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—
Chair

Mr. Colin Mayes

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• (0910)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC)): I would like to open this meeting of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development of Tuesday, November 21, 2006.

Committee members, you have the orders of the day before you. I'm going to move the committee business to the end of the meeting so that we can proceed with the witnesses. As I understand it, there isn't any urgency to talk about the Pikangikum issue right away, so we might postpone it to future business. I'll be looking for direction.

Committee members, today we have witnesses from the Assemblée des Premières nations du Québec et du Labrador, Mr. Ghislain Picard, regional chief. We have the Assembly of First Nations, with Grand Chief Phil Fontaine. We have the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, with Mary Simon, president. We also have with us the Métis National Council, Rosemarie McPherson, member of council, and Marc LeClair, lead negotiator. I would like to welcome the witnesses.

Thank you very much for taking the time to be witnesses before this committee. I understand you all know that each group will be given ten minutes.

I will start with Mr. Picard, please.

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard (Regional Chief, Assemblée des Premières nations du Québec et du Labrador): Thank you very much. Merci beaucoup.

[Witness speaks in his native language]

Thank you very much for this opportunity to address Bill C-292, the Kelowna accord Implementation Act.

I bring to you today three key messages. My hope is that you can have a positive impact on your institution, Parliament, and that in turn it can force the federal government to act with honour and urgency on the AFNQL's concerns.

The three messages are these. The first is that the first nations that make up the AFNQL have the plans to raise our standards and living conditions, including the priority actions required. It is called Mission Ten Thousand Possibilities.

Second, we are not receiving the cooperation and support that we expect of the federal government; that is, to review and discuss our plans with us and support their implementation, according to the government's obligations.

Third, I respectfully request on behalf of the AFNQL that your report include a separate section that reflects the AFNQL's approach to improving socio-economic conditions, and that is separate and distinct from the Kelowna discussions. Please allow me to elaborate.

The AFNQL and its sectoral commissions have worked hard over the years, with limited funds, to develop plans and proposals to boost first nations jurisdiction or control, program funding, and operational capacity.

On October 25, 2006, I announced, on behalf of the AFNQL, Mission Ten Thousand Possibilities. It focused on obtaining federal and Quebec government commitments to act on at least three large priority areas. It aims to create 10,000 new jobs over five years, to get 10,000 of our children back in school, and to see the construction of 10,000 new homes.

However, the short time allotted to me today requires that I highlight only two key examples.

A good education is the passport to self-sufficiency and quality of life. The federal government has accepted first nations control of education for 30 years. The problem is, it has never had the will to support first nations education to the same extent as mainstream public education. First nations third-rate education suffers from the diseases of federal avoidance and indifference.

The federal fiduciary of the first nations has never followed up on its platitudes and pronouncements. In 30 years, since the federal announcement on Indian control of Indian education, there is still no clear legal framework to underpin first nations control of education. Our schools and teachers suffer chronic underfunding; poorer equipment than mainstream schools; lower salaries and benefits than mainstream schools; little or no second-level services; little or no professional development; extremely low support for culture, language, and arts; no sports or recreation funds; no opportunity for vocational training at the secondary level; and no solid plan to fund school Internet connections past 2007.

Last Friday, November 17, we heard that the Indian Affairs department has made a decision on special education that will severely limit the education opportunities for our children with special needs. The current Minister of Indian Affairs has made education a priority. We will believe it when we see it.

But the criticism rests not only on the current wardens of our prison of neglect. The last 30 years of Liberal and Conservative governments, progressive and otherwise, are littered with federal inaction. We have become vaccinated against broken federal promises.

•(0915)

[*Translation*]

The First Nations have a common goal and a plan to have jurisdiction over a comprehensive and independent school system within five years. Our hope is that Parliament—you who are gathered here—will take action in a non-partisan manner to get the federal government to meet its obligations to support that goal wholeheartedly through concrete action.

Among the many matters requiring immediate attention is the key issue of quality housing. It is a known fact among community planners that healthy and adequate housing conditions are the core and foundation of a good education, healthy citizens and productive workers. For years, the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador have experienced and continue to experience a housing crisis of gigantic proportions.

Since 2000, the AFNQL has been compiling its own housing data, and a recent update indicates a current need for 8,800 new units. That need is constantly growing and is based on a number of key factors. The First Nations have the following targets: decrease overpopulation so as to achieve the same occupancy standards as elsewhere in Quebec; bring back people who have left the reserves mainly because of the housing shortage; build a new community in Kitcisakik and replace the houses that were declared uninhabitable, a number of which are still occupied because, regardless of the situation, people need a roof over their heads.

The federal government's response seems to indicate that it is willing to allow First Nations people to live in third-world housing conditions.

Despite our considerable efforts in recent years to convince governments of the need for more money, we continue to receive laughable amounts that do not meet our needs.

Two hundred and ninety-five million additional dollars were set aside nationally in 2005 for housing, and the Quebec region's share fell from 12% to 7%. The annual federal amounts allocated to housing in the Quebec region is \$21 million, yet the Quebec and Labrador region needs \$1.5 billion, and the need keeps rising.

In September, the AFNQL presented a 10-year plan to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, emphasizing once again that it had made the plan one of its priorities. We are still waiting for a response.

The AFNQL's plan, which is made up of two parts, requires an immediate investment to alleviate the huge build-up of needs. It also proposes a bargaining process to develop and implement a housing jurisdiction system under First Nations' authority within 10 years, to replace the current housing approach, which is not working at all.

In education, like housing, there is enough blame to go around for everyone. Federal aid for housing has been rather stagnant in the past 25 years, with only two injections of new money, neither of which became permanent or ongoing.

Committee members, there is a severe lack of federal co-operation and support. For example, less than one month ago, the AFNQL hosted a major tripartite conference in Mashteuiatsh. We worked on

it for over a year. The conference's overall goal was to bring together the federal and Quebec governments and the First Nations, with a view to getting the Quebec public involved, and to planning, committing to take action and developing partnerships in order to improve socioeconomic conditions for First Nations people.

The federal response was disgraceful. It committed some money to education, housing and other areas, but the amounts were so negligible compared with the needs that it was embarrassing. The lack of commitment on the part of the federal government to help us and meet the needs of our children and families is consistent with its refusal to endorse the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The huge federal surpluses are being spent on debt reduction and supporting increasing militarization, while a large percentage of our children live in poverty. You can be sure that in two days, Minister Flaherty will tell Canadians that the federal government's economic forecasts are on track, thanks mainly to its financial policies. We would be very surprised if he paid attention to the living conditions of First Nations people, conditions that the United Nations described as the greatest blemish on Canada's record.

•(0920)

Until now, this government has not shown itself to be our ally. Nevertheless, we urge it, once again, to enter into a sincere dialogue with us to support the action needed to improve the socioeconomic conditions of our members.

If the committee is interested, I can send it a copy of our development plans.

[*English*]

The AFNQL did not participate in the Kelowna discussions, and we would prefer to dwell on our needs and plans. However, the record must be clear. The AFNQL fully supports our sister regions of the AFN in their goals, which include the implementation of the Kelowna commitments. The AFNQL respectfully requests that this committee include in its report to Parliament the recommendation that the federal government act urgently to invest and support the AFNQL's plans and that it enter into the high-level discussions and negotiations with us that are required to reach our goals. The recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, released ten years ago, generally match our proposed solutions. Today's focus, however, should be on the future and on the federal government, which has the power to improve conditions if the will is there.

In closing, I note that the end of the last "whereas" clause of the bill before you indicates that it is incumbent upon the Government of Canada to honour its word and its commitments. Although the AFNQL officially does not object to the Kelowna commitments, I would hope that Parliament would hold the government accountable to its obligation to the first nations and not just to its promises.

Thank you very much. Merci beaucoup.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Picard.

We're going to go to Grand Chief Phil Fontaine from the Assembly of First Nations.

Chief Phil Fontaine (National Chief, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Honourable members of the standing committee, as you see, I've brought with me a great deal of evidence today, evidence, ladies and gentlemen, that will prove the facts regarding Kelowna. I've watched the proceedings of this committee closely, and I'm happy to be here to once and for all answer every question that may be asked about what happened at Kelowna a year ago.

I will show you that indeed there was a clear plan, including detailed measurements, indicators, and clear accountability; that there was a firm public and national commitment; that there was a clear implementation process; and that, yes, there was money attached to the plan. I will show you beyond any doubt that these are the facts.

Ultimately, however, that is not what I'm here to do today. I'm here to urge Parliament to work with us, to recognize the seriousness of the conditions facing our people, to create opportunity, to instill hope, and to provide justice for first nations people and for all of Canada.

Let me begin by dispensing with the questions.

First, you have heard that Kelowna was quickly thrown together on the eve of an election. To this I take personal exception, and all other first nations leaders take exception. In fact, Kelowna represented the response of the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to a very long series of events, processes, and tabled interventions.

Beginning in early 2004, with the first round table meeting, first nations tabled specific action plans on key issues. These plans were refined through our own national policy forums and chiefs assemblies, as well as in meetings with governments. Our work was formally tabled, which led to our inclusion at the first ministers meeting on health in the fall of 2004. Indeed, I personally, on behalf of first nations governments, in July of 2005 issued a ten-year challenge to close the gap in living conditions.

I table with this committee a detailed account of the evolution of this process. This is an 11-page list of key events, meetings, and steps in the careful and deliberate process that preceded the first ministers meeting in Kelowna.

I might add two important events that followed Kelowna. First, the Honourable Minister Jim Prentice attended, as critic for the Conservative Party, our special chiefs assembly in December 2005. At this event he specifically and clearly made a full commitment to supporting the targets and outcomes of Kelowna. Later, on January 18, 2006, I and two regional chiefs, Angus Toulouse from Ontario and Rick Simon from the east coast, met with Mr. Prentice at the Ottawa airport. Again Mr. Prentice acknowledged the importance of Kelowna and committed to the outcomes, to the need, in his view, to put wheels on Kelowna. In fact, he stated very clearly to me that the Conservative Party, if it formed the government, would not be interested in setting aside—and wouldn't—all of the hard work that went into producing the Kelowna accord.

Second, you have heard that there were no details, that there was no concrete plan. I table for the committee, as evidence, this four-

page list of key documents. I've brought with me today the detailed action plan. I've mentioned the specific outcomes of negotiation sessions, the concrete plans for implementation, for monitoring and evaluation, as well as the plan for accountability and reporting.

Third, you've heard the criticism that because there was no signature, that must mean there was no agreement and no consensus. But I would point out that, based on information provided by the Government of Canada's Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat, there have been 78 first ministers meetings, and many did not issue any kind of document. Some even concluded with a simple communiqué. Only a very small number concluded with a signed agreement. Yet in almost every case there was a clear expression of commitment and a course of action to be followed.

In the case of Kelowna, there were several documents, including a communiqué; the Assembly of First Nations and Government of Canada implementation agreement; the first nations implementation plan; a document outlining the federal financial commitments; and the B.C. transformative change accord, which was to be the first of many signed agreements across the country at a provincial-territorial level to initiate specific plans that would be relevant to the particular circumstances of each region. Here also, we can reference the education agreement signed by this government and British Columbia with the first nations leaders there, which is the direct consequence of the Kelowna accord.

● (0925)

I must also wonder what these questions are telling our people. Do you as parliamentarians really want to tell our people, the first nations citizens, and all Canadians that when every government of this country makes a very public and nationally televised commitment, it actually means nothing unless you see them signing an agreement? Surely this is not what you intend.

The choice of some first nations not to be at Kelowna has also been misrepresented. In fact, the criticism from some first nations was that Kelowna did not go nearly far enough, but almost all first nations agreed to support the outcomes as minimum requirements.

We've also heard the criticism that there was no fiscal plan. I believe this has been addressed by previous witnesses before the committee, but I table a letter from the Minister of Finance at the time, along with a document, confirming these commitments.

There was also a question about a lack of accountability in the targets associated with Kelowna. Here again there are clear facts. An extensive set of indicators to measure progress was discussed through a working group process in a draft report table. Commitments were made through a joint accountability initiative. In fact, there were to be specific resources dedicated to ensuring accountability and the pursuit of indicators.

Ladies and gentlemen, if there are possibly any other questions, let me point you to a useful summary of this information provided by your own institution. The Library of Parliament produced this handy summary, and I suggest you use this information at your disposal.

Now, at long last, I turn to the first nations action plan, our plan. This work was initiated well before Kelowna and continues to this day. Indeed, this work cannot and will not stop. Our action plan, the first nations action plan, is an urgent call to address crisis situations in our communities. The plan is a clear, concise statement of what must happen. It also clearly illustrates how this can be accomplished and what the anticipated results will be.

Our plan is not static. We didn't stop at Kelowna because Kelowna was to be the beginning, an important milestone that would set us on a good path requiring effort and expansion, including to ensure the full consideration of off-reserve and urban first nations peoples. But still, and very importantly, Kelowna produced a collective vision of where we have to travel.

The first nations plan aims to create opportunity and a secure future for our people. The plan contains four elements: governing our lands, resources and communities—exercising rights and jurisdiction; achieving justice and our fair share—implementing treaties; strengthening first nations communities—alleviating poverty; and securing opportunity for first nations in Canada and internationally.

Within each of these elements there are clear priorities identified. We have thoroughly considered a framework for policy development and have put forward a balanced and consistent model. The key characteristics of this model are sustainability balanced with structural change. The key processes are first nations engagement and federal, provincial, territorial, and first nations multilateral agreements. And the key mechanisms to deliver results include regional projects to test innovations and performance measurements.

The first nations plan reflects a holistic perspective and a detailed course of action. We've applied the framework to every socio-economic issue facing our communities, and we have produced detailed sectoral plans. The plan also references the relationship between first nations and the federal Crown, through the themes of the recognition and implementation of first nations governments.

• (0930)

We've concluded that three critical steps are required: first, community-based processes and funding for capacity-building leading to capable first nations governments; second, policy reforms to advance first nations governments, including on claims, treaty implementation, and self-government; and third, structural and machinery of government changes, including a diminished role for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, which would be restricted to program delivery, a new ministry for first nations-Crown relations, an office of treaty commissioner, an office of fiscal relations, a first nations auditor general, an office of a first nations ombudsperson, and the establishment of an aboriginal and treaty rights tribunal.

The Chair: Chief Fontaine, you're over ten minutes. I'm going to let you carry on if you're close to being...

Chief Phil Fontaine: I just have the one page, Mr. Chair.

• (0935)

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Chief Phil Fontaine: Thank you.

Honourable members of this committee, the facts are abundantly clear. The plan forward is clear, and so too is the imperative to act. We all have the responsibility and power to act. I'm very proud of the work we've done—the first nations leaders—to advance detailed plans, to initiate dialogue with governments across this country, and to forge the path ahead despite our many obstacles. And the Kelowna accord was part of this work.

Now the questions must end and the work must begin. Our people, our children, must not suffer the fate of inaction any longer. Poverty, inequity, and injustice cannot be tolerated.

Specifically, I respectfully ask the members of this committee to urge the Government of Canada to honour Kelowna and to commit to three preliminary actions. First, immediately call for a meeting of federal, provincial, and territorial ministers of aboriginal affairs. Second, remove the unfair funding caps on first nations core programs and services and commit to funding based on real cost drivers, including population and inflation. And third, mandate regional offices of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Health Canada to begin the processes of multilateral engagement to identify targets.

The Honourable Minister, Mr. Prentice, has said that he is prepared to roll up his sleeves and get to work. Well, this is the single biggest social justice issue in our country. It is time for the government, indeed the entire Parliament, to stand up and be counted, to work with us and not against us, and to join in a vision, a plan, and a commitment to real change.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Fontaine.

I'll turn to Mary Simon, please.

Ms. Mary Simon (President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Witness speaks in her native language]

Thank you for the invitation.

Before I begin, I want to make an observation. I see a lot of leaders around the table. This tells me something. We're here again to tell you about a very serious situation that's facing our people who are living in the communities. I think that if the seriousness was not something we experience every day, we probably wouldn't be sitting here all together at the same time. I simply wanted to make that observation.

I would like to begin by thanking the committee for inviting me to appear today on behalf of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, which is more commonly known as ITK.

In keeping with the importance of the future of the Kelowna accord, I have prepared a brief that would take longer than the time allotted to allow me to deliver it, so I intend to present to you orally an excerpted version of that brief. But I would ask the committee to accept the entire brief as part of its written record of proceedings.

Much remains to be done on defining an enduring and adaptable partnership between Inuit and the Crown within Canada, but we have made some promising starts. I am mindful of being both an Inuk and a Canadian. I know that Canadians everywhere are conscious that aboriginal peoples are one of the distinguishing features of Canadian life. I know Canadians everywhere regret those things that inhibit and compromise a sense of unity and solidarity between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.

What Canadian isn't appalled at images of the squalid, crumbling, overcrowded housing that characterizes so many aboriginal communities in both the southern and northern reaches of this country? What Canadian isn't aware that the rest of the world takes note when a country that consistently ranks in the top half dozen for overall living standards nevertheless throws up the ugly incongruities of gas-sniffing epidemics in aboriginal communities and of roadblock confrontations?

These are not only aboriginal problems. These are not only aboriginal issues. These are Canadian problems and they are Canadian issues that demand and deserve the attention, energies, creativities, and resources of all of us, no more so than the Parliament of Canada.

I would similarly like to commend members of the House of Commons as a whole for referring this bill for a more detailed review by this committee. The fate of the Kelowna accord is too important to be mired in short-term or petulant politics. Bill C-292 is more than a private member's bill. It is proof that the death of the Kelowna accord, to use a famous phrase, has been greatly exaggerated. Kelowna lives.

The Kelowna exercise culminated, after more than two years' work by 19 parties, in the Government of Canada pledging to invest \$5.1 billion to begin—and I emphasize “to begin”—to deal with the profound gaps in health, education, and housing that cripple aboriginal peoples and that shame our country. I was the Inuit facilitator for all of those round tables, so I know firsthand what people had to say in those round tables. The situation is still the same today. Not too much has changed.

Abandonment of this promise, combined with an absence of any alternative plan, is not a mere detour; it would be a self-declared admission of defeat. A focused, federally funded attack on the social problems that beset aboriginal people is a necessity, not an ideological indulgence. The striking gaps in social and economic well-being that inspired the Kelowna accord are not closing themselves.

● (0940)

Kelowna has four enormous strengths, from an Inuit perspective. First of all, it proceeds from the proposition that the profound gaps that separate aboriginal and other Canadians in the core areas of health, education, and housing are of fundamental importance to both aboriginal and other Canadians, and the responsibility of closing those gaps is shared.

Secondly, it acknowledges that making progress on closing these gaps cannot rely on a one-size-fits-all model.

Thirdly, the Kelowna agreement committed to solid blueprints for achieving progress in the critical areas of health, education, and

housing. Regrettably, a number of myths have arisen in relation to Kelowna, including the myth that the entire accord was somehow conjured up in a back room in the absence of facts, figures, or reasons. This is not true. The accord and the blueprints associated with the accord were the product of a multi-year, multi-party effort that featured a lively, intensive, and informed discussion of options and priorities.

Fourth, and finally, the Kelowna accord committed to the achievement of targeted outcomes and allowed for a high level of accountability to the public in the measurement of progress towards those outcomes.

Permit me to give you a few sample facts about the acute social problems facing Inuit. The average lifespan for Inuit women is 14 years less than the average for Canadian women. Tuberculosis rates among Inuit are 70 times greater than the Canadian rate. Data showing similar gaps in the fields of housing and education are also available. For example, as of 2001, 68% of Inuit in Nunavik, which is where I come from, lived in crowded conditions; in Nunavut, 54%; in the Inuvialuit region, 35%; and in Labrador, 28%. The Canadian average for crowded housing is approximately 7%.

The process that culminated in the Kelowna accord did not shy away from these painful realities. Rather it confronted these realities with blueprints for action.

Inuit are a small population in Canada. We are only about 55,000 people. Yet we occupy a very large proportion of the land and marine areas of Canada. Delivery and service challenges are very significant, but they are not insurmountable. For example, mental health is a major concern among Inuit. Although crisis counselling is part of the federal non-insured health benefits program, Inuit cannot readily access this service. Annual cost drivers increases for Inuit health programming have been measured at the 14% level, while Health Canada is struggling with a 3% program cap.

The Kelowna accord is a frank acknowledgement that in a monetized economy, money may not solve all the social problems, but the absence of targeted and creative investments in basic social infrastructure and programming will guarantee their persistence.

The national chief talked about their action plan. We also have an Inuit action plan. Our regions have developed this national action plan together and we have submitted it to the Government of Canada. We have been talking to the Government of Canada about how we might be able to implement it.

I'd like to talk about another interest in implementing the Kelowna accord. There has been much talk in recent years in the courts and elsewhere of the honour of the Crown, and about how the honour of the Crown is engaged when the Crown, representing the people of Canada, interacts with aboriginal people. To Inuit, and I think to Canadians generally as well, acting honourably means beyond anything else keeping your word. The word that was pledged at Kelowna on the federal side was not the word of a particular individual or a particular political party. It was the word of the Prime Minister of Canada, the highest-level servant of the Crown and of the people of Canada and an important custodian of the honour of the Crown and of the honour of the people of Canada.

● (0945)

It has been argued that the Kelowna accord can be discarded because it was not signed, but that is misleading. Everyone at Kelowna understood that commitments made at Kelowna were not intended to constitute a legal contract, but everyone believed the commitments carried great political and moral authority and momentum.

The Chair: Ms. Simon, you have one minute. You're actually over ten minutes, but if you could summarize, I'd appreciate that.

Ms. Mary Simon: Okay.

A great deal has been said in recent times about the need to make accountability a central theme of political decision-making. I urge this committee and all parliamentarians to demonstrate their commitment to keeping faith with the aboriginal peoples of Canada. I urge this committee and all parliamentarians to demonstrate their commitment to unity and solidarity among all Canadians. I urge this committee and all parliamentarians to support this bill by voting for it, thereby making its provisions part of the laws of Canada.

Thank you very much for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam McPherson, are you going to make the presentation, or will Mr. LeClair?

Ms. Rosemarie McPherson (Member of the Council, Métis National Council): Good morning.

I'm Rosemarie McPherson. I have Marc LeClair with me. We are going to be representing the Métis National Council.

I'd like to thank the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development for inviting the three national organizations that represent first nations, Inuit, and the Métis Nation to make presentations on Bill C-292 today.

The Right Honourable Paul Martin's private member's bill to implement the Kelowna accord is a topic of fundamental importance to the Métis Nation.

The Métis Nation offers its unqualified support to ensure Kelowna's implementation. As one of the Métis leaders who had the privilege of participating in the process leading up to the Kelowna accord and who had the opportunity to take part in the historic first ministers meeting held last year, this issue is near and dear to my heart.

By way of background, the Métis National Council is represented through province-wide governance structures from Ontario westward. These regional Métis governments include the Manitoba Métis Federation and the Métis Nations of Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. Each maintains a membership list or registry of citizens, based on our national definition for citizenship, and holds province-wide elections for their leadership at regular intervals.

Based on these mandates, the Métis governments represent the interests of their respective constituents. Further, these Métis governments have well-established records of delivering effective and accountable programs and services to our people in urban, rural, and remote centres across the Métis Nation homeland. In total, Métis

governments administer a combined amount of over \$250 million annually in federal and provincial resources, along with self-generated revenues from various economic development initiatives.

Our regional governments come together to form the Métis National Council, which is mandated to represent the Métis Nation at the national and international levels and is governed by a six-member board of governors. The board of governors consists of the presidents of the five regional Métis governments as well as our elected national president. The women of the Métis Nation and the Métis National Youth Advisory Council also participate in all meetings of the board of governors.

Our modern-day governance structures are the contemporary expression of the century-old struggle of the Métis Nation to be self-determining within the Canadian federation. Our history demonstrates that we have consistently stood up to protect our rights, culture, language, and way of life in this country. Unfortunately, Canada's longstanding approach to the Métis people has been one of neglect, wilful blindness, and denial. As a result, our people have been marginalized from their lands and resources and have sensed that the gap between our quality of life and that of other Canadians has widened.

However, in the last few years, our people have witnessed many positive developments that signal a change from our difficult past with Canada. In 2003, in *R. v. Powley*, the Supreme Court of Canada affirmed our existence as a distinct aboriginal people with constitutionally protected rights. In May 2005, our leadership signed the Métis Nation Framework Agreement that committed to a process to resolve many of the longstanding issues that have created challenges in our relationship with Canada.

Of course, in November 2005, our people witnessed the federal, provincial, and territorial governments agree to implement the Kelowna accord in partnership with aboriginal peoples.

● (0950)

In order for this committee to fully appreciate the importance of Bill C-292, the Métis Nation believes it is essential for the committee to understand what Kelowna is and what it's not.

Kelowna represents the culmination of over eighteen months of dedicated consultation and efforts that involved all levels of government in Canada, including aboriginal ones. More importantly, it involved the engagement of front-line workers, youth, community leaders, experts, and practitioners in order to bring forward the best ideas and solutions to begin to close the gap between aboriginal people and other Canadians.

The Métis people, like other aboriginal peoples, participated in this process because we believed we were on a new collaborative journey with governments, a journey where our opinions and knowledge had value, a journey where government was going to work with us, a journey where we collectively set targets and goals and measured results. For the Métis Nation, Kelowna also represents a leap of faith forward with respect to long-standing challenges that our people have faced.

As you know, the federal government's long-standing legal position is that it has no responsibility for the Métis people under section 124 of the Constitution, 1986. The provinces take the opposite legal position. This convenient positioning on the part of government leaves the Métis people being a political football. As a result, the Métis people are denied programs and services available to other aboriginal peoples, resulting in our people falling further behind other Canadians and in some instances behind other aboriginal peoples.

With Kelowna, rather than getting bogged down in the usual jurisdictional wrangling that usually arises in Crown-Métis relations, governments and the Métis Nation agreed to move past these legal stumbling blocks in order to craft a forward-looking agenda to deal with unique socio-economic challenges that Métis people face. Prior to Kelowna, when ministers of the Crown repeated the standard line of their desire to work through jurisdictional issues on the Métis file, nothing ever happened. Kelowna represents a part solution to this stalemate. Instead of worrying about petty legal positions, we focused our efforts on worrying about actual people. Simply put, Kelowna moved through the jurisdictional logjam for the Métis and worked with the communities on Métis-specific initiatives and processes to address our unique needs.

Kelowna also represents so much more than a concrete plan for closing the gap between aboriginal peoples and other Canadians. It represents hope, trust, respect, and compromise on the part of all parties. Kelowna is an attempt to reconcile the claims, interests, and ambitions of the Crown with those of aboriginal peoples. The importance of ensuring that the Crown fulfils its obligations to aboriginal peoples as a part of this reconciliation process cannot be understated. In numerous cases, the Supreme Court has emphasized that it's always assumed the Crown intended to fulfil its promises to aboriginal peoples.

Reneging on Kelowna would be a new symbol of dishonour of the Crown and would only further entrench a mistrust that exists between the Crown and aboriginal people. An entire generation of aboriginal young people will grow up knowing that even if you see your leaders on television with the Prime Minister and every premier in the country agreeing to a plan to improve your future, you cannot place any trust in that.

● (0955)

This is not acceptable. It is not honourable. It is not consistent with Canadian values.

Moreover, Kelowna is not about one man, one government, or one political party. It is bigger than individuals or legacies. It is a solemn promise made by the Crown to aboriginal people to move past old and difficult grievances in order to improve the quality of life for first nations, Inuit, and the Métis people.

Leaders of every political stripe from across this country came together with aboriginal leaders to chart a new course of hope and opportunity. This should not be politicized by partisan politics. It should be embraced for what it is—

The Chair: You have one minute left, please.

Ms. Rosemarie McPherson: —a collaborative effort to address the shameful conditions that aboriginal peoples face in this country today.

I did not even want to address the issue that because the Kelowna accord was not formerly signed it cannot be implemented. Governments make political commitments that are implemented all the time. The public trust demands it. The special trust relationship that exists between the Crown and aboriginal peoples also demands the implementation of Kelowna.

If aboriginal people cannot rely on the implementation of a written document that was agreed to by consensus by every order of government in this country on national television, what can we actually rely on? The honour of the Crown must mean something. If it does not, where does it leave us? More litigation, more political posturing, a lost generation of hope. This is not in anyone's interest.

We ask that this committee do everything it can to ensure that Kelowna does not become synonymous with one more broken promise on the part of the Crown. As members of Parliament, we believe the onus to ensure this promise is fulfilled falls on each and every one of you. The promise of Kelowna is larger than one minister, one political party, or one government. It falls to the Crown to ensure its implementation.

Once again, on behalf of the Métis Nation, I would like to thank the committee for providing us an opportunity to speak with you today on this issue of national importance.

Merci. Thank you. *Meegwetch.*

The Chair: Thank you, Madam McPherson.

I notice there are one too many Liberals.

Madam Neville, I know you are leaving.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): No, I am not leaving, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Keeper has not signed in. She has just joined us at the table.

● (1000)

The Chair: That's fine. I would just make the rest of the committee aware of that.

Who is going to lead off?

Madam Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville: I'll lead off, Mr. Chair.

I have seven minutes. Is that correct?

The Chair: That is correct.

Hon. Anita Neville: Could you tell me when we're at five minutes so I can share two minutes with Mr. Merasty, please?

The Chair: Sure.

Hon. Anita Neville: Let me begin, first of all, by thanking each and every one of you for coming today. I believe the evidence you presented is important in terms of establishing what Kelowna was to each organization and the processes that led up to it.

I'm going to ask questions of each of you, and then I have a particular question to the national chief.

What do you estimate the losses to have been, by first nations communities, by Inuit communities, by Métis communities, in the fact that the Kelowna agreement has not been honoured?

To you, National Chief, I would ask what you see is the role of first nations governments in the implementation of the accord.

Can we perhaps begin with the national chief?

Chief Phil Fontaine: Thank you very much.

We've been very careful about our statements regarding Kelowna, including facts related to Kelowna, because we want to be fair in our public expressions to all concerned, including to the government. We knew we were dealing not just with Kelowna, because Kelowna is a \$5.1 billion commitment. There are other considerations, including the fact that we've had to operate with a 2% cap on core programs and services since 1996, so now we're ten years.... We estimate that has cost us \$10 billion. That's the loss we've experienced as a result of the cap. So that's one important consideration here.

Now, on the \$5 billion, if we're talking about money, the fact of the matter is that the RCAP report pegged the cost of poverty in 1996 at \$7.5 billion. By 2016, if nothing is done to eradicate poverty, the cost will be in the order of \$12 billion. So we're significant, just strictly in dollar terms.

In terms of lost hope, how can you put a dollar figure on that? It's nearly impossible. That's what we are dealing with here. We shouldn't have to talk about the poverty and what poverty is doing to our people; we should be talking about all of the good things that we've been able to achieve. When we talk about poverty, when we talk about problems and all of the ills that have plagued first nations communities, that burden is placed not so much on the shoulders of first nations leaders but on young people, our children. There isn't a single child who should have to shoulder that kind of burden. We believe that's the biggest challenge we face as a country.

As far as the role of first nations governments at the local level is concerned, first nations chiefs and councils, the significance of the Kelowna accord process is that all of the implementation would take place at the regional level, meaning at the community level. At the national level we would have been responsible for reporting and monitoring the progress at the community level. So this was not going to be a top-down process; it was very much going to be about communities at the local level, including our people who reside in urban centres.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

• (1005)

The Chair: You have about two and a half minutes.

Hon. Anita Neville: My same question was to Ms. Simon and to Ms. McPherson as well, in terms of what are the losses experienced by not—

The Chair: You're coming out to the five minutes right now.

Hon. Anita Neville: Well, then, we'll move on. We'll continue with this and then Mr. Merasty will lead on the next one.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Simon.

Ms. Mary Simon: Thank you very much for that question.

Like the national chief...it's very hard to measure how much you've lost. When we were negotiating with the provinces and the federal government for the event in Kelowna, we were looking at the situation as it was in our communities. When you look at the level of graduates coming out of high school, when you look at the level of suicide rates in the north related to many different problems that youth are having at the community level, and when you look at the different conditions faced by families, with the social services, the health services, not really anything has changed. The \$5 billion mark was to begin to close the gap. It's very hard to measure in dollars and cents at this point.

The minister did make an announcement on housing for Nunavut. I represent all the regions in the north. We have Nunavik, which has probably one of the highest percentages of overcrowded housing. Then we have Labrador. Although their housing doesn't seem to be as crowded, the condition of housing in Labrador is very grave. They haven't had the same types of housing programs that, let's say, we have had in some of the northern communities. I have to say that one announcement, although it was very much appreciated, does not meet the needs of even Nunavut or other regions.

I think the other point, the integrity and the hope that was tied to the announcement and how people feel about it today, is a big, big part of it.

The Chair: Mr. Lemay or Mr. Lévesque.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the four of you for coming.

Since I represent a political party that is not seeking to take power in Ottawa, let us speak frankly. The members facing us, and those on this side, were in power at a very important moment for the Aboriginals, First Nations and Inuit of this country.

I have a number of questions to ask and comments to make, but to begin with, I would like to say that today is a rather ironic day. I just want to point that out. Today is November 21. Exactly 10 years ago, the Erasmus-Dussault report was tabled. I know that the Assembly of First Nations will be marking that anniversary this evening. I wanted to draw attention to it because it is both funny and not funny. The Conservatives were in power when the Erasmus-Dussault report was requested and obtained; it was during the Mulroney era. It is both funny and not funny. In 2005, in Kelowna, it was the Liberals who were in power.

There are things I do not understand. I am going to tell you what they are and I would like the answers to my questions to be quite brief. I will start with Mr. Picard.

I know that you held a very important meeting. I want to congratulate you, on behalf of the committee and personally, too, for the work accomplished in Mashteuiatsh. I was there all three days, unlike the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. I can tell you that a lot of work was done. It was extraordinary. I hope that you will be able to come, if asked, and present the recommendations to this committee. I do not know if you would agree to come and present them to the committee and tell us what you are going to do with the recommendations that came out of the Mashteuiatsh socioeconomic forum.

I will let you answer that in a few minutes.

Today, I have a problem. I now have confirmation, which I received 15 days ago, with the presence of Mr. Martin, Mr. Goodale and Mr. Scott, that plans had been made in the government budget to add \$5.1 billion to the \$6.2 billion already available to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Those amounts were already set aside in the budget.

What can we do? I know all of the issues facing the First Nations, Inuit and Métis. I swear I know them by heart because I experience them in my own riding. I want to know how we around this table can go and get the \$5.1 billion that you are entitled to following the Kelowna Accord.

That is my only question. I would like you to answer briefly, starting with Mr. Picard.

•(1010)

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: Thank you very much, Mr. Lemay.

You took the words right out of my mouth because I was going to use the opportunity given to me today to ask the committee to read the forum report, once the conclusions are ready and the analysis complete. It is paramount that we find a way to engage the government.

As for your other question, I would like to respond by asking another one: How long are we going to play this game?

I will echo a bit of what Ms. Simon said a little earlier. The number of times we have been invited, that we have appeared before your committees, Parliamentary committees, is getting ridiculous and is unfair to the communities that we are being called to defend. I find it totally unacceptable, and that is part of what led our region to its position vis-à-vis Kelowna, which is not—I will emphasize this again—against the sought-after goals.

A short while ago, you referred to the Royal Commission report tabled 10 years ago. The report's 10-year anniversary is being marked today. It is important to remember that the commission was established because of a situation in Quebec, a situation that not only was going to, but did in fact, degenerate, a situation that, at the time, involved the federal government and the community of Kanesatake.

You can go back 20, 30, 40 years and find this type of situation. How long will we be content with these episodes that remind us in the end that there is deep injustice in Canada, which reflects on the way the country is viewed internationally. I think it is terrible. There are leaders that I respect a great deal who have spent their careers defending their communities. I have only been doing this for 15 years and I am starting to get tired. I think it has to change.

Mr. Marc Lemay: Mr. Fontaine.

[English]

The Chair: Actually, we unfortunately don't have any time for another answer, Chief Fontaine.

I'm going to turn it over to Madam Crowder, please.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank each and every one of you for coming before the committee today. I know this is difficult to have to be repeating things that have been said many times.

I also want to thank Chief Fontaine for the very detailed outline of what led up to Kelowna, because I think it can put to rest any notion that this was written on the back of a napkin somewhere. The extensive documentation that's before the committee certainly provides that background.

Of course, you did mention the fact that the transformative change accord did lead to a signed document here in British Columbia, on behalf of the First Nations Leadership Council and the First Nations Summit. I have that signed document if anybody wants to look at it.

I think the challenge I'm coming up against is that in a briefing note to the current minister when he took over, it clearly talked about how meaningful and lasting progress requires fundamentally new ways of doing things. It talked about the commitments around Kelowna. It talked about a focus on outcomes and the fact that the provinces and territories, along with first nations, Métis, and Inuit leadership, were on side and at the table. I think there were a couples of points.

Ms. McPherson made the point that what Kelowna represented, in a way, was a collaborative journey, a collective. And Ms. Simon talked about integrity and honour.

When I'm looking at what's currently happening, what we're seeing is a fragmentation. We have one-off policies that are being announced, such that we have a fragmentation around water, we have a fragmentation around housing. Many of these policies are not addressing communities. Pikangikum, which we're going to talk about later, wasn't even on the list for water.

It seems to me that what we're starting to see is a grave philosophical difference. Kelowna, although it was not perfect, was a step in recognizing a nation-to-nation status, finally, after so many years, but we've seen a backslide. Could you comment on whether, in your view, Kelowna represented a step toward recognizing nation-to-nation status and if the actions that have been taken since are eroding that recognition of nation to nation?

I'll just throw it open.

•(1015)

The Chair: Who's going to answer first?

Mr. LeClair.

Mr. Marc LeClair (Chief Negotiator, Métis National Council): Sure. Thank you for the question.

The time for half measures is over. We didn't come here on bended knee to beg for \$5.1 billion or for half measures. What we need is for parliamentarians around the room to live up to the obligations they have as parliamentarians and as Canadians.

We've come here for three decades. We've done deals with the Conservative government in Charlottetown. We've done them with the Liberal government. We try our best. This whole gang behind me, many of them have been around a long time, come to Parliament expecting parliamentarians to live up to their responsibilities.

What message are you sending to those young kids who are in gangs in Edmonton and Winnipeg and around the country if you can't live up to your responsibilities that you make in public forums? That's the issue in this bill.

The politics aside, it's not about the Conservative Party or the Liberal Party. It's not about Paul Martin. It's about living up to obligations that have been negotiated with people in a political process, which is the marvel of the world.

To just backslide on this now is irresponsible and a failure of this Parliament to live up to its obligations, and it needs to do so.

The Chair: You still have three minutes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Does anybody else want to comment?

Chief Phil Fontaine: Yes, I do.

First of all, and I don't want to lose this opportunity with respect to what was lost, in the 2006 budget there's a commitment of \$450 million. That represents \$100 million in this fiscal year plus \$350 million in the next fiscal year.

In Kelowna over two years we're talking about \$1.6 billion. If you ask me what the value is, it's significant, just with respect to the difference between what was committed in 2006 and what was outlined in the Kelowna accord.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Chief Fontaine, one of the things that has come up at this committee is the fact that the current government says they've actually bookmarked more money in this budget.

Chief Phil Fontaine: Part of it includes what we view as lawful obligations on the part of the federal government. I'm referring specifically to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which is \$2.2 billion.

There I would be unfair if I didn't applaud all parties, including the government, for doing the right thing, but that is not a program or service. It's not an investment in programs and services. It's a settlement on a legal obligation, and there's a huge difference.

We're talking about programs and services. There's a vast difference between what is in the budget of 2006 and what we have been able to realize through the accord.

•(1020)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bruinooge.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for coming before the committee today. National Chief Fontaine, I'd like to also thank you as a fellow Manitoban for coming before us today.

My question I guess initially is this. Have you had a chance to read Bill C-292 yet?

Chief Phil Fontaine: I've had my people review it, yes.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Okay.

There are three parts to the bill, three clauses on two pages. You could correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the key point to this bill is in clause 2, which is:

The Government of Canada shall immediately take all measures necessary to implement the terms of the... "Kelowna Accord"....

My question would be, how, as a government, are we to enact this piece of legislation when it seems difficult, at least from my perspective, to ascertain exactly what the Kelowna accord is? This bill is asking the Government of Canada to implement something that has multiple definitions.

I know you have a perspective as to what was accomplished at the first ministers meeting. I think Mary Simon does, as well as all members of this committee, Rosemarie, Ghislain.... But as parliamentarians, we're voting on a piece of legislation that is calling upon us to do something as a government, so I need to know how we define this. How do we define this part of this piece of legislation, the part I mentioned:

The Government of Canada shall immediately take all measures necessary to implement the terms of the ... "Kelowna Accord"....

What are we implementing?

Chief Phil Fontaine: First of all, in terms of our attempts to try to understand the Kelowna accord and the details around Kelowna, we have no problem with the definition. It was about a first nations plan, a plan we put to the first ministers as a challenge to join us in the eradication of mass poverty in our communities. The plan was very specific in terms of implementation. It was about closing the gap.

Up until 1996, the gap in terms of quality of life was closing. A two percent cap was introduced on core programs and services. From that period on, until we met in Kelowna and to this day, the gap started to widen. Clearly, that was telling us the quality of life in our communities was deteriorating, and we needed to do something very specific and concrete. We see the Kelowna accord, with all its plans, as being a very specific response to this challenge. That's why we brought this box of evidence, if I can call it that. It was to indicate very, very clearly that we weren't talking about this in generalities; we were very, very specific.

If Bill C-292 is about kick-starting this whole process, why would we argue against that if that's what it's designed to do? If it's less than that, then we're adding to the problem.

• (1025)

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: That's my question, though. What is this piece of legislation designed to do? The role of this committee is to review the bill that is now before us. That's why you've been called as a witness to the committee. We're here to review Bill C-292, and that is the crux of our question today. What are we adding to this bill to define the Kelowna accord? As you've witnessed, there wasn't a specific document that could be pointed to that was signed off as saying this is the accord.

The Charlottetown accord was referenced by Mr. LeClair; that was a document signed off by multiple parties. It ended because Mr. Elijah Harper from Manitoba decided aboriginal people weren't at the table and hadn't signed their name to that accord. Nonetheless, a tangible document was signed off and that was what would have been....

For instance, if we look back to the nineties, we would have had a bill to implement the Charlottetown accord. That is my question. What are we attaching to this bill? What tangible document is going to be used for this bill?

Chief Phil Fontaine: First of all, Elijah Harper's action was not against the Charlottetown accord. It had to do with Meech Lake and the fact that Meech Lake—

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Well, there's another accord.

Chief Phil Fontaine: Yes. The Meech Lake accord was really, from our perspective, a denial of the distinct characteristic of our people. We were being told that our turn would come later but that we had to deal with the Quebec fact in the country.

Elijah took exception to that because clearly, from his perspective and ours, we're one of the founding nations in this country and they're—

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: But would you not agree that Meech Lake had an accord associated with a document with signature pages, and that was what would have been enacted?

Chief Phil Fontaine: The objection was the fact that there was no specific reference to aboriginal peoples.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: I don't disagree with that, but I'm just saying, in the absence of something we can enact as a part of this piece of legislation, that's the problem we find ourselves in.

The Chair: Are there any further questions?

We'll go to the Liberal side. Mr. Merasty.

Mr. Gary Merasty (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, Lib.): First of all, thank you very much. I think your presentations were outstanding.

I have a yes or no question, and maybe another question after that. I'll share my time with my colleagues as well.

Plain and simple, the Conservative government claims that the Kelowna accord does not exist. I think we heard that in a question just now, that there's no signed agreement; therefore, they have nothing to implement.

My view is that this government does not have a written agreement to expend huge fiscal resources to undermine the Canadian Wheat Board. They didn't have a written agreement to tax income trusts. In both cases, they proceeded.

On the flip side, we do have written agreements for aboriginal SchoolNet, aboriginal women's programs, language programs, and so on—written agreements; cancel them anyway. So I think, to paraphrase Chief Stewart Phillip, from B.C., basically this government, through its collective wooden heart and through its wooden smile, had no intention to implement the Kelowna accord. Their argument is fake and false.

So on the question, yes or no, I believe firmly and strongly—and this is from my travels and from my phone calls and conversations across the country, from first nations, Métis, and Inuit people—that a promise was made, the Kelowna accord, and that this promise has been broken by this government. Do you agree?

The Chair: Who are you directing your question to?

Mr. Gary Merasty: To each one of them.

Mr. Marc LeClair: It has yet to be implemented.

Mr. Gary Merasty: I see nodding heads as “yes” on the other side.

Do you think the Kelowna accord would have fundamentally and positively altered the course of aboriginal poverty? Would it have begun to alter, fundamentally? This question is to all as well.

Ms. Rosemarie McPherson: Yes, absolutely.

Chief Phil Fontaine: First of all, Kelowna must be seen for what it was designed to do and for what it was. It was really an investment, on the part of the country, to deal with the single most important social justice issue in the country, which is first nations poverty. It was an investment in our future. It was an opportunity for this country to finally turn the corner regarding our situation, and it was but a beginning. It was supposed to be the initial investment in a series of investments that the country agreed to undertake to deal with this situation.

The problem here is simply one where we live in one of the richest countries in the entire world, and there's absolutely no good reason for anyone to experience the kind of poverty that plagues first nations communities—no good reason. There's no good reason why we don't have decent housing, why there are close to 200 communities that operate under a boil water advisory, why we don't and can't expect access to quality health care, or why we're not able to educate our kids in good schools—all those things.

•(1030)

The Chair: Ms. Simon, please.

Ms. Mary Simon: Mr. Chairman, may I respond to Mr. Bruinooge, or do I have to respond...?

The Chair: It's up to the person.

Mr. Gary Merasty: Go ahead. Feel free.

Ms. Mary Simon: I didn't have an opportunity, and I'll be very brief.

I think Mr. Bruinooge raises a very important point. I think that if the government would honour the Kelowna accord, we wouldn't need Bill C-292. It wouldn't be necessary. Bill C-292 doesn't recite all the specific pieces of Kelowna, but it makes it clear that the commitments in Kelowna must be honoured.

People bring up the fact that it wasn't signed. Probably, in that package of documents, you will see documents that were negotiated by representatives of first nations, Inuit, and Métis and deputy ministers of the government and assistant deputy ministers of the government. There's a blueprint on health. There are other documents that start to lay out the relationship that would be built around the partnership envisaged in the Kelowna accord. Everything, as usual, would be negotiated between the federal government and aboriginal peoples.

We've always been very open to negotiating agreements. So there is no reason, if the commitment was made by the government to implement Kelowna, why we could not move forward on discussing what initiatives are needed to implement the funding that has been approved, although we have identified many of those issues ourselves. There are very specific recommendations in the reports that came out of the round tables, which included representatives from all sectors of, in our case, the Inuit community. There are very specific recommendations on education and curriculum development. There is a lot of material, so to speak, that wouldn't be very difficult to put forward if that were the thing we had to do.

Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to the government side, please. Who will speak?

Mr. Blaney.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming to meet with us this morning. Your presence is appreciated and shows the importance you give to improving conditions for First Nations people.

I would particularly like to thank Chief Picard for coming this morning. I participated with him in the First Nations socioeconomic forum in Mashteuiatsh, during which our government signed a protocol aimed at transferring the responsibility for Aboriginal education to Aboriginals.

The housing issue was also broached. A committee and follow-up mechanisms were put in place. A meeting is scheduled for the spring.

In that regard, I think that my colleague Mr. Lemay's idea to give you the opportunity to share your thoughts with us on the forum is brilliant. I think it is in everyone's interest. I fully support the idea, just as I support the principles mentioned this morning aimed at eliminating poverty, not only in Aboriginal communities but also throughout the country.

It is difficult to run through it again in three minutes. I have a few questions for Chief Picard. Did you attend the preparatory meetings leading up to the first ministers' meeting in Kelowna?

•(1035)

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: Yes, just like the other regions.

Mr. Steven Blaney: Were you involved in the distribution process? An amount had been agreed on. Were you involved in determining the amounts to be allocated to First Nations in Quebec?

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: Mechanisms were to be put in place following the Accord to discuss it.

Mr. Steven Blaney: Agreed.

Was Quebec committed, in Kelowna, to participating financially in improving the living conditions of the communities?

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: I am sorry; I do not understand the question.

Mr. Steven Blaney: Canada and the provinces said that an accord had been reached, but during the first ministers' meeting in Kelowna, did Quebec commit funding to Aboriginal communities?

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: Are you speaking about the Quebec government?

Mr. Steven Blaney: Yes.

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: No.

Mr. Steven Blaney: Which was not the case in Mashteuiatsh, where the Quebec government made a number of commitments.

In your presentation, you said that the housing jurisdiction system does not work. You are proposing changes. I would like you to hear you speak about that.

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: We already know that there is a significant gap when it comes to housing; we already demonstrated that with the figures we gave. What we are saying is that if the responsibility was transferred directly to First Nations, with the associated credits, the management of housing programs would certainly be better.

Mr. Steven Blaney: So, not only would additional funds be needed but there would also need to changes to the method of transferring funds to First Nations.

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: It is all part of our efforts to eventually achieve self-government.

Mr. Steven Blaney: Agreed.

[*English*]

I would like to ask a question of Chief Fontaine.

Chief, you've mentioned many times this morning the gap that is a burden for first nations. How do you see the gap? You mentioned that since 1986 it's been a \$10 billion gap that's been created. How do you see that gap relating to the discussions that were held in Kelowna? How do you see the stress on first nations regarding the gap? Maybe you would like to comment on this.

Chief Phil Fontaine: First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to respectfully clear up, if I can put it this way, a misconception regarding Kelowna and the suggestion that in order for Kelowna to be given effect there had to be a signed document. I noted in my presentation that there have been 78 first ministers meetings. Only six concluded with a signed document.

What we are witnessing here is that we are being held to a higher standard. It's completely unfair that because there is no signed document, this is still not good enough—even though there was a commitment in a transparent process before the entire country—and that there have to be signatures from 14 jurisdictions in order to give effect to these very important commitments.

We didn't come here to engage in one-upmanship, to beat this party over that party. We're here because we're faced with dealing with the biggest challenge this country has—

A voice: That's right.

Chief Phil Fontaine: —and that's first nations poverty and what do about it. That's why we're here, not to engage in this highly partisan process here. I didn't come here to beat up on anyone. I came here because I believe we can do some good together; that's the simple fact.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaney.

Unfortunately, we're out of time. We're going to move on to the Bloc.

Mr. Lévesque, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming here today. I am very pleased to meet with you again, even if, in Ms. Simon's view, you are starting to be asked to appear before the committee too frequently. Nevertheless, I am always happy to see you.

Mr. Picard, you mentioned at one point that 8,800 housing units were needed. I suppose that means in Quebec alone. I wonder whether that also includes the 800 housing units in Nunavik.

Before I let you answer my question, I want to say that what is beyond me in this case is that immigrants are being brought to Canada from just about everywhere to meet economic needs, and laws are being passed to respect the cultures of the people of different nationalities who come to live in Canada, but we are forgetting to sustain and train our own nations. We talk about education before housing yet we know full well that if children do not have a house to study and sleep in, it will be difficult for them first of all to go to school and then succeed in their studies.

The big question that was asked a short while ago and that my colleague was alluding to is the following: Do you agree that the Kelowna Accord was, for the First Nations, a nation-to-nation accord?

I would like to hear each one of you answer. Mr. Picard, you provided an answer, but by the time Mr. Fontaine's turn came around, time had run out. I would therefore like both of you to answer my question and give us your opinion on the Accord.

• (1040)

Vice-Chief Ghislain Picard: First of all, I would like to clarify one thing with regard to the housing issue. The data that we validated reflects First Nations housing needs only, even though we know that the Inuit participated in the socioeconomic forum debate. Ms. Simon was saying earlier that there are housing needs in that area, too. It is easy to show.

That said, with regard to political relations—and what we are really talking about is political relations between the federal government and the First Nations that we represent—I think it is up to us at this point to fully define the concept. We recognize ourselves as such, as nations, and I think that it is the federal government now that has to do its part. The Quebec government takes every opportunity to portray itself as the only government in the country to have gone as far as passing a resolution in the National Assembly recognizing the Aboriginal nations of Quebec in 1985.

That said, between the declaration, or recognition as such, and the actual implementation of the resolution, there is also progress that needs to be made. The ideal has perhaps not yet been attained.

[*English*]

Mr. Marc LeClair: I think the process itself, the negotiations that occurred leading up to Kelowna...they were no different from the negotiations that would occur between the federal and provincial governments. Given the nature of the changes for the negotiations, organizations and governments hung on every word. So there is a very large degree of clarity on the nature and scope of the commitments that were made in Kelowna, including the financial numbers.

The financial numbers for Kelowna may have come late in the process, in determining exactly what it was going to cost to implement the commitments, but the commitments themselves, in the documents that were negotiated, were negotiated as if they were nation-to-nation, government-to-government negotiations. They were held in a transparent fashion. There was no hiding anything from anybody. The discussions occurred. The compromises were made. In the end, an agreement was reached. The clerk will confirm this. All of the senior public servants who were involved in the process will confirm that these negotiations were transparent and that every word in those documents meant something.

Moving forward, Rod asked the question about the nature of the commitments in the bill. I think Madam Simon is right on. The bill would not be necessary if the government were to take a harder look at this file again.

•(1045)

The Chair: Thank you. We're out of time.

From the government side, Mr. Albrecht, please.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also want to thank each of the witnesses for appearing before us this morning, and I want to address Ms. Simon for a moment.

Recently, you were quoted as saying, "We don't have to call it the Kelowna accord at all. It could be called something totally different. The situation doesn't change. The needs are there." I totally agree with you on that, and I understand your frustration. In fact, I share your frustration. In fact, at the last meeting, I told the former Prime Minister that I wanted to serve on this committee because I care deeply about the needs of all aboriginal peoples and I want to see that file move ahead.

I believe the federal government totally believes in the principles of the Kelowna accord in terms of closing the gaps and addressing the needs of education, water, and housing. If we look at the recent budget that the government implemented, it shows our commitment to improving the conditions for all aboriginal people: \$3.7 billion in new investments over two years. That amount includes \$450 million for education for women and families and water and housing on reserves. To address the situation that you raised, \$300 million was provided for housing in the territories, \$200 million of which was for Nunavut, along with an additional \$300 million for off-reserve housing.

My point is simply this. It seems clear that we're committed to moving ahead and addressing the needs. Are we not wasting time by constantly returning to this word "Kelowna", this name of a city where the negotiations were held? It's clear our government is committed to moving ahead. Why don't we get on with discussions on moving ahead instead of going back to November 2005?

The Chair: Who would you like to direct that to?

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Ms. Simon.

Ms. Mary Simon: Yes, I did say that, and there was a reason. It seemed to us this summer that the word "Kelowna" brought very negative feedback in trying to address the needs our people are facing. I was being interviewed, and I made the comment that I didn't care what you called it as long as the government lived up to its commitment to address and meet the commitments that were made in November last year in British Columbia. That's the extent of what I said.

Minister Prentice also told me he believes in the principles of Kelowna. The difficulty we are having is that we don't see a comprehensive approach to the issues that are facing us, which were outlined in the Kelowna accord.

We're not trying to attack the government. As Mr. Fontaine said, we would only like some answers to address these very serious issues. It's to say to us and to Canada that we are supporting the principles of Kelowna, but it should also tell us and talk to us about how those principles are going to be implemented in a comprehensive way.

We don't disagree with the announcements that are being made. We're very grateful the housing announcement was made, but it certainly doesn't meet the needs of our people.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Do I have more time?

The Chair: Yes, you do.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: My point, Mr. Chairman, is that the initiatives our government has announced address in a very concrete way some of the specific needs in terms of housing.

I'd ask one further question. You mentioned many of the gaps that are present in relation to health in the lifespan of the people of Nunavut, and I certainly agree with you on those. You listed a number of different conditions, such as the 68% crowding conditions and the 35%. How would Kelowna have specifically addressed those specific needs? Was there a plan? How would it have had an impact on those numbers?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Ms. Mary Simon: As far as I know, there were very specific plans on how the roll-out would happen. There would be further discussions with senior officials of the government. Amounts were set aside for the priorities that were set out in Kelowna. There were very distinct priorities and dollar amounts were tied to those.

In relation to housing, for instance, I think the \$300 million that was announced by Minister Prentice partially meets the objectives laid out in Kelowna. It doesn't meet the needs of some of the regions that I represent, such as Nunavik in northern Quebec, as well as Labrador and the Inuvialuit. For off reserve, perhaps some of the funding could fall within the Inuit territory, but we don't know that.

•(1050)

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Crowder.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the questioning we've heard is starting to point to the fundamental differences we have around the intent of Kelowna and what's currently happening.

I'm going to come back briefly to the advice that was given to the minister in one of the paragraphs when he took over the job. It says:

In November 2005, first ministers and first nations Inuit and Métis leaders agreed to priorities for closing the socio-economic gap for the next 10 years. The plan included five and 10 year targets in the areas of health, education, housing, economic opportunities and aboriginal organizational capacity, and proposed federal investments to achieve specific outcomes in each area.

It goes on to say:

This meeting has no doubt become, for aboriginal leaders and provincial and territorial governments, the reference point against which federal policy approaches will be measured.

I come back to this briefing book that was prepared for all committee members, which contains material from the first ministers meeting on aboriginal issues. There are two important statements in here. It talks about a ten-year commitment and dedicated effort to close the gap in the quality of life, and then it outlines some principles.

I want to reference the transformative change accord that was signed by the Government of B.C., the Government of Canada, and the leadership council representing the first nations of British Columbia. In this document it talks about bringing together these levels of government:

to achieve the goals of closing the social and economic gap between First Nations and other British Columbians over the next 10 years, of reconciling aboriginal rights and title with those of the Crown, and of establishing a new relationship based upon mutual respect and recognition.

So it seems to me there is an intent, a flavour, a notion of true nation-to-nation movement. Whether or not we have one-off pieces of Kelowna being implemented versus the nation-to-nation approach that was inherent in the Kelowna accord, I think that's the difference.

If Bill C-292 passes—and we hope it will—what difference would you see between the programs that are being announced in isolation currently that are contributing to alleviating some of the problems, versus the intent of the Kelowna accord? How would it look different, between these one-off announcements and what you would see if this bill were actually implemented, in the spirit of its intent?

Mr. Marc LeClair: The important thing to recognize is what everybody has recognized—that the one-off and half measures haven't worked. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, you have to run in the same spot to stay where you are. We're not there anymore. Things are falling behind. As the national chief said, where we closed some of the gap, now we're not closing the gap.

There are really two major things that this parliamentary committee ought to consider. First is the message it sends in dealing with this bill. It's a larger issue. It might be a very political issue, but the failure to deal with this in an effective way is going to create so much cynicism out there that you do so at your own peril. I don't know that anybody who's ever looked at this file, whether it's in government or outside of government, has ever thought that the one-off type of approaches are working and are effective. Nobody's saying that.

The Chair: Madam Simon.

Ms. Mary Simon: Maybe I can also respond to that.

When you talk about nation to nation, that is precisely where we're starting from. As original people of the country, we fought very hard to get very basic recognition of aboriginal treaty rights in the Canadian Constitution in the 1980s. We have a relationship with the Crown, and the Crown has a fiduciary responsibility toward aboriginal people. When you look at the relationship between Canada and aboriginal peoples, you have to come to the conclusion that this in fact is a process that talks about peoples and the Crown. We are a collective; we have aboriginal rights, and we are the

aboriginal people of the country, so I would say, yes, it is a nation-to-nation process.

If Bill C-292 were passed and one-off announcements were continued, we would never oppose announcements. If there is anything to improve the living conditions of our people, we embrace that happily. Although in many instances Inuit are often left out of the process, we still are happy for the first nations and other aboriginal peoples when there are other announcements.

The Kelowna accord not only laid out the nation-to-nation context, it also laid out a vision of where we, as a country, want to go to close the gap of the living conditions of aboriginal people. It's a vision. It's like we are setting targets. It's a plan of action, and as much as I support announcements here and there, I'd like to be part of a process in which we have a vision about how we are going to address aboriginal issues as a country. Kelowna did that. It set out a vision for us.

• (1055)

The Chair: We can have just a short comment, because we're just about out of time.

Chief Phil Fontaine: Just very quickly, the value of Kelowna and of the first ministers meeting is that we were at the table in our own right. We were a constructive presence at this first ministers meeting. All of us at the table were there to deal with a comprehensive plan that addressed, in practical terms, the big challenges we face—housing, education, health, and economic opportunity—and to close the gap on those important health indicators. We were all there for the same purpose. We thought that what we achieved there was significant. It was comprehensive, and it engaged all governments in the country with the intent of bringing forward multilateral transparent agreements. That's what Kelowna was designed to do.

As Mary Simon said, we're not opposed to announcements. What we're opposed to are unilateral undertakings. What we need are multilateral, transparent agreements and processes.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Fontaine, Chief Picard, Madam Simon, Madam McPherson, and Mr. LeClair. The committee appreciates your coming here today to share with us.

One thing, as a chair, that I've always observed is that when we're talking about reconciliation with the Crown, I think that's reconciliation with Canadians, and that is important. An institution is not necessarily something you reconcile to. It is to the people of Canada. The members who are sitting here represent the people of Canada, so we will do our best to fulfil that desire.

Thank you very much for your presence here.

The meeting is adjourned.

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