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Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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Wednesday, May 13, 2009

• (1045)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): It is Wednesday, May 13, 2009, and I would like to welcome you to this 29th Meeting of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. We are starting the meeting a little late. We will make up the 15 minutes owed to you, ladies, by ending the meeting at 12:15.

We would like to welcome the following witnesses to today's meeting: Ms. Denise Boucher, Vice-President of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux; Ms. Gibeau, from the Union des consommateurs; Ms. Chevrier and Ms. Mazerolle, from the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec; and, Ms. Janine L'Archevêque, from the Jardin de la famille de Fabreville. Welcome to you all.

I would simply like to explain the process. The headsets are very important. Channel 8 is for English, channel 9 is for French, and channel 7 is for the floor. You have to press the little green button, as I have just found out myself, if you want to hear.

This meeting is part of a major tour of Canada by this House of Commons Committee. We began in Moncton and Halifax. We are continuing our hearings today in Montreal. In a few days, we will be in Toronto, and then we will move on to Western and Northern Canada. This tour is an opportunity to continue the work we have already begun on poverty in Canada. Although it has always existed, unfortunately, we are realizing that, in the current economic climate, it has most certainly worsened.

You are all people who are working in the field, and that is valuable. You have direct and personal experience with what is occurring at this time. I hope that you will address an issue of great interest to us—namely your specific recommendations to the Government of Canada regarding a situation you are closely acquainted with.

All the political parties in the House of Commons are represented at this table. Ms. Minna and myself are members of the Liberal Party; Ms. Beaudin and Mr. Lessard represent the Bloc Québécois and will be sharing their speaking time; Mr. Mulcair is from the New Democratic Party; and, the government party, the Conservative Party, is represented by Mr. Komarnicki and Mr. Lobb.

Each organization is given five minutes to make a presentation, so that you will be sharing your time with your colleague. Once we

have heard from everyone, each of the parties will have seven minutes to ask questions and hear your answers. Those seven minutes include both the questions and the answers. I just want to remind colleagues that, the longer your question, the shorter the answer will have to be, if you follow me.

I would like to begin with Ms. Denise Boucher, from the Confédération des syndicats nationaux.

Ms. Boucher, please proceed.

Ms. Denise Boucher (Vice-President, Confédération des syndicats nationaux): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Confédération des syndicats nationaux would like to thank the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for this opportunity to propose solutions for the fight against poverty in Canada.

The CSN, the second largest labour confederation in Canada, represents 2,800 unions in Quebec and 300,000 members, most of whom are Francophone. Even though the Standing Committee began its study of the federal government's contribution to reducing poverty in Canada in the spring of 2008, we believe it is appropriate to state, right from the beginning, that this study is extremely timely.

Whatever people may say, the political crisis in recent months has brought home the importance of establishing mechanisms which will no longer be unacceptable and unfair to the jobless, older workers, women and Quebec, and which make them highly vulnerable. Why do we refer specifically to Quebec? Well, because we believe that the changes announced to the equalization formula last fall, which were confirmed in the most recent budget, will result in a loss for Quebec of \$1 billion, this year, and up to \$2 billion, next year. This will essentially deprive Quebec of the means to address the current crisis and will undoubtedly deprive large segments of the population of the necessary spinoffs, which could have been invested in health care or post-secondary education. To weaken Quebec, particularly in those two areas, is to deprive Quebecers of the opportunity to raise their standard of living.

As regards employment insurance, given that more than 129,000 jobs have been lost since January—something that has not been seen in 32 years—it is abundantly clear that our safety net is quickly unravelling. Employment insurance is a frontline economic lever and family support. The money is spent immediately and locally to feed a family, pay bills and buy clothing for children. It is also the local economy as a whole, and even that of an entire region, that will feel the effects of either access, or no access, to EI benefits for laid-off workers.

Quebec has already been hit hard by the forest industry crisis, as we all know. The Government of Quebec's investment in that industry has been significant. However, one cannot help but notice that the federal government has not stepped up to the plate to address that crisis.

In the Mauricie Region, 2,500 people lost their jobs in the forest industry in one year. We are therefore asking for significant improvements to be made as regards access to the EI system. We are suggesting that there be a single requirement of 360 hours, an increased benefit rate—based on 60 % of an individual's wages over the 12 best weeks—and that the two-week waiting period be abolished. Why should workers be penalized for two weeks? Since when do people work for free? Furthermore, the CSN has long been demanding a financial support program that would allow older workers who have lost their jobs to bridge the gap between the end of their employment insurance benefits and the beginning of their retirement benefits.

Since POWA was cancelled in March of 1997, nothing has been done to help a whole category of workers who are more severely affected than young people during periods of unemployment. Indeed, you heard from witnesses a little earlier, including representatives of the CSD, who told you exactly the same thing. In fact, several years ago, the four main central labour bodies formed a coalition to address this question. We made representations to the Government of Quebec which were acted on. Unfortunately, there has been no response from the federal government.

As you were probably told a little earlier, the CSN believes that, in order to be eligible for the income support program, an individual should be over the age of 55, have been subject to a mass lay-off or company shutdown, have at least 10 years of labour market attachment over the last 30 years, be in a situation where the gap between acquired skills and those required by the labour market is significant, be unable to find truly gainful employment and find a job in his or her region.

With respect to women—I mentioned this in my introduction—we consider Bill C-10 to be an affront to the fundamental rights of women and to recognition of the value of their work.

• (1050)

This legislation attacks women's rights by preventing them from accessing equal pay for work of equal value, in particular, and by adding to generally-acknowledged job assessment criteria, additional elements that reflect the needs of employers in terms of recruitment and labour retention. In other words, wage discrimination is allowed if it can be justified by market conditions—something which is completely unacceptable.

We are therefore recommending that proactive legislation be introduced to help women escape poverty and ensure that women workers will no longer be considered second class. I would also be remiss if I did not emphasize the importance of investing in social housing and the need for a federal contribution in that regard.

That completes my presentation.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Thank you, Ms. Boucher, for being so concise, although the essential points were most certainly raised.

I now invite Ms. Gibeau, from the Union des consommateurs, to make her opening statement.

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau (Social and Fiscal Policies Analyst, Union des consommateurs): I would like to thank you for inviting us to present our views on the federal government's contribution to reducing poverty in Canada. The Union des consommateurs is a non-profit organization—a federation of cooperative home economic associations, which have had roots in every region of Quebec for more than 40 years now. Ten of these associations came together to create the Union des consommateurs, which represents their interests at the national level. The associations have daily contact with people struggling with poverty—people who have difficulty making ends meet and who come to them for advice on how to balance their budget, how to access certain government benefits and how to deal with welfare offices, if they are having trouble receiving benefits. These associations are out there every day helping people who are having trouble making ends meet and balancing their budget. The associations make us aware of the issues, and we then make representations to [*Inaudible—Editor*]. So, the focus of my presentation today will be the issues brought to our attention by the associations through the work they carry out on a daily basis in the field.

We have tried to answer one of the questions included in the witness guide. You asked if federal resources currently earmarked for reducing poverty could be distributed more effectively, if additional resources are necessary and how they could be funded.

I would like to give a three-part answer to that question.

It is quite clear to us that the federal government's current contribution is not adequate in terms of reducing poverty rates in Canada. The brief we submitted provides some figures to support that assertion. Indeed, in 1989, the House of Commons passed a resolution calling for an end to child poverty by the year 2000. We note that, in 2000, the child poverty rate was exactly the same as in 1989—11.7 %. So, child poverty has not gone down, despite the government's good intentions.

Furthermore, in 2008, despite increases in the minimum wage, no employee making minimum wage in Canada reached the poverty level by working 40 hours a week. We know that most people paid minimum wage do not work 40 hours per week. If we rely on this threshold, everyone falls under the poverty line.

As we see it, these numbers speak for themselves and clearly indicate that the very significant contribution of federal and provincial government social programs is not adequate to bring about a significant and lasting reduction in poverty rates in Canada. In our opinion, the federal government must do more.

As for your second question, regarding the resources needed to reduce poverty, we have set a number of priorities. I remind you that these are priorities. In our opinion, the following programs constitute a priority for additional federal government funding: employment insurance and the Canada Social Transfer, particularly in terms of support for children and post-secondary education, housing and public transit.

Along with these additional investments, the Union des consommateurs is also calling for an in-depth review of the Canadian tax system, in order to guarantee more equity among taxpayers.

We also believe that enforcement of the Canada Health Act and continuation of a strict ban on the advertising of prescription drugs are two priorities that would have an impact on poverty in Canada.

With respect to employment insurance, fewer than half of the workers who lose their jobs are currently eligible to receive EI benefits, even though all workers contribute to the system. We consider that to be completely unacceptable and unfair. We are calling for a major improvement in benefit coverage, by setting the number of work hours required to be eligible for benefits at 360 hours, extending the benefit period to a minimum of 35 weeks, setting the percentage of insurable earnings at 60 % of wages, abolishing the two-week waiting period, extending the illness benefits, and enhancing the benefits for compassionate reasons.

With respect to the Canada Social Transfer, we believe it is important to continue to enhance it. The many cuts made to provincial transfers since the 1990s have negatively affected the funding of many social programs in the provinces and resulted in chronic underfunding, something which has greatly affected service quality.

In our opinion, it is high time that the federal government increased transfers to the provinces, in particular, to allow for massive reinvestment in post-secondary education. In that respect, I would like to mention that an Ontario association published research in 2004 showing that investments in Ontario colleges yielded an annual rate of return of 12.7 % if one considers, among other things, income earned by graduates, improved health, lower government transfers, the unemployment rate, and so on. For comparison purposes, I would note that paying down the federal debt yields a rate of return of only 5.5 %, which is less than half.

The Quebec economist, Pierre Fortin, recently published research showing that every school dropout costs society some \$500,000. We see this as clear evidence that a massive investment in post-secondary education is extremely important.

• (1100)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): I would ask that you please wrap up now, Ms. Gibeau. You have exceeded your five minutes.

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: As regards housing and public transit, a massive reinvestment is also needed because these are both budget items that have a major impact on low-income Canadians.

With respect to the tax system, I simply wanted to mention that it is important to once again create additional tax brackets, as was the case in the 1980s in Canada, so that it is not the middle class and

low-income Canadians who are bearing the brunt of the tax burden. There is a need to spread that burden more equally and require high-income Canadians to contribute more to the overall tax burden.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): For those people who do not know this system of ACCÉSSS, these are cooperatives that help families work out their budgets and give them a great deal of information, which is free. It's very little known outside of Quebec. But certainly I remember years ago, when I first went to them when I was unemployed, they helped me an awful lot.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Ms. Gibeau. Sorry for interrupting you.

I would like to turn it over to Ms. Germaine Chevrier.

Ms. Mazerolle, how would you like to proceed? Is Ms. Chevrier going to be making the presentation? If you prefer to share your time, that is fine.

Please proceed, Ms. Chevrier.

Mrs. Germaine Chevrier (Delegated Spokesperson, Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec): Thank you.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting us to appear. We feel privileged to have this opportunity to present our vision of the fight against poverty to the Human Resources Committee. At the Regroupement, we always work together; so, we both decided to come and meet with the Committee today. Ms. Mazerolle sits on the Board of Directors of the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec and she works in the field as a facilitator with member groups in the Laurentians region. I am a last-minute replacement for the person who usually acts as spokesperson for the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec. I will try to explain our overall vision.

I would like to begin by introducing the community kitchens concept and talk about our vision of the fight against poverty. I will then discuss cooperation with some of our associations.

The community kitchens concept was developed in 1982. It is important to understand that it grew out of the desire of two people living in poverty to take control of their lives and do more than simply receive gifts of food. So, the basic principle is empowerment. This group was created in 1990 and now includes some 1,400 groups across the province and more than 37,000 people. Community kitchens were developed by five or six people who got together and pooled their money, skills and energy to prepare meals that they would take back home. Skills development and improved purchasing power are the fundamental principles behind the community kitchens concept.

We have a political component which is founded on the principles of popular education and independent community action. We have always fought poverty—first and foremost, in order to eliminate prejudice and avoid ghettos. That is why the community kitchens are open to everyone, both rich and poor. We rely on individual skills.

Several years ago, we developed a vision which is separate from what is known as food security, something many people often misunderstand. We refer to food security from the standpoint of food unfairness or the response to food insecurity. We believe that the right to food is far more than that, and thus we prefer to talk about food autonomy. That food autonomy is based on four major thrusts: providing access to healthy food at a reasonable cost; giving people purchasing power and the ability to choose their food; respecting the principles of sustainable development and the environment; and, responsible consumption, now and for future generations.

Food autonomy is not something that exists at an individual level; it is not just a matter of developing individual skills. It also refers to collective action, and communities need to develop the means to respond to the right to food.

As I said earlier, the community kitchens movement was the initiative of two women who wanted to be able to make ends meet. So, the guiding principle is to fight poverty and avoid ghettos. We want to empower people so they can take control of their own lives again and access the tools that will allow them to do that.

We have significant personal testimony and research we could refer to dealing with the impact of community kitchens in Quebec and other provinces. We have less contact with those associations, but we know that community kitchens are a means of helping people to save and reducing the effects of poverty while improving their lifestyles, that they have a major impact on people's physical and psychological health, and that they strengthen self-esteem and develop skills, as well as creating mutual assistance networks. These are ways of fighting poverty. As well, we have always been very active and supported the demands of *le Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté*.

What do we think the government should do to contribute to reducing poverty in Canada? In that connection, we would like to talk about the work that is carried out by the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Québec and other associations in the province, including the Association québécoise des banques alimentaires et des Moissons, Équiterre, Option consommateurs and the Table de concertation sur la faim. We looked at how we could really eliminate poverty by enforcing the right to food. As we see it, enforcing the right to food is very important.

•(1105)

In Quebec, we have the Coalition pour une souveraineté alimentaire. In Canada, there is a similar organization with the same kind of orientation, with branches in every province. It is called Food Secure Canada. So, we work in close cooperation. Our guiding principle is that food is an essential need and a recognized right, and that it must not be considered simply as a consumable good. There are different provisions that set out the right to food—for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. I am not a lawyer, but the United Nations has a special rapporteur on the right to food. There is also the Rome Declaration on World Food Security and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): I have to interrupt you, because you have exceeded your allocated time. I will give you one

or two more minutes and ask that you move directly to your recommendations.

Mrs. Germaine Chevrier: I would just like to say that we are recommending the application of a food policy in Quebec that focuses on the right to food and draws on nine interrelated dimensions. We have 14 recommendations dealing with purchasing power, the cost of food, physical access to food, food safety, nutritional quality, the food culture, food diversity, the sustainability of our food system and citizen power. Our recommendations deal with those nine dimensions.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Ms. Chevrier, I am sorry to have to interrupt you, and I also want to apologize to the other participants, but there will be a question period, and anything you have been unable to touch on can be included in your answers subsequently.

If you have written briefs, please submit them to our clerk. He will have them translated into the other language, if necessary, and will make them available to us. So, even if you did not have a chance to say everything you wanted to, we will still receive that information.

Thank you, Ms. Chevrier.

I would like to invite Ms. L'Archevêque, from the Jardin de la Famille de Fabreville, to make her opening statement.

•(1110)

Mrs. Janine L'Archevêque (Director General and Co-Founder, Jardin de la Famille de Fabreville): Good morning. Thank you for your invitation. Unlike my sisters, I will be talking primarily about my organization. My comments will be of a far more practical nature.

Our organization *Au Jardin de la Famille* was founded 20 years ago. Our mission is to provide fragile, disadvantaged people with a living environment that teaches people autonomy, discipline, self-esteem and respect. Our client base is made up of low-income people, people living with an intellectual or physical disability, people who are illiterate or have low educational attainment, people with learning difficulties, or people with mental health problems. There are 45 people in our organization.

I would like to tackle the question regarding the strategies and solutions our organization has developed to reduce poverty and what parts of our program are currently yielding the best results. Our strategy and our solutions involve providing them with actual work. We are a support service. We opened a second-hand clothing store, where they can learn to work in a store environment, in sales or as window dressers or cashiers. They learn how to do the things that are required. We also have work in a warehouse, where they receive the merchandise. It is important to state that we receive a great many donations. So, they learn to sort the clothing and prepare it for sale. We also have other services which are provided through our organization. In 1996, the Quebec Ministry of Education recognized us as a grassroots literacy group. We also help children with their homework. We have computer workshops, sewing and community cooking workshops. We also teach them janitor work and budgeting. Our goal is to develop all aspects of the individual.

All learning occurs in a structured environment, meaning that they have to punch in just as they would in the workplace. They have to punch in when they arrive and when they leave. They have one hour for lunch, as well as breaks. The clothing store represents an actual commercial business that gives them work and provides service to the community. And, it allows the organization to be self-financed.

Our latest project, which began last year, is the development of a community garden. All the work we are doing in that area focusses on teaching our clients to work as a group and to socialize, and on breaking their isolation and fostering their social integration through everyday tasks. That means that people who come to see us learn to get along on their own, with a view to being able to live alone in a home subsequently. We focus a great deal on helping them become autonomous. As you can see, our client base is made up of the most disadvantaged people. They cannot even work at a developmental centre, because they are not quick enough.

We do what we call “pre-pre-employability”. In other words, it is a long-term process. The aspect of the program that works best is the range of activities that are offered, because they learn to live in a group, they socialize, they develop more self-confidence and have better self-esteem. Also, we see them change and develop and become better integrated into society. In fact, what we are doing is what I call popular education. When they are at the *Jardin*, it is like being in a real family.

I also wanted to answer the question regarding the role the federal government should be playing in reducing poverty in Canada and how it can pool its efforts with those of the provinces and community organizations. In terms of the funding we apply for, we would like to see that funding be a lot more stable and recurring. In fact, as regards the IFPCA programs, when we apply for a grant, the amount we are given is \$25,000. If we are given \$18,000, we have to apply again to explain how our work is changing. So, it is very tough. We are constantly having to justify what we do.

We would like there to be more stable funding. As regards project funding, when the year is up, the project is over, and that has an impact on the organization because things are constantly changing. It is exhausting for us. We hire people and then have to let them go because, when the year is up, we no longer have the necessary funds to continue the project. Very often, it would be worthwhile to continue those projects, but it just is simply not possible.

We are aware that needs are great in this area. Unfortunately, as needs continue to grow, we do not have the necessary resources to respond. I also note that, as regards the job integration contract program, which gives a job to seven people, year over year, the amount being provided is going down.

• (1115)

At the same time, the person's illness is not receding; his problem remains the same. By reducing funding, though, there is a risk that the work will not continue. Furthermore, we need more workers and more psychoeducators, which we do not have.

So, overall, we are asking for more stable and recurring funding.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Thank you, Ms. L'Archevêque.

I believe I said previously that all of you are people working in the field who have direct experience. I find that very helpful.

Ms. Minna, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Everything that has been said is extremely important. They are things that we have dealt with for some time. Some of you may have been at various meetings like this one many times before. Maybe it is time we started dealing with it much more aggressively.

I wanted to ask Madame Boucher about the 360 hours a week. The wait times are pretty much a given. In fact, the two-week wait period was already voted on in the House of Commons. With respect to the elderly worker bridge to pension, how low would you set the bar in what you consider to be the bridging period, how much would it cost, and how would it be funded? Would you see it as being funded through the EI system or as a separate fund?

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Boucher: I would just like to remind you that, previously, there was a federal program called POWA, the funding of which came out of the Consolidated Revenue Fund. Whatever the source, money is needed. Since money has been transferred from the EI Account to the Consolidated Revenue Fund, there is money available. At the time, there was a 40-60 split in terms of the provincial and federal contributions. The federal contribution is much higher.

In my opinion the source of the money is unimportant. Earlier, I talked about the conditions that should apply, and they certainly are not frivolous. When there are significant layoffs, we have noticed that we often end up—

[English]

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you.

I understand what you mean by the program and the importance of it. I just want to understand what age you would start it at.

[Translation]

Ms. Denise Boucher: Starting from the age of 55.

[English]

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you.

Madame Gibeau, you talked about the tax system and having more equity in it. We had a report yesterday from the Auditor General that gender budgeting is still not being done by the government and they're having problems. You mentioned lower tier, to lower the bottom. That I understand, I think. Do you also have some suggestions with respect to tax expenditures as opposed to direct investment? These are things like child care versus child care tax credit. Do you know what I mean? There are programs that come through the tax system, social programs, ones that are direct payment like child care or the education direct assistance. Then there is the child care tax credit.

Can tell me which programs are more effective in addressing poverty, the direct investment or the tax expenditures? I think I have the answer, but I would like to hear from you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: This gives me an opportunity to raise a point that I did not have time to mention in the brief I submitted. We are calling on the government to put an end to the UCCB, or Universal Child Care Benefit, because tax credits are measures that apply to individuals—and the same thing applies to the public transit tax credit—are ineffective and unfair, in our opinion, because they do not benefit all segments of society. These investments are not intended to improve public transit or fund daycare services. We believe it would be better to transfer the money to the provinces for them to invest. For example, in the case of the UCCB, Quebec would be in a position to recover half a billion dollars, which could then be used to increase the number of available spots in daycare or early childhood centres.

At the present time, the number of daycare spots is woefully inadequate. We believe it would be preferable, by far, to transfer the money to the provinces so that they can invest in public transit, social housing and daycare programs, rather than giving the money to individuals through non-refundable tax credits that do not apply to everyone.

• (1120)

[*English*]

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you. That's a very clear answer and I appreciate that. As I said, I thought I had the answer. I simply wanted to share that, because sometimes there is a difference of opinion on some of these things.

Madam Chair, do I have more time?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): You have one minute and 43 seconds.

Hon. Maria Minna: Okay. I'll try to be quick on this one. It's hard.

Canada's statistics for 2006 show that unattached individuals who do not live with a blood relative, a spouse or a brother or sister, what have you, are poorer, that their income level is lower. What do you think the Government of Canada should do to target the unattached individual in Canada specifically that would be different from a family approach?

This is to Madame Gibeau or anyone else who has a specific recommendation to target that group.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: What comes to mind offhand is the need to increase social welfare benefits, particularly for unattached individuals, because those benefits are woefully inadequate. At the same time, that is not a federal responsibility. As regards the federal government, my answer would be to increase provincial transfers so that the provinces are able to fund programs for people experiencing much deeper poverty than families.

Right now, there are a lot of programs in place, particularly in Quebec, that are aimed at families. That has benefitted them a lot, but unattached individuals are pretty well ignored for the time being.

In my opinion, the federal government could increase transfers to the provinces.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Ms. Boucher, I sense that you want to add something.

Ms. Denise Boucher: We could also add that there should be better investments in social housing, which is partly a federal responsibility.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Thank you. That is all the time we have. Sometimes, the shortest answers are also the most promising.

Ms. Beaudin, please.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

When you talk about better investments, I guess you mean you would like to see increased funding for social housing.

I have a question which is addressed mainly to you, Ms. Gibeau, because you talked about prescription drugs in your recommendations regarding the Canada Health Act. Could you expand on that, please?

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: Canwest is currently suing the federal government, alleging that a ban on prescription drug advertising violates its freedom of expression. A decision in this case is expected in the summer of 2009. We see this as a real danger; that's why we brought it up.

Also, a study done by an economist shows that if it were to be allowed, it would cost \$10 billion more per year in Canada for drugs and health services. That would have a direct impact on the pocketbooks of people who buy medications, something which, in our view, poses a very serious threat, not only to low-income people, but all Canadians.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Have you also looked at credit card rates? Can you comment briefly on that?

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: Yes. Regulations are needed to lower credit card rates. There is considerable variation, depending on whether the card was issued by a bank or a department store. So, that is an area where regulations are required.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: I am also thinking of regulations on advertising.

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: Yes. I think we need to look at the fact that people are solicited without ever asking for a credit card, opening the door to all sorts of other types of credit. There is also a parallel credit market that needs to be monitored, one that especially affects low-income Canadians who do not have access to normal credit and thus resort to other forms of credit. Sometimes, that is the only way they can access cash, but it engulfs them in a vicious and endless debt cycle.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: The day before yesterday, we were in Halifax, where we were even told that people are able to get advances on their pay. There seems to be more and more of that.

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: Yes.

• (1125)

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

My other question is for Ms. L'Archevêque. You referred to the IFPCA. I think bureaucracy is winning out over support for the people who need the services.

Is it your sense that grant programs jibe with your reality and reflect your needs?

Mrs. Janine L'Archevêque: In a sense, yes, but they are very demanding. You have to provide detailed descriptions, identify all the people who will be involved, and so on. This makes for a lot of extra work for us during the year, because we have to fill out forms, etc. It takes a great deal of time. In terms of administration, in our organization, it is the same people performing multiple tasks. We often ask for psychoeducators, but it seems that no one is paying attention. We even wonder if they read our applications, because our needs are not adequately met.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you.

My next question is addressed to each of you. We were in Moncton yesterday and in Halifax before that. People in the other provinces are forever talking about Quebec and citing it as an example because of its framework legislation aimed at fighting poverty, that goes back to 2002. Indeed, they often seem to take inspiration from it—or at least, as often as possible.

Since we are all aware of the fact that there is often a need to do things in parallel and on a concurrent basis, do you see there being one segment of the population whose needs we should be addressing on a priority basis? Which segment of the population should we very quickly aim to focus our energy, time and financial resources on, as you see it? For example, it could be young children or seniors.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Go ahead, Ms. Chevrier.

Mrs. Germaine Chevrier: My spontaneous answer would be that poverty affects everyone. It is very difficult to prioritize one group of poor people over another. I think we need to look after families, seniors and everyone, in fact. I also am thinking about people in remote areas. I talked about our proposals dealing with the right to food. I would like to give you a specific example that is one of our recommendations. It has to do with the price of food. Imagine people living in poverty who see the price of food tripling in an Aboriginal or northern community in Quebec where they live, or wherever else it might be. It is really a worry for them and decreases their purchasing power. That is the kind of recommendation we are making. We talk about a basic basket that would allow people to buy food that is nutritious. There is also another concern, which relates to the first week of the month. Why not force certain markets to offer special prices when people receive their welfare cheque? Those are concrete proposals, and we suggest they be acted on in order to fight poverty. Let us stop saying that there are some poor who are poorer than others, because when you are poor, you are already excluded, even if you are living in a rich community. A poor person in Westmount seems even poorer than someone in another region.

I do not have much use for these kinds of distinctions. And that is precisely the principle that we support à the Regroupement des cuisines collectives. We also talk about the need to prioritize young

people. Young people are part of a family. They have parents who are also poor. Any measures have to be comprehensive.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Ms. Boucher, would you like to add something?

Ms. Denise Boucher: Ditto! Is that short enough for you, Ms. Folco?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): You all agree.

Thank you, Ms. Beaudin.

Mr. Mulcair, please.

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): I am very pleased to welcome all the women appearing before us today in this second part of our meeting.

I would like to begin with you, Ms. Boucher, because we have had an opportunity to talk about Bill C-10 and the fact that the Conservative government has shamefully taken away from women the right—because it is a right—to equal pay for work of equal value. Some people think that we are talking about equal pay for equal work—in other words, that a woman who drives a bus will make the same wages as a man; but that issue was resolved 50 years ago in Canada. However, assessing the value of work and ensuring there are no pockets of poverty because they happen to be female-dominated industries or jobs is something we have been working on for 30 years now and which has been well established for 20 years. And now, they come along and take it away! What is even more shocking—and it is worth reminding people of this—is that a party whose official name contains the word “liberty”—namely the Liberal Party—allows the Conservatives to do that by supporting Stephen Harper's extreme right-wing government. Every woman in the Liberal Party voted to take this fundamental right away from women. I find that absolutely scandalous, and we can never repeat that enough, because the fact is it is also very closely linked to poverty.

In terms of your opening remarks, Ms. Gibeau, I wanted to thank you for reminding us of an important truth: only 43% of people who lose their jobs are eligible for employment insurance. Minister Finley is systematically lying when she says that 80% of people who contribute to the Employment Insurance Fund would be—she makes sure she always uses the conditional tense—be eligible when, in fact, people who lose their jobs, by definition, have less stable jobs and live in areas where job insecurity and unemployment are higher. Often, these individuals work part-time and are therefore unable to accumulate enough hours. These are the people who have really lost their jobs, and who cannot access employment insurance. The 80% includes a lot of people, like public servants, whose right to a stable job is not being taken away—let's be clear on that—but people who are not losing their jobs are also included in that percentage. It is an absolute fiction! As the saying goes, there are lies, damned lies, and statistics, and that one belongs in the category of damned statistical lies, because it is repeated over and over again by the Conservatives, even though it is absolutely false. I want to thank you for raising that today.

Ms. L'Archevêque, welcome. It is clear there is kind of a "Laval West" theme developing between you and Betty McLeod this morning. I wonder why. So, welcome. I was not aware of your organization previously. Your presentation was very interesting.

Ms. Chevrier, as regards the community kitchens, it is fabulous to hear you explain what that is all about. It could not be clearer and the fruits of your efforts are so positive that it is an absolute pleasure to hear from you today.

I would like to come back to Ms. Boucher and ask her what specific actions the CSN is advocating to reverse the tragedy of Bill C-10. There are Liberals in Newfoundland, for example, whose conscience simply did not allow them to support the budget and who received permission from Michael Ignatieff to vote against it. Women Liberals, however, did not get the same permission to vote against a measure that removes a woman's right to equal pay for work of equal value, and none of them have said a word about it.

What specific actions can be taken to turn around a situation which, at the very least, could be described as troubling in a free and democratic society?

• (1130)

Ms. Denise Boucher: We intend to continue to denounce this. In my opinion, women's groups in Canada should also be mobilizing, and members of Parliament, men and women, should have refused to pass this legislation. At the same time, we understand that, for the Conservative government, it is much more of an ideological principle, as I see it. It is an ideology aimed at ensuring that the right-wing positions itself in the centre in terms of the objective of equality, while at the same time pursuing goals of inequality and unfairness. In a Canada that calls itself progressive, that is an attitude that I believe we must condemn. In my opinion, women members of Parliament should have challenged this and ensured that the legislation would not pass. At the very least, they should have refused to support it, because this is a very significant setback for Canada—a country which considers itself to be in the vanguard.

Mr. Thomas Mulcair: Ms. Gibeau, I would also like to thank you for your very clear answer when you stated that it is not up to the federal government to deal with these issues. That is a simple truth—federal government representatives do not know how to do it. Every time they have attempted it, it has been a pathetic failure. I would like you to explain what you meant when you reminded us that the tax credit is only given to people who pay taxes and that 40% of Canadians do not pay any.

A voice: Everyone pays taxes.

• (1135)

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: Yes, the 40% of people who do not pay income tax are still giving money to the government in the form of other taxes they pay or contributions to various programs. They are contributing to the Treasury.

There are a number of measures, in our opinion. In fact, we have noted a trend towards tax expenditures at the expense of establishing social programs or funding programs. There is a clear advantage to not funding them... Let's take the example of public transit. Why not invest the money that is now allocated to refund a few dollars of the cost of a bus pass through a public transit program that applies to

everyone? As you said, people who live in the regions and do not buy a bus pass obviously will not receive a refund, nor will they benefit from public transit in their region or see any kind of improvement in their district, even though people now devote some 13% of their budget to transportation. That is more than they spend on food. That trend is becoming increasingly pronounced because transportation costs are rising as the price of oil goes up. That is one example among many others.

Mr. Thomas Mulcair: You are the only ones to have raised the important matter of prescription drug advertising. Other than the cost aspect, which you referred to, advertising encourages people to overmedicate. I know the Conservatives are looking for every possible way of subsidizing Canwest, so we will be keeping an eye on that. Thank you for bringing it up.

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Thank you, Ms. Gibeau.

Thank you, Mr. Mulcair.

Monsieur Komarnicki, please.

[*English*]

Mr. Komarnicki, you have the floor.

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

[*Translation*]

I think my question is both very important and very difficult.

[*English*]

I'd like to say, though, that Monsieur Mulcair is playing a dangerous game with the truth when he talks about statistics, and I must take some time to make a few comments to correct what I think are some inaccuracies.

The statistics clearly show that of those who pay into employment insurance and subsequently lose a job without cause, about 80% to 82% are actually entitled to receive benefits. Now, we need to do better, but those are the statistical facts we get from reliable authorities.

There may be a disagreement on that, and that's fair, but I don't think it's right to play the game that Mr. Mulcair would like to play.

Secondly, I'd like to talk a little bit about the universal child tax credit. I know that when I stopped in a small community at a coffee shop and asked some moms what they were receiving for their children under six, it was interesting that around that little coffee table there was \$9,600 being received in that very small community that they found very useful.

Unlike the musings of Mr. Mulcair in terms of taking that right away, as you would suggest, many young moms have approached me and are appreciative of it. I think we may need to do more, and I'll accept that, but taking away things from people is not something I would prefer to do.

In terms of child care spaces, I think that's a fair comment. We need to do more there. We are transferring \$250 million annually to the provinces toward child care spaces. Indeed, in my province of Saskatchewan, the budget recently indicated 1,000 new spaces, and we heard in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that their province was going to create 1,050 additional spaces. I think those are good forward steps and we need to continue in that direction, perhaps increase them, but I would be loath to take any benefits away from anyone.

With respect to the Canada social transfer and education, it's true. It's fair to say that back in the Martin years, \$25 billion was cut to the transfers to the provinces, to the Canada social transfer. There's no question that the most vulnerable would be affected by that transfer cut. But I can tell you that since we've taken government we have increased transfer payments to the provinces year to year. We've provided \$350 million per year in new funding in 2009-10, increasing to \$430 million in 2012-13, with respect to education. In fact, the post-secondary education portion of the Canada social transfer went up by 40%. It's not an insignificant amount. I agree that we may be able to do more, but those are the facts on the ground.

Of course, there were a number of grants for low-income and middle-income Canadians of \$250 per month and \$150 respectively, which is non-repayable, and there have been other groups that have been targeted. I think education is important and therefore we need to do that.

There may be some question of whether the transfers to the provinces should be more conditional or not. I know we heard a lot about that, with people asking, when we transfer the moneys over an increase year over year, is it going to where it should? That's probably a fair question. I know there are agreements between provinces and the federal government, and maybe those can be pursued as well.

Another statement I want to take some issue with is that nothing is being done with respect to older workers, because there are things being done for them. I want to go through them somewhat, and the employment insurance—

● (1140)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): I want to remind you that there are witnesses and you might want to save some of your time to ask them questions. On the other hand, to be perfectly fair, I think it is really regrettable—and we're not including this in your time, Mr. Komarnicki—that the political aspect of it has been brought out here this morning.

I do understand that you want to answer this, because someone else has opened the door and you want to shut it. I simply want to remind you that there are witnesses—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I appreciate that, Madam Chair, accepting the fact that I've heard what everybody has said and I'll take that into consideration, plus their briefs, which we'll read in a short period of time. I can ask them a question or two, but it's important to set the record straight with respect to some of the things that have been said.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): This is a reminder that you're losing time.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I appreciate that, but it's not losing time; it's actually using time to put the proper context around what we're

discussing. And we've heard from many witnesses. I appreciate hearing from these witnesses and from their briefs. But some of these issues have to be addressed.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Please go ahead then.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you. I don't accept the chair's premise on this.

So there has been \$60 million a year spent as a targeted initiative for older workers, \$500 million for helping long-tenure workers get additional training for a longer period of time, \$500 million to help those who aren't able to qualify for employment insurance, and a number of billions of dollars put into skills upgrading and training. The total amount spent on employment insurance through increased benefits and extending the benefits is about \$4.5 billion.

Having said that, there may be room for improvement, and I'll accept that, but I think it's not fair to say that nothing has been done. Perhaps more needs to be done, and obviously that's why we're listening to you and listening to what you have to say, but I think it's important to acknowledge what has been done.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Do you wish to address witnesses? You have time.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Boucher, I am sorry but I really cannot give you the floor since no question was addressed to you. However, there are two other people who want to ask questions. If a question is addressed to you, you can take the time to answer it and I may give you time at the end to react.

Ms. Minna.

[*English*]

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Madam Chair. How much time do I have, Madam Chair? Just very quickly.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): You have five minutes.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you.

I will say very briefly that with respect to pay equity, every single woman in our caucus and our members support proactive pay equity legislation. We spoke against it. You know, having another election three months after the last one wouldn't have resolved the problem, but we will be introducing proactive pay equity legislation if and when we form a government. That is a commitment that our leader has made and that I'm making to you here today. I'll leave it at that, because I don't want to go on with this.

I really would like to get back to some of our discussion earlier. I want to expand a little bit on Madame Gibeau's response earlier, and also Madame Boucher's, with respect to investing in services as opposed to tax measures. It's a big issue with me only because some governments tend to use tax measures a lot to provide social programs, which I think always miss women, especially, and low-income Canadians, in my view.

So I understand very clearly the \$1,200 you've already mentioned, in addition to the child tax benefit. We've had presentations from many others on the child tax benefit, which could be increased to \$5,000. The would-be fund should be strengthened in some way. The early learning and child care program—quality, accessible, and all of that—would be another, as well as a national housing strategy, the things that we'd actually create. Could you give me, because of your experience, some other suggestions that would take away from what I would call the tax structure to invest in people and families, which would help us?

The question is to Madame Boucher and Madame Gibeau and any others, because they were the ones originally who were talking about this.

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Ms. Boucher?

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: I would simply like to clarify something because, Mr. Komarnicki, you opened a door earlier that I would like to close. We are not against tax measures—quite the opposite; we are against the fact that certain tax measures, such as non-refundable tax credits, or some other tax expenditures, do not apply to everyone. Everyone is not able to benefit from them. However, as regards the Canadian Child Tax Benefit, I certainly have no desire to see that program disappear. It is a program that is open to all women and all families, based on income. So, everyone is entitled to it. Our comment really had to do with non-refundable tax credits that target certain categories of people and exclude others. That is the clarification I wanted to make. In our opinion, the tax system is an ideal instrument that governments should be using to progressively redistribute wealth based on individual income. I just wanted that to be clear.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Ms. Boucher.

Ms. Denise Boucher: I think Ms. Gibeau already answered the question. At the same time, I believe the federal government should be considering the dynamic in the different regions, as regards the whole issue of daycare centres. What has been developed is quite extraordinary and means that services are available at a lower cost. That money should have been given back to Quebec so that it could create additional spots. This also allows women to re-enter the labour market and escape poverty, because they are able to put their

children in daycare. Also, it gives us an opportunity to raise our standard of living. It is important to understand that.

It looks as though governments think they are taking that money out of their own pocket and are thus a little reluctant to help out. However, these are not expenditures; they are investments and that is how they must be seen.

In terms of post-secondary funding, this is an investment, not an expenditure. Giving money to create daycare centres is not an expenditure, it is an investment. Once that has been understood... We contribute extensively, through our income and other taxes, to ensure that this money can be fairly redistributed, rather than in ventures such as weapons. Those are political choices, but they are not the choices we should be making in terms of our investments. We do not support those choices; we support a more just, fairer society. Ms. Chevrier said there are not different categories of poor people, and I agree with her. There are simply poor people and we must support them.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Thank you, Ms. Boucher.

[*English*]

Mr. Lobb, you have five minutes.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I must tell our witnesses here today that on behalf of Mr. Mulcair, I apologize for his partisan outburst. I can tell you from my past meetings—we've had 29 in total—that Monsieur Lessard, Madame Beaudin, Ms. Minna, Mr. Savage, who isn't here today, Madame Folco, Mr. Komarnicki, and a few of my other colleagues have refrained from the partisan comments because we know that partisan comments don't address the issues. I can also say that a few of Mr. Mulcair's colleagues who have filled in when Mr. Martin is unavailable have refrained from them as well.

I find it regrettable that this has been brought in here today, because we really do have our hearts in the right place to listen to what you have to say in order to put a good report forward for the government.

With that being said, I would like to say, Janine, that I really appreciate your comment today about the financial literacy that your group provides. I feel that is a gap in our educational system. Right from high school on into university and college, we teach our young students many things, and financial literacy is not one of them. So I appreciate the fact that your group does do that.

One theme that we have heard from various witnesses is the fact of the transfers to provinces and the regrettable fact that when those dollars are transferred to the provinces, those dollars are perhaps not invested in the areas of greatest need. You've heard that in both Nova Scotia and in New Brunswick. I just wanted to ask the panel today on their thoughts about transfers, because we know they have been increased. But if those dollars are invested in specific areas, such as affordable housing and income supports and so forth....

Madame Gibeau, I think you made a comment about that, so maybe you'd like to respond to that.

• (1150)

[Translation]

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: We talked today about what the federal government can do to fight poverty. I said that provincial transfers must be increased. That way, whether the money is invested properly or not, a provincial standing committee will be able to get involved and talk about it.

Your colleague mentioned earlier that provincial transfers had been increased since the Conservative government took office. That is why I said we have to keep on doing that. At the same time, there is a lot of catching up to do, and that is precisely the reason why I am urging you to take action in that regard. Since 1994, transfers have been cut back dramatically. Transfers to the provinces must continue to increase significantly, so that the provinces can continue to do their work in terms of social programs.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Mr. Lobb.

[English]

Mr. Ben Lobb: I can appreciate your comments. The fact is that we've heard from other witnesses that perhaps the provinces weren't directing their money to the correct areas. That's why I asked the question about acts or agreements in it.

To conclude, our April job numbers were very positive: 36,000 jobs were added. The great news for *la belle province* was that 22,000 of them were in Quebec.

We noticed that one of the areas of growth in jobs was older workers. I just wondered if any of our panellists had any comments or ideas about the best practices around why that has occurred, because that's definitely great news for the province of Quebec.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Ms. Boucher.

Ms. Denise Boucher: Jobs are being created, but we are still experiencing a crisis and I would not like to hear people saying that it is over. It is important to be very aware of what is going on. The entire forest industry in Quebec is still very seriously affected and the federal government has invested very little in that sector, unlike what was done in Ontario in the automotive industry.

Ms. Folco, I had the feeling that the first Conservative MP who spoke had asked a question. He said the government had invested a lot of money in training and skills development through the EI Program. But, in terms of older people, the problem is not what is being invested in training. We are not questioning that; rather, we are questioning what is being done for people aged 55 and over, the people we—colloquially—call the hard core. These are individuals

who are not capable of going back to school, who are 55 or 56 years old and cannot retire yet, for all kind of reasons. They are functionally illiterate, or pretty well, and now, even though they have always been machinists and have been doing the same work since the age of 15, they are being asked to retrain. There are very few people in that situation. In a company where 100 people are laid off, there may be one or two of them. They are the ones we are talking about. Since the federal government cancelled POWA, nothing has been done for them. That is what I am talking about and what the Quebec unions are talking about.

• (1155)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Thank you, Ms. Boucher.

Mr. Lobb.

[English]

Mr. Ben Lobb: Okay, that's fine.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): I would like to thank all of you for appearing today. I have one or two comments to make.

With respect to job creation, I fully agree with what has just been said. As we all know, the jobs that have recently been created are primarily among the self-employed or people working in small business. Which actually means that real jobs are not being created. The individuals who were laid off created their own jobs, although we do not know for how long. Obviously, when you are unemployed, you are prepared to do anything it takes to try and develop some kind of work with the little money you may have in the bank. I am speaking from experience here. So, you try to start up your own little business, and that is what has been happening. So, the fact that the numbers have dropped—and there, I completely agree with what Ms. Boucher just said—is in no way an indication, in my view, that the Canadian or Quebec economy is starting to recover. As far as I am concerned, that is not at all the case.

Second, I would like to support the comment—and I am going to be partisan here, since others have already opened that door—made by Ms. Minna. I would like to remind all of you that Bills C-6 and C-10 were part of the budget, and we had a very strong sense—it was actually more than just a sense—that the people of Canada did not want another election. Thirty million dollars would have had to be spent in the midst of an economic crisis. So, we voted the way we did. Ms. Minna very correctly pointed out that our leader and ourselves, Ms. Minna and myself, said on the record that when the Liberals return to office, this issue will be resolved the Liberal way.

So, I would like to thank you all for being here today.

Mr. Lessard, would you like to add something?

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Yes.

Madam Chair, you just made a clarification. With your permission

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Yes, but please be brief, Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Chair, with your permission, I would like to make one clarification. The truth has its rights. I believe inaccurate information was given by Mr. Komarnicki earlier. I find that particularly offensive, considering the accuracy and rigour of Ms. Gibeau's testimony this morning.

We are constantly hearing it said that 80% of unemployed people receive employment insurance. But that is not correct. The Department's own figures contradict that assertion. Simply repeating a falsehood does not make it true. I want people to know that, if you look on the Department's website, you will see, unless it has been taken off, specific information—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Mr. Lobb has a point of order. I have to let him raise his point of order, Mr. Lessard. Sorry. [English]

Mr. Ben Lobb: On a point of order, Madame Folco, when I had done my five minutes, you indicated to me that the meeting had come to a close. You were going to conclude with your comments. I think that would be appropriate at this point in time.

If Mr. Lessard would like to do a partisan rant, I would welcome him to do it outside after this meeting.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Mr. Lessard, I believe I have no choice but to hear from Mr. Lobb. The point you are raising has already been discussed. I invite everyone here to take a look at the website, Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I want to finish what I was saying, Madam Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): No, Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I won't be long. I could have demanded that we complete the second round; we did start it.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Mr. Lessard, we have already exceeded our time. We have noted the point you just raised. I invite everyone—

Mr. Yves Lessard: Madam Chair, you said that we would end the meeting at 12:15 p.m., but it is only noon.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): That is true. In that case, please be brief, Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Yves Lessard: I have five minutes, Madam Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): How much?

Mr. Yves Lessard: I am entitled to five minutes.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): No, Mr. Lessard.

Mr. Yves Lessard: My colleague had five minutes.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Mr. Lessard, if you use five minutes, I will have to do a third round.

Mr. Yves Lessard: No, we are still on the second round, Madam Chair. We have not completed it yet.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Mr. Komarnicki. [English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I think, in fairness, the way we proceeded was to have the first round of seven minutes, the second round of

five and five. You were hoping to conclude by 12 o'clock and that didn't appear possible, but it is now possible.

Allowing Mr. Lessard to rant and make accusations that, in my opinion, are totally false is not something I wish to hear and put up with it. Let's set the record straight.

I think, Madam Chair, when you referred to the issue of being partisan, you would do well to follow your own instruction. For the afternoon, we should probably all refrain from that. This is nothing more than political grandstanding on the backs of those who are most vulnerable, really. I think that should desist. There's no point to it. We disagree, and we should agree to disagree.

I think the meeting has ended. You've prevented the continuation of questioning, but now you're allowing political rhetoric of the worst kind.

● (1200)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): I am obliged— [Translation]

I said the meeting would end at 12:15 p.m., and it is not yet 12:15 p.m. On the second round, both the Liberals and the Conservatives had turns. A Bloc Québécois member has asked for the floor, and I have no choice but to allow him to speak.

Mr. Lessard, you have four minutes.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you, Madam Chair. I should normally have five minutes, as we had agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): You already used up one minute of your time.

Mr. Yves Lessard: This is a point of order, Madam Chair. Nevertheless I will try to ask my question in the four minutes remaining.

The Department itself has acknowledged, in its own figures, that only 67% of the people contributing to employment insurance are receiving benefits. However, considering all the people who are losing their EI benefits and who, *de facto*, are excluded from the system because of certain restrictions, only 46% are actually receiving benefits. Those are the Department's own figures. Ours are even lower.

So, you are absolutely right, Madam. They attack Mr. Mulcair for what he said, but at the same time, they are attacking you, since you said exactly the same thing. I find that regrettable.

My question is for Ms. Chevrier. She can certainly enlighten us on this. The premise of my question is an observation that clearly reflects the current state of our society. When an economic crisis arises, women are the ones that suffer the worst effects of it. And, when the only way they have to come through the crisis is taken away, as we saw recently, things get even worse.

You said that you are calling for recognition of everyone's right to food that meets certain criteria. As you see it, what can the federal government do to ensure that such a right can be exercised?

Mrs. Germaine Chevrier: A few minutes ago, in between discussions, we were forced to witness your political games, which made us very uncomfortable. We did not come here today for that.

Mr. Yves Lessard: My apologies, Madam, but I only spoke the truth.

Mrs. Germaine Chevrier: I wanted to express my discomfort in that regard. We did not come here this morning for that.

We talked about housing programs. Our colleagues in Quebec who are fighting for affordable housing are doing excellent work. Housing meets an essential need.

However, it is clear that people seem to have forgotten that food is also an essential need. When the costs of housing or transportation go up, what do people cut from their budget? Food.

That is why we think action has to be taken to ensure that people can eat better. In fact, eating healthy food has an impact on an individual's physical and mental health, and so on. There need to be programs that will help people to eat properly. That way, they will have more energy to go back to work or school, depending on their circumstances.

There have been significant advances in the battle over housing over the last 20 years. However, the battle over food has not advanced at all. I think this is a priority that you should consider. Earlier, I named a number of organizations that have proposals to make in that regard, including the *Collectif pour une politique nationale de l'alimentation* in Quebec, and Food Secure Canada. I urge you to contact them to find out what specific solutions they can propose in that respect.

We also talked about the economic crisis. However, I am anxious to hear people talk about the economic and social crisis, because the economic crisis affects people. It affects industries, but it mainly affects people—people who end up with no food and no money to pay for their housing. When these individuals are in trouble, the first thing they do is seek help from community organizations, such as the one Ms. L'Archevêque represents, and the 1,400 community kitchens that are providing services all across the province.

I would like to close with a comment about the specific needs of community kitchens. According to our assessment, community kitchen groups needed some \$6.5 million, just to carry out their mission. In some organizations, there are 300 people waiting to join a community kitchen group. But we simply do not have the means to give them a spot in these groups.

Once again, I just want to emphasize the importance of our demands with respect to the right to food.

•(1205)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Thank you, Ms. Chevrier.

[English]

We will finish with Mr. Komarnicki, who has asked to speak.

Mr. Komarnicki, I give you three minutes. This will be the last speaker.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you. I have just a couple of questions with respect to some of the suggestions for enhancements to the employment insurance program.

Has either of you done any costing as to what the cost might or might not be? That's the first question, and I have a couple of others.

Go ahead, Ms. Gibeau. No? Okay.

With respect to the forest workers, I know we had a \$1 billion—
[Translation]

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: Could I—

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): It is Mr. Komarnicki's speaking time. If there is any time left, you can respond.

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Did you have a comment you wanted to make? Go ahead.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): Sorry.

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: We have not done any calculations, but I know that the costs would certainly be lower than the amount of money that has been accumulating in the Employment Insurance Fund and which has been diverted for other purposes.

One of our suggestions for funding the proposed EI reforms is simply to use that money for the unemployed people who now need it.

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I appreciate that.

My comment on it would be that of course the benefits, if you're going to have them, would cause the premiums to go up unless we froze the premium rate. If you were to increase benefits in the future.... We froze them for two years, which I think is a step in the right direction. The previous funds that were built up in the EI system went into general revenues, at a time when we were necessarily government. Good or bad, that's how it worked, so there is no fund existing presently that you can draw on. It would have to come from budgeting.

Another step we took with respect to EI was extending the job sharing program, loosening up the rules and increasing the number of weeks to which work sharing can extend up to 52 weeks. There is a comment here from the Forest Products Association of Canada, who say:

Extending the Work-sharing program will keep thousands of forest-sector employees gainfully employed until market conditions improve, help workers retain valuable skills, position companies to take full advantage of the eventual economic recovery and lessen the impact of layoffs and mill closures on communities.

Would you agree at least that this is a good step and should be increased, and do you find that this has been helpful in that sector, to some degree? I appreciate what Ms. Boucher, I think it was, said, that the \$1 billion under the community adjustment fund has not been moving but eventually will.

Go ahead, Madame Boucher or Madame Gibeau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Denise Boucher: We certainly do not intend to oppose any positive steps. The problem is that you have provided more support to Ontario than to Quebec, even though the crisis there, notably in the forest industry, is just as significant. In Quebec, making one's livelihood from the forest is a priority. We do not have an automotive industry in Quebec, but we do have a forest industry. And, there is a global crisis affecting softwood lumber and trade in lumber with Canada. As for work sharing, some people have taken advantage of it, but very few people have had an opportunity to do so. We believe the government has to do more.

• (1210)

Mrs. Élisabeth Gibeau: I fully agree with the idea of extending the number of benefit weeks, but the fact remains that this does not

make people who are currently ineligible any more eligible for benefits. Those people are still without any income, although eligible individuals will be able to receive benefits for a longer period. They have addressed one problem, but not the fact that less than half—and I want to emphasize that—of the people who are entitled to EI actually are able to access it.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Raymonde Folco): I would ask that Committee members remain behind for two or three seconds so that we can deal with a couple of administrative matters before lunch.

The meeting is adjourned.

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