community groups and labour groups and so forth.

• (1240)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arthurs.

[*Translation*]

The allotted time for this question is up. We may come back to it.

Mr. D'Amours, over to you.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I find it interesting to note that, in addition to discussing and trying to get feedback from the organizations, you're also trying to obtain information and opinions from individuals. To my knowledge, that's not often done. Most of the time, an attempt is made instead to look for an umbrella organization that will handle a number of other small organizations. It's very interesting that you obtained information from individuals on their personal situations. I'd like you to explain why you wanted to get that feedback from individuals.

You also mentioned that you had begun to send out invitations to your various activities. Do you sense a positive reaction from organizations and individuals?

[*English*]

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Madam Chair, the reason we're attempting to secure these reactions from individuals is that by definition they're not organized workers. The people who confront the floor of standards that we're mostly dealing with quite often are just ordinary workers, in quite humble circumstances. But by and large, almost by definition, the Canada Labour Code applies to all workers. Those who really engage with minimum standards typically are unorganized workers. So we're doing our best to allow those people to be heard from.

I'll be very candid with you: we know that some of them will come to us with very particular problems that we can't solve. For instance, if they've had difficulty with their employer about their vacation pay or something of that sort, we know we can't give remedies. But we hope that by identifying perhaps some recurring problems that individual people are telling us about, we'll be alerted to the need for some kind of legislated or non-legislated response.

I'm sorry, I've momentarily lost the other half of your question...

• (1245)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: The second part of the question concerned feedback from individuals, organizations and groups to your invitation to come and talk with you.

[*English*]

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Thank you. I apologize for forgetting that for a moment.

So far we really haven't had a lot of response from anyone. We're very much at the organizational stage. We're planning a strategy. What I was attempting to convey is not that we've done so much; we've done all the obvious things, but we haven't really launched the strategy that I'm describing to you. We hope it will coincide with our scheduled public hearings in October and November, and we hope it will be effective in reaching particularly these people. The advance notice has been given especially to the organizations that we anticipate will wish to submit formal briefs. They'll have to do research and to consult within their ranks, amongst their members, so we've tried to give them as much notice as possible.

Of course, we posted the general fact that we're holding public hearings, and we'll immediately post the schedule. One of the devices we're talking about now, for example, is putting up posters in all of the 400-some labour offices across the country, with information about the website and our coordinates generally, giving people the schedule.

I might mention, by the way, that our public hearings will be held in probably something like 15 cities across the country. We've already held, on an experimental basis, what I might describe as a community meeting in Regina. One of my expert advisors and some of the people on my staff sat down with local groups and simply tried to canvass the issues in an open-minded way. That turned out to be quite a useful experience. We hope we can learn from that and replicate it on other occasions.

If I can assist you further, I'd be happy to do that.

[Translation]

The Chair: You don't have much time left, Mr. D'Amours.

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to go back to the point you referred to a little earlier, concerning individual workers who have the same needs as other workers. It's very interesting to see that you're interested in them.

Will one section of your report concern those people who lack skills or organization in order to give them information enabling them to move forward by providing them with the necessary tools?

[English]

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Without suggesting that I've come to any conclusions, two things are clear. First of all, the history of this legislation is that it is meant to protect the most vulnerable people in our society, those who have neither individual skills that command a high price on the labour market nor an association with a collectivity, like a trade union, that could enhance their bargaining power. This legislation goes back to the beginning of the industrial revolution in the early 19th century. It is designed, historically, to protect the most vulnerable people. We hope that our research will tell us who these people are, particularly in the federal sector. At the moment, we have our suspicions about who they may be, but we would like to know more clearly the industries they're working in, their demographics, their numbers, and so forth. We hope to learn a lot more about them. This information will assist people in formulating strategies to respond to their problems. Labour standards may be only part of that response. There may be other things that have to be addressed.

This, I think, is half the answer.

●(1250)

The Chair: Mr. Arthurs, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but your time is up on this question.

Mr. Harry Arthurs: I'm sorry, Madam Chair. Thank you.

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

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I want to be sure that the hearings you're holding will be transcribed and placed on the website, including the briefs that you receive from time to time. I wonder if you might place the critics for the various political parties on your e-mail list or mailing list. Certainly I would want to be on such a list.

Mr. Harry Arthurs: I assure you that we are going to post as much as is technically and financially possible. Certainly all submissions will be posted. Laptops are being made available at our hearings so that ordinary people who haven't prepared briefs and want to express themselves will be able to post directly onto the website. Anything that people submit will be available. With respect to the actual transcriptions of the hearings, I'm happy to look at that. As for putting the labour critics on the list, they're all on it already. In fact, the labour critics lead the pack.

Mr. Paul Forseth: I appreciate what you said about increasing the breadth of consultation. You talked about learning from the provinces, other jurisdictions' experts, stakeholders, and so on. But time and again, representative structures do not reflect the varieties of opinion and expertise at the low worksite level. You talked also about trying to find and help the most vulnerable people. I would encourage you to make extra efforts to reach out to them, to make it convenient for them to provide their expertise and their reality. I encourage you to come up with the most imaginative things you can and to provide effort and resources. They're often the last ones to be consulted, and sometimes the most innovative and interesting things come from that level. I get from you that you're going to do that.

In relation to interprovincial trucking and international trucking, and looking at a meshing with the United States, a lot of the trucking increasingly goes north-south. I would encourage you to look at developing a more integrated regime—reduction of time and cost barriers, the introduction of common safety standards, and so on. A lot of the complaints I get in my office, related to federal jurisdiction, are disgruntled people in trucking. Some companies don't obey the law. The enforcement isn't all that great. Then there's this problem of the emerging north-south market. Under what jurisdiction are they when they cross the border? That's an issue of particular concern in my area. In the lower mainland of British Columbia, the north-south traffic in trucking is growing fast.

The Chair: Do you wish to respond to this?

Mr. Harry Arthurs: I don't think there's really a question between myself and Mr. Forseth, but the problem of trucking encompasses many issues: the north-south issue that you identify; the problem of small firms that are under intense pressure very often to work at low rates in order to keep their trucks rolling and so on. The problem of who is an employee is a difficult problem. There is the problem of whether or not trucks crossing boundaries, be they international or provincial, are sufficiently involved in transborder activity to invoke federal jurisdiction. All of these make the trucking industry a very interesting one, and my understanding, in a very preliminary way, is that significant numbers of complaints come to the inspectorate out of this industry. So that's why we're really focusing on it. In shaping our investigation, we're keen to have the advice of the trucking firms, the Teamsters Union, and anyone else who may be considered a stakeholder.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Forseth.

[Translation]

Mr. Vincent, you have three minutes.

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Madam Chair, I'm going to skip my turn in favour of Ms. Lavallée.

The Chair: You have three minutes, Ms. Lavallée.

Mrs. Carole Lavallée: When Minister Fontana announced to the House of Commons that he wanted to establish this committee to revise Part III of the Canada Labour Code, I told him it would be much better to review the three parts together. He has also referred work to your committee. Recently, following a vote on anti-strike-breaking legislation, which was almost passed, he announced that he also wanted to ask another working committee to examine Part I of the Canada Labour Code.

There's also the issue of precautionary cessation of work for pregnant women. This is not an easy matter. In fact, precautionary cessation of work is governed by two parts of the Canadian Code, Part II concerning occupational health and safety and Part III concerning labour standards.

However, when you want a real prospect of change, when you have a real vision for the renewal of labour standards, labour adjustment in our modern society — I'm thinking of the aging population, the relatively recent phenomenon of two working spouses and continuing training, which is now mandatory in one or more careers — it seems to me more appropriate to rework the three parts of the Canada Labour Code. I'd like to hear what you have to say on that subject.

In addition, I'd like to go back to the fact that it was said — and perhaps I didn't understand your answer — that large businesses are exercising a lot of pressure for your recommendations to advocate more relaxed labour standards so as to make them adaptable to the type of work these large businesses do and so that they are more competitive internationally. That might mean, for example, lowering the minimum wage when they do business in an environment where competitors elsewhere in the world pay lower wages.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lavallée.

You don't have much time left to answer.

[English]

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The agenda of issues you mentioned, the family-related issues, for example, clearly are part of my mandate. We have a number of research projects commissioned. I should add that our entire research program will be posted shortly, so you'll be able to see we have commissioned roughly 20 to 25 projects with leading Canadian experts from right across the country—and for particular reasons, several who aren't Canadians. For example, there is someone to tell us about what's happening in the European Union. All of that will be displayed on the website very shortly. We're just finalizing our contractual arrangements. As soon as we've done that, you will know the areas we are concentrating on in our research, which clearly include the questions you mentioned.

As to the latter part of your question concerning claims by employers about the need to remain globally competitive, I don't think it's a secret that they are likely to make such claims. I think everybody, certainly every responsible employer that we've heard from through these representative organizations, is anxious to say we acknowledge the need for minimum standards.

There may be debates about what those standards should be. There may be arguments in favour of variability of standards—give a little here, take a little there—in a given context, perhaps in a context of collective bargaining, for example. I have yet to hear anyone tell me in my first round of discussions with the major organizations to do away with labour standards, to enable us to wrench them down lower than the existing floor so that we can compete globally. I haven't heard that. Frankly, I don't expect to hear it.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arthurs.

This is the end of this part of the session. I would ask the members to remain for another minute after Mr. Arthurs and Mr. Gavigan leave.

Thank you very much. We look forward to meeting you again as your project evolves. We probably will have some more pointed questions at that time. Thank you so much.

Mr. Harry Arthurs: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you for your help.

The Chair: Thank you.

Colleagues, I just wanted to take one or two minutes. This is regarding what will happen after we come back.

Excuse me, Mr. Van Loan. Could I have your attention for one minute?

Next week, of course, we will all be working hard in our ridings.

Mr. Peter Van Loan (York—Simcoe, CPC): One way or another.

The Chair: Yes. I thought you were going to say, Mr. Van Loan, that you don't have a riding.

This is what I would suggest for when we come back. I would like to hear some comments, if you have any.

This is just a very short-term calendar so that when we come back we have something to go to. On the Tuesday we come back, May 31, I suggest we do Bill C-280—that's Monsieur Lessard's bill—and that we do clause-by-clause on Bill C-280. That would mean that between now and then we would appreciate receiving your suggestions on amendments. You could send them to the clerk. You have a week to do this. That would allow us, immediately upon returning on Tuesday, May 31, to do the clause-by-clause on Bill C-280.

Regarding the Thursday following, June 2, we have received the response from the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. I would suggest that we invite the new minister. This would be a chance for us to meet her—some of us don't know her very well—and for her to respond to your questions on the response to the very first report that we presented to the House, which was on employment insurance.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: The one we all agreed on, or the second part that we didn't agree on?

The Chair: The one that I tabled.

A voice: In February.

The Chair: Yes. So that would take us to the first Thursday, June 2. On the second Tuesday, which makes it June 7, I suggest.... We have the Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, which we've not heard from for a long time. They've decided to put a report together, and I'm going to try to push them into presenting us with the report as quickly as possible so that we can discuss it on our third meeting, which will be Tuesday, June 7, and possibly vote on it so we can table it immediately afterwards. We'll see. I haven't seen the report, so we'll just have to see. I'm pushing them to get cracking. All this is going to happen together.

Finally, and this takes us to June 9—and I'm being as conservative as I can be, because no one knows how long our session is going to take—we will discuss future business. So this is a suggestion; it's not a recommendation, it's a suggestion I'm making so we can move forward very quickly. This takes us to June 9, and as I see it right now, I don't think we're going to go much further than June 9 or June 10.

Is that acceptable to all members present?

• (1305)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I wondered if you were going to have the new minister appear, and I see that you will, so that's good.

The Chair: Oh, we will invite her, of course. She will have to respond.

I worked it out to four meetings, very conservatively, and you know what conservative means. I'm working on four meetings, so I'm trying to sort of juggle the bits and pieces that are remaining.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: If you're going to be Conservative, then we won't be here.

The Chair: There's a difference between being conservative and being realistic.

Thank you very much, everybody. I look forward to seeing you after your riding week.

An hon. member: Maybe.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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