



House of Commons
CANADA

Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

OGGO • NUMBER 009 • 2nd SESSION • 40th PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, March 10, 2009

—
Chair

Mr. Derek Lee

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Derek Lee (Scarborough—Rouge River, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

This morning we're continuing our review of the main estimates. In this case it's a series of votes under Treasury Board.

We're delighted to have with us this morning the minister responsible for the Treasury Board, the Honourable Vic Toews, President of the Treasury Board. He's joined by a number of officials who have been good enough to accompany him. I'd better get them all on the record in the beginning. They include Wayne Wouters, secretary of the Treasury Board; Alister Smith, assistant secretary, expenditure management sector; Mr. Dan Danagher, executive director, program integrity; and Ms. Kelly Gillis, assistant secretary, corporate services sector.

Thank you very much for coming.

As is customary, we'll open with the minister, who will open the issue of the main estimates for Treasury Board.

Minister Toews.

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I will in fact make a presentation, and after I have concluded, my officials and I will be pleased to answer the committee's questions.

Let me begin by saying that I am pleased to be with you today to discuss the priorities of the Treasury Board portfolio in the context of the current economic climate and our role as the management board of the Government of Canada.

As we are all aware, we are facing tough economic times. Just over a month ago, our government brought forward Budget 2009, Canada's economic action plan. This multi-year plan outlines many measures we will be taking to stimulate the economy, protect Canadians hit hardest, and secure Canada's long-term prosperity. For these measures to have a real impact, they must be implemented as quickly as possible.

Today I will give you an overview of how the Treasury Board portfolio supports the government in implementing its agenda. I will also speak about the ongoing priorities of the Treasury Board Secretariat.

The stimulus in our economic action plan represents 1.9% of our economy for the next fiscal year and approximately 1.4% for the year after. We need to get this money out the door quickly to help

Canadians in the short term. Even my honourable colleagues in the opposition have acknowledged that for these measures to have a real impact, they must be implemented as soon as possible. At the same time, we need to ensure proper due diligence. As the management board of the government, we at the Treasury Board Secretariat make sure that this process is handled properly and that we not only get the funds flowing, but we do so responsibly.

We are putting in place a number of measures to ensure that funding flows to those who need it most. One of these measures is a special central vote in main estimates of \$3 billion, assigned to the Treasury Board Secretariat, for budget implementation. It will allow our government to provide initial funding for ready-to-go initiatives announced in Budget 2009 in advance of the normal parliamentary supply schedule. Reporting on allocations on the vote will be done in supplementary estimates and in quarterly reports to Parliament on the economic action plan. All the funds distributed will be thoroughly accounted for.

In keeping with the need to be responsive and responsible, we have established clear conditions for the use of this vote to ensure that the appropriate checks and balances are in place. For example, this fund can only be used for economic action plan initiatives announced in Budget 2009. Every initiative funded from this vote will require the approval of Treasury Board. Existing policy requirements on accountability and reporting will have to be met. In this context, it should be noted that grants and contributions payments will be subject to the transfer payment policy. Also, the use of this vote is time limited. Funds can only be allocated between April and June 30, 2009.

Contrary to what has been reported, we chose to create a special vote to provide bridge funding for departments to ensure due diligence in approvals, transparency in reporting, and accountability with respect to its use. In addition, we will streamline the review and approval of policies and programs while ensuring that appropriate controls and respect for parliamentary authority are in place. For example, we will use simplified or omnibus Treasury Board submissions for straightforward program extensions or top-ups. Existing programs will be dealt with in an omnibus way, because these have received prior approval from Treasury Board.

In addition, we have better aligned the timing of the budget and estimates. Thanks to new measures put in place by the Treasury Board Secretariat, the public service is better equipped to handle this process than in previous years. For example, over the past three years, financial management standards across government have been improved. Departments now have independent audit committees that include members from outside government, and departments now have qualified chief financial officers.

Departments have also improved the management of their operations. Under the management accountability framework assessments, large departments and agencies, representing over 90% of government spending, have improved in the area of financial management and control. Recent results show that financial management indicators rated acceptable or strong have risen to 90% from 59%.

We have also increased departmental oversight with a committee of deputy ministers, who will be tracking progress and overseeing the implementation of these measures. The Auditor General will also be auditing spending. For the second year now, the government plans to use early spring supplementary estimates as a vehicle for budget measures.

We all appreciate that we have a big job ahead of us. We will be balancing appropriate due diligence and transparency while rapidly delivering funds to Canadians, but we're up to the task, and we intend to help Canadians through these difficult times.

I'd like to now take a few minutes to talk about some of the ongoing priorities for us at Treasury Board. The first is to make government more effective. What do I mean by this? Our focus will be to continue to reduce the web of rules that stymie innovation and creativity in the public service and lessen our ability to deliver results. This initiative lines up with the recent recommendations of the third report of the Prime Minister's advisory committee on the public service, and it is part of our ongoing commitment to the public service renewal action plan.

Our second overall priority is to ensure that program spending is focused on results, provides value for taxpayers' money, and is aligned with the government's priorities and responsibilities. In this area the expenditure management system that our government put in place in 2007 will continue to serve us well in controlling the growth of government spending while producing results that provide value for money for Canadians. An important part of the system is the strategic review process. Through this exercise, every department and agency is required to assess all their direct program spending and performance on a four-year cycle to ensure they are achieving their intended results, are efficiently managed, and are responding to the priorities of Canadians.

Finally, our third overall priority is to create a dynamic public service that is well equipped to address the challenges of today and tomorrow. That means making changes to the organizational structure of government to ensure that we are as efficient and responsive as possible. One such organizational change was the recent restructuring within my portfolio. On March 2 of this year, the Canada Public Service Agency was combined with two sectors in the Treasury Board Secretariat that are responsible for central human resource management functions, to create the new Office of the

Chief Human Resources Officer. This change focuses and streamlines the organizational structure for human resource management. With this new structure and other changes resulting from the review of human resources and governance, deputy ministers will be better supported to manage the people in their own departments and agencies. This restructuring was a result of our horizontal review of central human resource functions, and it responds to the recommendations made by the Prime Minister's advisory committee on the public service in its February 2008 report.

Mr. Chairman, as I mentioned, our government is pressing ahead to help Canadian families, communities, and businesses weather the current economic storm. To stand still is no solution at all, and that's why we're putting in place the measures I spoke about today. As the management board for the Government of Canada, our job is to support the government in its efforts to get money flowing to Canadians by ensuring that it is done right. We are determined to deliver on this commitment. The main estimates reflect this central goal and our commitment to providing this leadership to Canadians.

Thank you.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister Toews.

I'll now look to the official opposition for the first round. Mr. McTeague.

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here and providing us with your opening remarks.

I think you'll agree with us that extraordinary times also require that you, as the minister responsible for the Treasury Board, implement and continue to observe extraordinary accountability. Based on that, do you have before you right now at this time a list of the programs and departmental expenditures that are contained in vote 35 that you could give to this committee?

Hon. Vic Toews: Vote 35 is a central vote to be approved by Parliament that will enable Treasury Board to allocate the funds in support of items identified in the budget. The actual programs that are going to be receiving money through vote 35 are those listed in the economic action plan. We don't have a list of the actual projects that will be fulfilled on this particular initiative.

Hon. Dan McTeague: There begins the problem, Minister. I think you can appreciate this. If you were sitting in my position, you would want to ask these simple questions. You've done it many times.

You're asking for \$3 billion. In 21 days, you're going to begin a \$33-million-a-day expenditure. Given the comments that your colleague Mr. Baird made last week, with respect to three areas and three programs that will receive funds, and being the minister responsible for the Treasury Board, surely by now you have an idea of what that \$3 billion is going to be spent on. Given that you do know that—

• (1115)

Hon. Vic Toews: Yes, we do.

Hon. Dan McTeague: —and you must know that, what are they?

Hon. Vic Toews: They're set out in the economic action plan.

Hon. Dan McTeague: No, those are general. You have not established enabling legislation for this. So do you have a specific list?

Hon. Vic Toews: Well, let's take a look at how the process works. This process is often done in partnership with our provincial and municipal partners. We don't make these projects simply to get money out of the door. We work together with the provinces—

Hon. Dan McTeague: I appreciate that.

Hon. Vic Toews: —and the municipalities in order to determine whether there are incremental projects, projects that have not yet received any funding, which they are willing to cost-share with the federal government.

Those projects in fact will be reported out. They'll be reported through supplementary estimates and through quarterly reports to Parliament, as agreed to with the official opposition.

I might point out that what we are doing with vote 35 is no different from what we do with any vote of money. It is exactly the same thing. The same controls and responsibilities with respect to the spending of that money will take place. All we're saying is that we want the approval April 1 instead of June 30. That's the only difference.

Hon. Dan McTeague: If I could, Mr. Minister, you have before you a request to spend money in exactly three weeks, at which point... At the end of June, you'll tell us exactly what it is.

Hon. Vic Toews: Right.

Hon. Dan McTeague: We go through an estimates process in which the line item of every expenditure makes for accountability, not only of this Parliament to you, but of you to this Parliament. By not providing this list, are you not acutely aware of the fact that you are setting a very dangerous precedent in requesting of this Parliament that we give consent to something that you are not prepared to disclose, and that is not...? I would challenge your comments.

Hon. Vic Toews: Well, hold it—

Hon. Dan McTeague: We are dealing with a process that must be transparent. You're saying that it's in the estimates somewhere, so go find it. There's nothing here to attach your \$3 billion to. I appreciate the fact that you're concerned about projects that might be ongoing. In three weeks, surely you must have an idea of where you're going to be spending that money.

What are those specifics, Minister? Why are you and your government so reluctant to come forward with that information?

Hon. Vic Toews: The money will be allocated over the three-month period. The money will not be allocated in the next three weeks. It will be allocated over that three-month period. That's what the process is. In respect of each of those projects, in the same way that is done by estimates, we will be reporting to Parliament.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Minister, you're just—

Hon. Vic Toews: Wait. This is not establishing a precedent in respect of how money is spent or how money is reported back to Parliament. The precedent that it is establishing, if any, is that it is a central vote designed to get the money out April 1 instead of June 30.

If the House said no, sorry, you can't have that central vote on April 1, what would happen is that it would back up to June 30, and all of those projects would be reported on subsequent to June 30. What we are saying is that we're going to be allocating the projects between April 1 and June 30 and reporting back to Parliament in terms of the allocation.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Minister, on that point, you would then have to know what those projects are. You know full well that your department cannot turn on a dime. They cannot, in the next two, three, or four weeks, go through a process, review, and provide assurances that it meets Treasury Board guidelines—

Hon. Vic Toews: I don't think you've been listening to what I've said.

Hon. Dan McTeague: I have been listening, Minister, and what I'm concerned about is that you're not prepared to give us a specific, detailed example of what you're prepared to spend that \$3 billion on.

For all of those who are interested in accountability, your party campaigned on it in 2006, so I don't need to remind you of the comments that some of your colleagues and perhaps you campaigned on in the last election in regard to the idea of transparency and accountability being paramount.

Minister, what you're doing today flies in violation of that, so I'm asking you once again, because I think you're going to hear it from members certainly on this side of the table: what projects are you now prepared to fund? And will you give to this Parliament, and will you give to this committee, a concrete list of where that \$3 billion is going? Is it simply going to drop from a helicopter and people simply have to run to pick it up?

Hon. Vic Toews: You haven't listened to a word I've said. I know you have your scripted lines, and that's what you're sticking to, but what I would appreciate—

Hon. Dan McTeague: Minister, my scripted lines are not scripted lines; they're accountability for the Canadian public, and you're not prepared to live up to that.

Hon. Vic Toews: No, hold it, it's my turn to answer now.

I know you have your scripted lines. You've made a certain statement, which is completely and utterly false—and you know that.

• (1120)

Hon. Dan McTeague: How would we know, Minister, when you're not prepared to give information to this committee?

Hon. Vic Toews: Hold it, let me finish.

Hon. Dan McTeague: What is the detail, Minister? You're not prepared to tell us what you're prepared to spend \$3 billion on—

Hon. Vic Toews: Yes, I am.

Hon. Dan McTeague: —but you're prepared to come to us.

Hon. Vic Toews: Yes, I am.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Then where are they, Minister?

Hon. Vic Toews: I'm telling you what the process is.

Hon. Dan McTeague: You're not telling me, Minister. I want to hear the list.

The Chair: Order, order.

In fairness, I have to allow the minister a reasonable amount of time to reply.

Mr. Toews.

Hon. Vic Toews: Thank you very much.

The process is that the money will be allocated to specific projects between April and June 30.

Mr. Chair, this member knows that the projects are not allocated at this point, but the programs on which they will be spent are in fact specifically set out in our economic action plan. As for the over-the-top kinds of comments that money is going to be dropped from a helicopter, the departments must meet a number of conditions in order to receive money from this fund.

First of all, as I've said, programs or projects must be economic action plan initiatives included in budget 2009 and passed by Parliament. Funds can be allocated only between April and June 30 of this year as bridge funding until money is available through supplementary estimates A or B. Appropriate checks and balances must be in place. Treasury Board approval must be obtained. Existing requirements on accountability—

Hon. Dan McTeague: Minister, you've left \$3 billion.... And I know you're ragging the puck. You've left \$3 billion on the floor. Can you tell this committee when you're prepared to give this money, and the projects it's dealing with?

The Chair: Mr. McTeague, order.

The minister has to have enough time to get his answer out here.

Minister, did you want to complete your answer?

Hon. Vic Toews: Yes. Existing requirements on accountability and reporting must be met. The member is trying to leave this committee with the impression that the requirements on accountability and reporting with respect to the \$3 billion are different from the requirements for any other money that is appropriated by

Parliament. And what I'm saying is that the only difference—and the member knows it and he's playing games with it—is that instead of this money being allocated by Parliament at a later date, it's done at an earlier date, at April 1. In all other respects the process is identical.

Hon. Dan McTeague: The minister is playing games with \$3 billion of public funds, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McTeague.

Now I go to Madame Bourgeois, for a second round.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to inform you that my colleague and I will be sharing our time.

Good morning, Minister. Thank you for coming.

You are asking for authorization to spend \$3 billion. Based on what you're saying, you have even simplified the applications to extend programs. Have the programs that you're going to invest further in been assessed and have they reached their objectives and performance indicators?

Earlier, you were saying that we are in an economic crisis and that this seemed quite urgent. However, not much has been done since last fall to resolve this urgent economic crisis. You understand that we are not prepared to give you the green light, to open the door to your spending \$3 billion without having you table a plan telling us who and what programs will get that \$3 billion.

Just to remind you, Mr. Minister, my colleague also has a question for you.

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Exactly. We will in fact be allocating those funds in the context of the programs identified in Budget 2009. So the projects that will be approved and the moneys allocated for those projects are in fact those contained in the economic action plan. So in that sense, there is a very clear direction in the budget as to what programs it can be spent on. The actual allocation will take place between April 1, when the money is approved, and June 30. There are obviously preliminary discussions that are going on with the provinces and the municipalities, but of course no commitments can be made to the provinces or to the municipalities. But we believe that those commitments can be made in short order after the money has been appropriated by Parliament. Then Treasury Board still has to approve each of the actual projects. So I can't give you a list of the actual projects at this time, prior to Treasury Board approval.

This gets back to the earlier question by the Liberal opposition member. This still has to go to Treasury Board. How can I give you a list of projects that have not followed due process? It would be irresponsible for me to even suggest that could be done.

• (1125)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Good day, Mr. Minister. I have a very specific question for you.

The Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans has asked the Treasury Board for years to invest significant funds in small craft harbours. Fisheries and Oceans is responsible for 800 small craft harbours in Canada, and the majority of these harbours are in a terrible state. Currently, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has said that it will take approximately \$500 million just to repair the harbours and wharves that belong to it.

Minister, in the budget you announced a very small amount for small craft harbours compared to the needs identified by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Would it not have been more reasonable to take that \$3 billion and heavily invest first in federal infrastructure? I was talking to you about Fisheries and Oceans, but I could also have been talking about the Department of Transport, which is facing the same problem concerning federal infrastructure. In fact, I could be speaking to you about all of the departments responsible for infrastructure in need of repair. Would it not have been better for the federal government to first invest heavily in its own infrastructure? Investing first in the repair of its own infrastructure would have accelerated the process.

I am coming to the very specific question that I want to ask you, Minister. How did you prioritize, if you didn't even invest in repairing your own infrastructure? I would repeat that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has assessed needs at \$500 million. For five years, I sat on that committee and for the past seven years this committee has been asking for funds but has only received crumbs every year. During that time, infrastructure has been crumbling. This infrastructure belongs to the federal government and I feel that it is a priority.

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Thank you very much. I appreciate that question, and I think that's a good point, that the federal government should not only be partnering with the provinces and municipalities in terms of matters that lie essentially within provincial jurisdiction but indeed take care of its own infrastructure. It was for that reason that we did announce in our budget document the funding for small craft harbours. Budget 2009 provides up to \$200 million on a cash basis to deal with the issue of small craft harbours.

Now, you've quoted a figure of \$500 million. I don't know whether that's accurate. I'm going to take you at face value that it is an accurate number. That deficit in terms of improving small craft harbours didn't occur overnight, and we're addressing those in a measured and timely way. For example, the economic action plan actually allocates \$89 million for this fiscal year for small craft harbours. That, I would say, is a substantial amount of money. It's perhaps not as much as the member would like, but it's better than voting against the bill entirely and giving nothing.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: Minister, \$89 million is close to being crumbs. These figures come from the Department of Fisheries and

Oceans. You can check them. This \$500 million figure has been checked. I am not pulling numbers out of thin air. I am referring only to Fisheries and Oceans; imagine what the situation is at the Department of Transport.

Most of these projects have already been assessed and checked. We know exactly what needs to be done. For example, in Quebec, all infrastructure has been assessed twice over a three-year period. Eighty-nine million dollars will not solve the problems, it is going to take \$500 million. This would have been one way to create jobs very quickly. These projects are shovel-ready and the department could have started them, if it had been given sufficient funds.

You said you wanted to move forward quickly. You would have had the perfect opportunity to do so, since these projects have already been assessed and are shovel-ready.

• (1130)

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: In fact, as I indicated, there is money available for many of these initiatives. The budget and the economic action plan in fact indicate a number of initiatives that we want to undertake in respect of federal infrastructure. The member is correct in saying that many of these have already been assessed, and especially in the area of federal jurisdiction, where it's not dependent upon provincial or municipal concurrence or contributions, we could move on a more timely basis. For example, the economic action plan speaks about the improved rail system for \$141 million, the Trans-Canada Highway for \$20 million, and federal bridges for \$43 million. I've mentioned the small craft harbours and the repair and restoration of federal buildings for \$158 million. In fact, in the economic action plan there's approximately \$383 million identified in this fiscal year for federal-alone projects—that is, projects falling within federal jurisdiction.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: Minister, why not start with these projects? It would have been much simpler.

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: It would certainly not present the same challenges that dealing with the municipalities and provinces does. I don't make those decisions, but I can assure you that when these kinds of projects come forward they can be done a lot more quickly in terms of the approval process than if we have to consult with the provinces and the municipalities.

I just want to talk about the consultation with the provinces and municipalities. As a federal government, we don't want to go in and tell the provinces what they should be doing in their areas of jurisdiction. What we want to do is ensure that they have sufficient funding to meet their priorities in the area of infrastructure. That's why we're moving on this economic action plan. That's why the \$3 billion stimulus will be of great assistance in terms of moving this along. It gets the process moving essentially three months earlier. It doesn't open the door to simply let the cash flow, but it allows the process to move three months earlier.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gourde, you have eight minutes.

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Lotbinière—Chutes-de-la-Chaudière, CPC): Thank you for allowing me to speak, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the minister for answering our questions and providing us with clarification.

Minister, what is the purpose of these votes and what conditions must be met so that these votes can be used as quickly as possible?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Thank you very much for the question. It is a very important question.

I think that while we want to be efficient and quick in getting the money out of the door, we also recognize that we have to do this in a responsible way. I note that the leader of the opposition made a statement that you have to change the rules by which this money goes out the door. Obviously, he's not saying create more rules or make them more burdensome. What the leader of the opposition was essentially saying is find a process that gets the money out of the door in a more timely fashion. What he indicates and what he states is that we're in a serious crisis, and I would rather err by doing it fast and making the occasional mistake, which then you, the voters, punish us for later, than sit here asking have we got all the boxes ticked.

I think there is a middle ground in terms of how to get this money out. It's true that there is sometimes unnecessary bureaucracy that impedes the flow of this money, but I think we can still have Treasury Board approval of this money in a responsive and a responsible way. So in terms of this \$3 billion, the programs and projects must be in the economic action plan initiatives included in Budget 2009 and passed by Parliament. So there's a clear perimeter around this fund.

Then the funds can only be allocated during April 1 and June 30 as essentially bridge funding until the money is available through supplementary estimates A or B. So what we're doing is moving the process up in order to get the money out the door faster, as the leader of the opposition in fact has indicated we should be doing. But I must say that the appropriate checks and balances must still be in place, Treasury Board approval must be obtained, existing requirements on accountability and reporting must be met.

One of the examples I gave is that there is a way of moving things ahead more quickly, especially when we've already approved a particular program, the parameters of the program are set out, the

requirements of the program, and all that municipalities or provinces are perhaps asking is for more money. So we can safely put that money into an existing program where that existing program has demonstrated that it is being carried out in a responsible fashion meeting the priorities of Canadians. So it would be done in omnibus approval rather than a specific project approval. There are ways of speeding up the process without losing control of the expenditures of the money.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: If I understand correctly, Minister, with the cooperation of the provinces and municipalities, money will be available this spring, starting April 1, to implement major infrastructure projects that will help stimulate our economy.

Minister, will the minister report back on the amounts spent under these votes?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Absolutely. We will be issuing reports to Parliament. Not only will we do that through supplementary estimates, but we will do it through quarterly reports to Parliament. What the official opposition leader has asked us to do is bring reports forward on a timely basis in March, in June, and in December. Why he chose those particular months, I'm not sure, but we are certainly prepared to meet those requirements.

Obviously, in March we're not going to have as extensive a report in terms of expenditures because the money has not yet been approved. But we will report openly and on a transparent basis how that money is being spent. Again, I want to emphasize there is nothing being changed in respect of how we report to Parliament; and we will not be reporting in any different way from what we would have usually reported, with the exception of the additional reporting that we will be doing as requested by the leader of the official opposition.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Minister, I see that considerable efforts are being made to ensure transparency. Will the Auditor General have access to the information she needs to audit the management of these votes, and will her reports be made public?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Absolutely. The Auditor General will continue to review any and all programs she chooses to review. We don't dictate to the Auditor General what programs or projects she will review.

I might say that we did have a meeting with the Auditor General—and when I say “we”, I mean the finance minister and I—to apprise her of what we intended to accomplish through vote 35. She is aware of the government's intention in that respect.

Again, there is nothing that prevents her from making the appropriate inquiries, at any time, in respect of this fund or any other fund, if she or her office have any concerns.

•(1140)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Minister, will all the amounts paid out under these votes be subject to approval by Treasury Board ministers?

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Absolutely.

I'm wondering whether Mr. Wouters, the Secretary of the Treasury Board, would want to give some details in that respect. I could do that, but there's nothing like having it come from the expert himself, in terms of the process that Treasury Board will follow in respect of the \$3 billion fund.

Mr. Wayne Wouters (Secretary, Treasury Board Secretariat): Well, as with all budget-related items, it has to come to the board for oversight and approval. The board looks at every program to determine that the terms and conditions are clear going forward, that there's appropriate oversight in the departments.

Of course the \$3 billion fund is to provide that bridge funding between April and June. The board has to determine, on a program-by-program basis, if a department is actually in the position to have the funding at the start of the year or if the program cannot get off the ground until June. That's why the comprehensive list is in the budget.

What will be allocated is now being decided by the board. It looks at each individual program to make a determination. Is that ready to go on April 1, or is it ready to go a little later? If it's a little later, it can be in supplementary estimates A; if it's ready to go on April 1, then we can allocate funds from the \$3 billion. That's what's being done now on a case-by-case basis. When that's completed, then the list will be there. Right now we're all working with the same list, which is in chapter 3 of the budget. That does not include the Budget Implementation Act measures, which are a separate source of funds.

Really, I think little can be done in terms of providing the list, except what's in the budget, until that work has been done. There's an intense effort by the Treasury Board right now to follow through on each one of those programs.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Martin, for eight minutes.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

And thank you, Mr. Toews, for being here today.

Mr. Toews, without being repetitious, I understand the government's intent is to get billions and billions of dollars out the door in a fast-tracked fashion.

I wrote down one of the things you said. You yourself said it will be necessary to streamline the application process. Yet you're also saying that nothing will change in terms of scrutiny or oversight or the due diligence of the study of these applications. I don't see how that jibes. Something has to give. Where specifically will you be able to streamline without compromising any of the oversight, etc., to get this volume of activity through your own bureaucracy?

I said to Mr. Smith at the last meeting that he has a human resources challenge, if nothing else, in just dealing with the sheer volume of activity that's going to be flowing through Treasury Board. The room for abuse or maladministration of these things is huge.

Hon. Vic Toews: Let me say, first of all, that I have a great deal of confidence in the officials at Treasury Board. They assure me they can do this in a responsible manner.

When I indicate there will be the same rigour in terms of getting matters through Treasury Board, I go back to the example of existing programs. All the criteria have already been set out so we know what a particular program involves, how that money is to be spent. In those cases we are simply topping up the money that has already been depleted.

Mr. Pat Martin: That's one example, yes.

Hon. Vic Toews: Yes, so there's no need then to go into the whole program, and that will make a huge difference in expediting the matter, because we don't then have to have Treasury Board analysts reviewing the entire program to ensure that it meets all of the requirements.

•(1145)

Mr. Pat Martin: One obvious question, though, Minister, that comes to mind is that you already have the Building Canada fund, with \$3 billion or so that was pre-approved by Parliament. That money is stalled. If we're willing to streamline applications, etc., to fast-track this future spending, you could be spending that Building Canada money now, or yesterday, and get that money out the door without any of this delay, without waiting for the Senate, etc., to approve this new pot of money.

Why isn't the same flexibility being shown to that pot of money as you're contemplating for this future pot of money?

Hon. Vic Toews: I think that's a good question. The short answer is that it is, in fact, happening.

Let's go to your province in particular, Manitoba, which I'm also familiar with. The Building Canada fund was not signed until some time in September. What has happened over the last number of months, especially in the last two or three months, is that we've been sitting down with the provincial government to determine the list of projects that will be approved jointly by the province and the Government of Canada. So we anticipate having a list of projects ready to go for Manitoba's share of the Building Canada fund. That, essentially, is happening right across the country, and it will be done concurrently with this specific fund—that is, the vote 35 fund.

Remember, the vote 35 money is separate and apart and deals with different issues from the Building Canada fund.

Mr. Pat Martin: No, I understand that.

Hon. Vic Toews: The Building Canada fund has very clear criteria. The economic action plan and the \$3 billion have another set of criteria.

Mr. Pat Martin: Fair enough, Minister.

Hon. Vic Toews: I don't want to take up your time, but we will be dealing with the Building Canada fund in a timely fashion and we will be dealing with this, and the three months extra that we get by moving the money up will allow us to enter into commitments earlier than we otherwise could.

Mr. Pat Martin: All right, let me ask another very practical question.

In your opening comments you were reminding Canadians of the urgency of the situation, that we have to get moving and fast-track this. Why then won't you and your government just split the bill and take out the irritating elements of this, so the opposition parties could in fact unanimously support some fast-tracking of spending?

I don't want you to spend the rest of your time on this, because I know it's an irritant for you and others, but what do pay equity and those issues have to do with economic stimulus? Why was the Navigable Waters Protection Act crowded into this same bill?

Why do you make it so hard for us to agree with you that we must get the money out the door? If you really wanted to get it through the Senate, split the bill, and it would be through the Senate and your job would be done and you could get busy spending that money.

Why let partisan politics get in the way of the very opening remarks you made?

Hon. Vic Toews: Well, I think the example you've given of pay equity is in fact a good example of why this should be done in an overall bill, rather than individually. What the pay equity bill does is ensure that pay equity principles are incorporated into the collective bargaining regime—

Mr. Pat Martin: Look, Minister, I don't want to argue the merits of pay equity.

Hon. Vic Toews: No, no, let me just finish.

Mr. Pat Martin: I don't want to argue the merits of pay equity. I asked you a general question of why these non-economic issues found their way into the economic stimulus package. If you're asking us to buy your story, why don't you show how sincere you are about getting the money out the door and back off some of these irritants that make it so difficult for us to deal with it?

Hon. Vic Toews: Let me just finish the answer.

Mr. Pat Martin: Sir, I'll let you finish, but I have to ask you this. We're worried about the partisan spending of some of this money; let's get the cards on the table. And one thing I wrote down that I'm worried about is when you said "vote against the budget and you will get nothing".

Is that some kind of a veiled threat, that those of us who vote against the budget won't see any money flowing into our ridings?

Hon. Vic Toews: No, that's the reality, Mr. Martin, that if you vote against the budget, you don't get any money, because there is no money to give out. All money comes through Parliament. That is the reality.

Now, the issue on pay equity.... You seem to classify that as a non-economic issue. How can that be? It involves expenditures of money, which involve the implementation of a human right. So in order to ensure—

• (1150)

Mr. Pat Martin: Which should never be negotiated, sir. It's non-negotiable.

Hon. Vic Toews: Absolutely, and that's what we're so concerned about. In the past, that has been negotiated away. In the future it will not be negotiated away. Everyone coming—

Mr. Pat Martin: It would have to be a matter for collective bargaining, if you take away the other avenue as a recourse.

Hon. Vic Toews: No, let me finish.

Pay equity ensures the appropriate compensation of women in the federal sector, and we will ensure that the principles of pay equity are incorporated into the collective bargaining process so that no decisions can be made without taking pay equity principles into account. At present, in a collective agreement situation or a bargaining situation, the union and the employer can bargain and arrive at whatever agreement they want, regardless of pay equity. They can simply ignore pay equity, and that's wrong.

For example, in Quebec—

Mr. Pat Martin: Well, I think it's wrong to have things like health and safety and pay equity at the bargaining table, because if you want to keep pay equity out of the negotiations, you offer people an extra buck an hour, and nine times out of ten they'll take it. That's why human rights and health and safety don't belong at the negotiating table. They belong in other avenues of recourse.

Hon. Vic Toews: The principles of health and safety and pay equity are fundamental to collective bargaining, and anyone who goes into a collective bargaining situation saying they can ignore health and safety and they can ignore pay equity is wrong. They have to take those into account.

Mr. Pat Martin: They're non-negotiable. I've negotiated a lot of collective agreements, and I would never allow the employer to bring health and safety to the bargaining table because it's non-debatable and non-negotiable. The same applies for fundamental rights like pay equity.

Hon. Vic Toews: And I agree with you.

Mr. Pat Martin: We're way off topic here.

The Chair: That's time. Thank you, Mr. Martin.

Ms. Hall Findlay, for five minutes.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing this morning. I have a very quick comment, and then I want to ask a question about the infrastructure and lapsing funds.

My first comment is that you keep saying the programs to which the \$3 billion will be applied are outlined in the budget. I will point out that the budget provides for total expenditures of almost \$250 billion, and to say that the programs for the \$3 billion are included in that is extremely broad, and in my view a completely inadequate answer for a \$3 billion blank cheque.

I have two questions on infrastructure. The first one is specific. When we talk about the Building Canada fund and other infrastructure money, there remains some question about the money that has been unspent. By far the majority of the Building Canada fund has been unspent. You mentioned that it had been signed in September. The Building Canada fund was announced in 2007, sir, but a significant majority of the Building Canada fund money has not been spent.

Will that money be allowed to lapse at the end of this fiscal year, or will it actually be brought forward into the 2009-10 budget?

Hon. Vic Toews: Let me just clarify that the agreements are signed with the provinces in order to flow the Building Canada fund money. The agreement, for example, that I said was signed in September 2008 was in one of those provinces, Manitoba. That's when that particular agreement was signed. So to suggest that money was available to Manitoba in 2007 under that particular fund is simply wrong.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: That's understood.

Hon. Vic Toews: It became available in September 2008, and the process now in Manitoba is to identify the particular projects that we hope to have identified in the next little while.

But there are three parts—

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Minister, that's actually not my question. I appreciate your clarification.

Hon. Vic Toews: But that was your statement.

• (1155)

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I appreciate your clarification on Manitoba in particular, but the Building Canada fund was announced in 2007. Very little of that money has been spent. The question is very specific. Will the money that has been allocated for the Building Canada fund be allowed to lapse, or will it be carried forward?

We are talking well into the billions of dollars here.

Hon. Vic Toews: I understand that. There are certain commitments that the Government of Canada has as a result of the signing of the individual provincial agreements. So there are—

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: This is money that was specifically approved and allocated. So the question is simple. Will that money lapse?

Hon. Vic Toews: Yes, I understand what you're saying. Where there is money that has been committed, that money flows.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Right now I am still confused. You can help me in my ignorance here, but I would like to know the answer. Of the money in last year's budget allocated and approved under the Building Canada fund, how much has not been committed and will be allowed to lapse?

Hon. Vic Toews: That number will be available some time in September, but I can give you more detail.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: It will be some time in September?

Hon. Vic Toews: That's correct. That's how it's done through supplementary estimates. You know that.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: When the infrastructure minister said yesterday that no money will be left behind, what exactly did he mean?

Hon. Vic Toews: There are a number of ways that money can continue on through the next year when commitments have been made. It can be through re-profiling, with the consent of the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: So I'm asking how much of this money will be re-profiled. The next budget year starts in April.

Hon. Vic Toews: We don't know how much money will be not committed or unallocated. I can't give you that answer. That's what the supplementary estimates in September will deal with.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: You have to bear with my appearing to be somewhat rude and interrupting. My challenge with this—and this speaks to my colleague's earlier question—is that we are being asked to approve a significant amount of money that is only going to be reported on after the fact.

There are two different issues. I will point to one and then refer back to the fact that under infrastructure spending, the investment that was approved and allocated under our accountability parliamentary processes, virtually none of that has been spent.

Hon. Vic Toews: That's not correct.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: It is correct. The majority of the money in the Building Canada fund has not been spent, when it should have been flowing into the economy over the last number of months. There is a bit of hypocrisy, quite frankly, in saying that we need to spend all this money quickly, but by the way, we have actually had approval to spend money over the last number of months and we haven't done it.

The Chair: Mr. Toews.

Hon. Vic Toews: Your premises are almost entirely wrong. Your statements are entirely wrong.

I haven't had a chance to reply, since you've interrupted every time.

Mr. Wouters.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Of the Building Canada fund, roughly \$3.3 billion was allocated to Infrastructure Canada through the main and supplementary estimates for 2008-09. The money that's been allocated is still being spent.

I think the minister alluded to the fact that many provinces have reached agreements where they are still putting in their forecasts about how much can be spent this fiscal year. At this point we don't have an estimate of the exact amount we've spent this fiscal year. If there were any lapses, if there were commitments made through framework agreements with the provinces, normally the Minister of Finance would look at that and make a determination as to whether that lapse should be re-profiled.

That process does take us into the summer, because the finalization of the 2008-09 estimate takes a period of time. Then as the books close, the government will determine whether that should be re-profiled in the next year. But the commitments are there, and it wouldn't surprise me if a lot of that were re-profiled.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: But given that we're about to come to the end of this fiscal year, we don't know in the next three weeks how many of those commitments will be carried out.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: We have a precise forecast, just like many of the departments. They may be in a better position to know; we don't have that exact. The money was voted on by Parliament to spend on infrastructure, not to spend on training or whatever, which the \$3 billion fund is going to be used for.

The Chair: Ms. Hall Findlay, we are way over time.

Thanks to all of you who were trying to generate good and useful information there.

Madame Bourgeois is next, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, in your introductory remarks, you said you wanted to protect the most vulnerable Canadians. We know that single women, single mothers and senior women belong to this category of Canadians and Quebecers who are extremely vulnerable. Among your priorities, you say that you also want to ensure a dynamic public service. However, you have just given it a cold shower by making pay equity negotiable.

Historically, in the public sector, pay equity has never been part of the collective bargaining process, when it comes to negotiating on this, because it's always the part that gets dropped. I see that your officials are giving you suggestions, but I would ask you to listen to me carefully. The fact that pay equity is set aside during bargaining is important. First, overall wages are negotiated, then benefits; finally, we leave it up to individuals and their unions to take pay equity further.

Minister, you seem like a logical man. What got into you to go over and above the Human Rights Commission and the group that wrote a report on pay equity? I fail to understand your stance.

•(1200)

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Let me first deal with the issue of why we've moved to the Public Service Labour Relations Board. It was a specific recommendation of the Bilson report in 2004 that it move to an independent tribunal, away from the Canadian Human Rights Commission, because the Canadian Human Rights Commission simply did not have the expertise to deal with the issue of wages in that context. So that's a direct recommendation that we've taken from the Bilson report.

The other point you make, that pay equity is never taken into account in the context of collective bargaining, is not correct. In fact, in your own province a plan is developed between the employer and the union on pay equity. Then that plan is brought to the collective bargaining table and worked into the collective agreement. So there is a clear utilization of the pay equity plan in the context of that.

What we are doing here is very similar. We are saying that there are certain principles in pay equity. We don't have the same strictures of the Quebec plan, but they still have to follow those principles of pay equity. So when the collective bargaining takes place, neither the union nor the employer can ignore the principles of pay equity, in the same way that in Quebec they can't ignore the plan that has been developed in accordance with the principles of pay equity.

We have essentially ensured that it is done in a flexible way so that pay equity principles are respected and not bargained away. What is presently happening in the federal sector is that a union can go in, bargain without regard to pay equity, and simply enter into an agreement that puts women at a disadvantage. Obviously that has happened in the past, because subsequently they've had to go to the Canadian Human Rights Commission to say that pay equity wasn't taken into account in the collective agreement, and therefore they now need to have a hearing by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. The Human Rights Tribunal and the court take 15 to 20 years to resolve those issues. That's not right, from a legal point of view. That's not right, from a human rights point of view. That's not good from a collective bargaining point of view, and it's not good for—

•(1205)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Minister...

[*English*]

The Chair: That's five minutes. If you wanted to just wrap up, a very short wrap-up, you could.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: I simply want to tell the minister that the principle of pay equity is non-negotiable. It falls under equal rights, and the principle itself is non negotiable. That is why I'm asking you what you were thinking, when you introduced bargaining. It's not logical to negotiate pay equity when it's a right for both men and women. You are completely out in left field.

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: I agree.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Great. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Toews? We can end the round there?

Hon. Vic Toews: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

All right, Mr. Anders for five minutes.

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This morning, as Mr. McTeague was going on about accountability measures, I had something come back to me from my first term as a member of Parliament, which I'd like to put on the record and have the minister respond to. I was at the time sitting in Room 112-North in Centre Block, and I remember that Eleni Bakopanos, who was a Liberal member for the government at the time, put forward amendments to go ahead and change the way political parties were financed in this country. I remember, Mr. Chair, you were there at the time and you gave her a hairy eyeball, looking at her as though she should be quiet and desist from proceeding forward with her line of questioning and speech.

I didn't know quite what was going on, but then Mr. Boudria, who was at that time the Liberal House leader, and his staffer, Mélanie, who still works for the Liberal Party, proceeded to replace every single Liberal member who sat on the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. Then what happened was the Liberal Party, the government at the time, forced through public financing of political parties. And then subsequently, of course, the Liberal sponsorship scandal all unveiled. It turns out that what it was doing was covering over the tracks of the Liberal Party of Canada with regard to their kickbacks, with regard to money that was siphoned through Chuck Guité, with regard to brown paper envelopes being passed around in Montreal to prop up failing Liberal candidates in the province of Quebec.

Mr. Minister, Mr. McTeague's questions this morning with accountability bring those issues back to my mind. I would like you to speak to the issue with regard to accountability and how what you're doing with regard to the money that's going out to fund the GO Train and various projects to stimulate infrastructure in this country is fundamentally different from the Liberal sponsorship scandal and what that party was up to with regard to slush funds and taxpayer dollars wasted to promote their own partisan interests.

Hon. Vic Toews: I don't want to get into too much detail about that unfortunate chapter in our country's history, but from a procedural point of view, it is important to make a distinction between what happened with the sponsorship issue and what is happening here.

With the sponsorship issue, in fact, the first big problem was that it bypassed the public service completely. It was simply a political fund that was set up. As I recall, and I was on the public accounts committee, when the deputy minister was there, he said that he had nothing to do with that project and that it was Mr. Guité who went directly to the minister. The minister and Mr. Guité decided on the projects, on what was apparently a very political basis.

So the first thing that happened was that the public service itself was completely shut out. There were no criteria. There was no Treasury Board oversight. There was, in fact, not a specific appropriation by Parliament. I'm still not exactly sure where that money actually came from.

We are not going down the road of a lesson that we have all learned. All we are doing here is saying that there has to be a balance between appropriate due diligence and transparency and the rapid delivery of stimulus measures. But you don't dispose of all the safeguards that were in fact put in place by Treasury Board or by the

government or by Parliament itself in order to get that money out the door.

So we have now, in this particular fund, the broad parameters, as I've said, in the economic action plan, which will define which programs will benefit from this money. Treasury Board will still review the expenditures. And as I've said, there is some streamlining of that process in cases where we would simply be duplicating what we are doing in terms of approvals. It's not necessary to go through the same forms if that's already been done.

Departments, I would also say, now have independent internal audit committees that include members external to government. They will also have input into these programs. Our government has taken steps to ensure that only qualified chief financial officers are appointed in departments and agencies. And of course we brought in the Federal Accountability Act, which makes a huge difference in terms of the responsibility that department heads, such as Mr. Wouters and other deputy ministers, have in respect of Parliament and the obligations they owe. So you could not go around the deputy minister, as happened in that unfortunate period in our country's history that we've come to know as the sponsorship scandal.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you. That's over five minutes.

We'll go to Ms. Hall Findlay. You have five minutes.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't know whether my question would be to the minister or to Mr. Wouters or to someone else.

I remain a little confused about the whole question of lapsing. My understanding is that at the end of the fiscal year, which is coming up in three weeks, if money that has been allocated has not actually been spent—and there's a difference between being committed and actually being spent—it either lapses, or if it has been reprofiled, it carries over.

If Mr. Smith can answer, that would be great.

Mr. Alister Smith (Assistant Secretary, Expenditure Management Sector, Treasury Board Secretariat): Thank you.

The normal course of events is that money that is not spent does return to the consolidated revenue fund. There are always, in programs like infrastructure, commitments that are made and indeed spending has not occurred, but a commitment that was made with the province is close to being signed. An argument will be made once the fiscal year is closed to honour those commitments. When one looks at that, a case will be taken to Treasury Board and to the Minister of Finance to see whether the money can be reprofiled to one of those commitments going forward. So reprofiling is permitted.

The trouble is, it occurs typically very late in the year in this case. One doesn't know what the fiscal year brings until as late as September. Then we do the due diligence before we approve a reprofiling, and it may not occur until supplementary estimates B, which will be in December. So it's not as if it's a rollover of funds into the new fiscal year early on.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: So the answer is that there may be money that was allocated for infrastructure under the Building Canada fund. So it would only relate to a commitment, or a hint of a commitment that was made before the end of the fiscal year. Is that right? It's a bit loosey-goosey here. We have three weeks before the end of the fiscal year, so I'm really trying to pin down what will happen with all of that money, with the majority of the Building Canada fund that has been allocated. I'm not talking about the gas tax fund or the GST rebate, but specifically the Building Canada fund. The majority of that money, as far as we know, has not been spent. Is it that if there is a semblance of a commitment made some time in the next three weeks, or a commitment signed some time in the next three weeks, that this would be the subject of possible reprofiling?

● (1215)

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Mr. Chair, I think commitments are simply one aspect that we looked at. The government can decide on a program that has lapsed to reprofile that funding because the government says, look, we still think this is a priority for us as a government and we don't want to reduce overall spending on this program, even though we may not have spent that amount that was allocated in 2008-09.

So commitment is one factor, but another factor is simply the government saying we want to continue to have the same budget for that program, but since we didn't spend it last year, we will want to reprofile it so we can spend it in future years.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: That decision to reprofile can actually come well after the end of the fiscal year in which it normally would have lapsed?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: It normally does come well after the end of the fiscal year.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: A specific question.... What's the expected actual surplus of the 2009 budget? Is it about a half a billion dollars?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Sorry, the federal budget?

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Yes, it's a slightly different question. I'm just pointing to the concern that we have raised a number of times on the lack of spending. The significant number of billions of dollars it had promised and announced under the Building Canada fund that have not been spent and will not have been spent by the end of this fiscal year significantly helped this government avoid a deficit as of the end of this fiscal year.

Mr. Alister Smith: We don't have a specific number, again, for the Building Canada fund. There is accelerated activity and we'll have to see what the year-end brings. But that is one program. It is not sufficient, if you wish, to ensure a surplus at the end of this particular fiscal year, if that's the question.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Except that we're talking about billions of dollars that have not been spent, which, I will note, have in fact been announced, even if formally they haven't been committed. There have been announcements made; money has not flowed. There is a significant concern that on a number of those projects, a number of those announcements, or a number of those opportunities, the money simply was not spent. It was held back, noting that the Building Canada fund does involve ministerial discretion. A significant amount of money was not spent. Our

concern was that despite the economic need, despite the deterioration of our economy, it was not spent in time for the end of this fiscal year because this government wanted to avoid a deficit.

Hon. Vic Toews: Let me just make a few comments.

First of all, the money doesn't flow to any particular project until the Government of Canada is invoiced for it. That is the process.

Now, should there be changes to that process? That's a good question. But the fact is that if we, as the Government of Canada, jointly make an announcement with the municipality and the provincial government, then the municipality goes out and gets the quotes from the tendering process. Then the shovels are put into the ground, and then when the invoices are received by the federal government, we pay. We don't pay before the work is done.

For example, we made certain announcements, I believe, in the Toronto area, in 2008, where not one dime has been spent by the proponents of the project. It's not our project. The proponents haven't spent a dime. Money cannot legally flow. So if you're suggesting that we flow money before it's legally permissible to do so, that's not going to happen.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: No, of course I'm not suggesting that.

Hon. Vic Toews: But that's what you're saying.

The Chair: Ms. Hall Findlay—and I'm asking all members—please avoid interrupting.

Mr. Toews, I'll let you finish your answer. We're over the five minutes.

Hon. Vic Toews: Unless there's an agreement to the contrary, the money cannot, in fact, flow until we've received an invoice for that money. This has nothing to do with the Government of Canada withholding dollars. It's a question of the proponents not invoicing the Government of Canada or commencing these projects, and that is an issue.

Now, the member from the Bloc did point out that there are some federal projects that should be moved along because there is in fact no other consent required, and that's a good point.

● (1220)

The Chair: Good.

I have to cut you off. We're at eight minutes. The rest of the colleagues here will be jaw-droppingly upset with me if we don't go to the next round.

Mr. Warkentin, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. President, for being here before our committee this morning. We do appreciate your testimony and your work. I know that you're working overtime to ensure that the budget and the dollars that do need to flow do flow in due course.

It's interesting that the Liberals have engaged in one of the most severe second-blow types of arguments that I've ever heard. It was probably even more clearly articulated in the last statements by the Liberals, in which they changed their questioning from asking why you are going to expedite all of this money, this \$3 billion, to at the same time asking why you aren't pushing this other money out faster.

I do not envy you, in terms of your responsibilities and your desire to make the opposition parties happy during this time as well.

Clearly you have worked very hard to try to explain to the opposition members exactly what this \$3 billion will be spent on, but I think it is very important that the average person out there clearly understand that the \$3 billion being brought forward in vote 35... Maybe I should put this in the form of a question. Is there a single cent of that \$3 billion that will be able to be spent on anything that is not outlined within the parameters of the budget, which the Liberal members have already voted in favour of?

Hon. Vic Toews: No. Thank you for the question.

In terms of working overtime, I must compliment the staff and the public servants. They have done an incredible job in moving this ahead. I know it's difficult sometimes to change the way you do business, but Treasury Board specifically and public servants generally have responded well to this particular challenge, and I'm very pleased with their performance.

In respect of your specific question as to whether there are measures outside of what has already been announced, in terms of programs to which this \$3 billion would be applicable, the answer is no. It must be spent in respect of the economic action plan measures outlined in the budget. That's what this money is for.

The purpose—and again, I don't want to repeat myself, at the risk of boring some of you—is to move the money out earlier than ordinarily would be the case. It's not that the rules have changed to allow government simply to create this sort of private fund. The public scrutiny of the expenditure of money and the Auditor General's auditing of specific programs will continue. Parliament will in fact receive regular updates in respect of the implementation of this so that Canadians can be assured that we are dealing with this money in a responsible manner.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I know your department is undertaking due diligence for many requests for funding for projects across the country, projects that don't all fall under the infrastructure program that we call the Building Canada fund. There are projects that are coming in terms of a request for funding for universities and colleges, a request for green infrastructure, and other programs that don't necessarily fall under the parameters of the Building Canada fund.

I certainly understand the Liberals. They keep bringing up possible funds that were not spent from the Building Canada fund from the last budget. But I think it's important that we make it clear and that we understand as committee members if there is a single cent that would be able to be spent for projects that were outlined in the budget, such as the initiatives regarding colleges and universities, green infrastructure, a number of other things. Could we pull money out of the Building Canada fund to fund those things—as I think there seems to be this insinuation—or do we need the \$3 billion so

that we'd be able to advance funds for some of these other things that are outlined in the most recent budget?

• (1225)

Hon. Vic Toews: I think it's very important to understand that the two funds, the Building Canada fund and this particular vote—vote 35—are separate and apart. They're two separate and distinct funds. The first, the Building Canada fund, deals with infrastructure funding. The second is intended to cover a broad range of initiatives outlined in the economic action plan.

As the member knows, you can't simply take money from one fund and then apply it to the other fund. That would be, certainly, inappropriate and perhaps even illegal. So we have to make sure that we are dealing with these two funds in a separate way.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I appreciate that, and I think that it certainly clarifies things for me. I think it would clarify things for Canadians. There is this desire to see the projects and the initiatives that are outlined in the economic action plan move forward in the next number of months. I think it's unfortunate that the Liberal members continue to muddy the waters to try to bring some type of doubt to this initiative.

As you and Mr. Anders have suggested, when the Liberals were in government they engaged in a different type of practice, so maybe they're thinking back to the way in which they operated, and that's what makes them so suspicious.

I appreciate the fact that you are undertaking complete due diligence in all these matters, and I appreciate your work and the civil service's continued work in this matter.

Hon. Vic Toews: Well, thank you.

Perhaps Mr. Wouters can give the members of the committee some indication of the types of initiatives that would benefit from this particular vote 35, as opposed to the Building Canada fund, which deals specifically with the infrastructure.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: I can. I guess we start with the budget initiatives that are not funded through the Budget Implementation Act. As I noted earlier, we're looking at these on a case-by-case basis, or the board is. We've wrapped up the business of the board to do that. It's essentially looking at all of those programs that were announced in the budget. There are many programs in HRSDC, such as the apprenticeship completion grant, the older worker program, Canada summer jobs program, aboriginal skills employment program, and the list goes on and on. Again, we will decide on a case-by-case basis whether that program has advanced far enough and if the terms and conditions are clear enough that the board can make the decision not only on approving the program particulars, but as well to say that they're ready to move April 1, so we'll provide that bridge funding through vote 35 until such time as supplementary estimates are passed. That's the process under way at the board now.

Federal infrastructure is being looked at, as well, and we talked about small craft harbours. We also have the president responsible for looking at federal labs; there's about \$250 million allocated to federal labs. There are many of these programs that could be funded from vote 35, and that, as I said, we are looking at on a case-by-case basis between now and about April 2, when we'll need to sign off and move into supplementary estimates.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I appreciate that.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Roy, for five minutes.

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): I have a point of order here, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Brown.

Mr. Patrick Brown: I know that the minister was booked until 12. Now we've gone beyond that. I suspect he has additional meetings.

Have we asked the minister if he is available to continue beyond what was originally scheduled?

The Chair: His staff has approached me and indicated that at some point the minister may have to leave. I said if that's the case, then when the time comes, the time comes. The officials, I presume, will stay.

We're delighted to have Mr. Toews here. As colleagues know, the main estimates issue, on which Mr. Toews is appearing today, is the big enchilada of ministerial accountability. While we're very appreciative of the minister, his appearance here is pretty much *de rigueur*. We all realize that ministers do have busy days, but....

If you do have to withdraw from the meeting, Mr. Toews, you can come back at another date, possibly, before we report back all of the other votes in the main estimates in June.

• (1230)

Hon. Vic Toews: I am half an hour over what I'd indicated I would be here for. If the committee determines that it's necessary for me to reappear, we will certainly take a look at that request and comply.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Your officials will be remaining, I assume.

Hon. Vic Toews: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll continue with the meeting. Thank you for being with us today.

I'll go to Monsieur Roy, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, just one last comment, before you leave. You mentioned \$200 million in response to my question earlier on small craft harbours. That is incorrect. You added an amount, but this includes the annual budget of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which is approximately \$92 million. This means that this \$200 million is not new money. I will come back to this.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: I think that Mr. Wouters understands.

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews: Mr. Wouters is nodding yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: I will come back to this, because \$200 million was not added. When I say that the needs are approximately \$500 million, I think priority should have been given to federal infrastructure.

Do you have an assessment of all the federal government's infrastructure problems, whether in the Department of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans or in other departments? Does Treasury Board have an evaluation of this type? How much would have to be invested to repair and renovate the federal government's infrastructure? In my opinion, this would have been much easier to do, and it would have created jobs in all parts of the country.

I went to British Columbia, Newfoundland and the Maritimes, and the infrastructure situation is a disaster. There have been problems with infrastructure for years. There has been no maintenance work done. For years, no money was spent, and now we are facing some very serious problems.

Let me give you the example of two wharves in my riding, where barricades have been erected so that people will not use them. However, fishers are continuing to use the wharves. The department has erected barricades, because the wharves are dangerous, but there is nothing to prevent people from using them anyways. There would have to be a police officer at each of these facilities. You tell me that you will be injecting \$500 million. That is nowhere near enough. The same goes for infrastructure belonging to the Department of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. I fail to understand the federal government's attitude in not maintaining its own infrastructure.

[*English*]

Mr. Alister Smith: Perhaps I could start by giving an indication of the scale of infrastructure spending that's already committed.

As you know, with the Building Canada fund we're talking about \$33 billion over seven years. Over and above that, with this large stimulus plan—it's not entirely infrastructure, but it's a very substantial plan—it will be two years of nearly \$40 billion in—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: I apologize for interrupting, Mr. Smith, but you are talking about the size of the investment in infrastructure. Personally, I'm talking about the federal government's own infrastructure, not the infrastructure that belongs to municipalities or others. What I want to know is whether you have an idea of how much it would cost to repair the infrastructure owned by the federal government.

[*English*]

Mr. Wayne Wouters: I think when it comes to the overall state of affairs for infrastructure, each department comes up with its own estimate. We don't have a comprehensive assessment of that; each department does.

As part of this action plan you'll see a lot of proposals coming forward based on what the department felt it needed. So in the case you've got initiatives in the action plan to deal with small craft harbours, that \$200 million is incremental to the department's budget. You've got money allocated for federal bridges, for federal buildings.

So a significant number of initiatives deal with federal infrastructure in this economic statement that we probably haven't funded at the level needed in the past, but I think this is a huge step forward to deal with some of those major rust-out problems we have across the federal infrastructure.

• (1235)

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Yves Roy: I think that is a minor change at Fisheries and Oceans Canada. I can say that, because the need is for some \$500 million, and that is a minimum. That would simply improve the infrastructure, not repair it properly. That would just make the infrastructure safe.

I do not understand why Treasury Board has no idea where we are headed with respect to federal government infrastructure, after consulting with all the departments. In my region, the image of the federal government is reflected in wharves that are full of holes, rail lines in poor repair, airports that do not work and a host of other similar things. I apologize, but I simply cannot get over the federal government's attitude regarding its own infrastructure. It is beyond understanding.

[English]

The Chair: Did you want to add something, Mr. Wouters?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Mr. Chair, I didn't think there was a question there. I think there was a statement by the honourable member.

The Chair: It was an exasperation of some sort, yes. But that's fine, the point's been made.

Mr. Martin, for five minutes.

Mr. Pat Martin: Thank you.

We asked the minister earlier today and then we asked John Baird, the minister for infrastructure, over and over again for a list of what the projects are. I know my colleagues with the Liberals expressed a disbelief that if you're going to roll this money out 21 days from now, surely you know what the list is. But now we learned on CBC Newsworld just a couple of minutes ago that after question period today a website will be going up and a list of all the stimulus projects will be posted. Is this true? Do you know anything about this? What will be on this list that's going to be posted at 3:15 today?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: I'm aware they were looking at setting up a website. I wasn't aware the website is being set up today.

There are always projects that have been planned for and are ready for announcement. But of course with an additional \$23 billion in stimulus there are many other areas of spending and many other projects that now we have to work very hard over the weeks and months ahead to identify and define and ensure they can move forward.

So I can't comment on what will be on this website, because I'm not aware of the current status.

Mr. Pat Martin: We've asked over and over again to show us such a list, and we were told no such list exists, we can't possibly do it. This is the parliamentary committee the minister answers to, and which you answer to. You don't answer to CBC. You don't answer to Rosemary Barton with Newsworld. Why should they know about this before we do when we've asked those specific questions of successive ministers and successive bureaucrats?

It chokes me to find out on my BlackBerry that such a list not only exists, it's going to be posted at 3:15 today. Somebody's in contempt of this committee if they've told us repeatedly no such information exists. We'll find out at 3:15, I guess.

The other thing I'd like more detailed information on is we've been told in a roundabout way that the Auditor General has been consulted on this vote 35, and we've been led to believe that she's fine with it. I don't dispute that the Auditor General was consulted, but what specifically did the Auditor General say? Did the Auditor General have any reservations or concerns about this vote? They have voiced concerns about five votes since 1968.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Again, my understanding is that the Auditor General has said she's been made aware of vote 35. At this time, I don't think she has declared her views about it.

In fact, I think she appeared before the public accounts committee, where she said at the time that she wasn't aware of the details around vote 35 except that the government was setting it up. You would have to ask the Auditor General that specific question on exactly what her views are on vote 35.

Mr. Pat Martin: Mr. Wouters, both the Prime Minister and the President of the Treasury Board in their answers in question period led the public to believe that the Auditor General is right on board with this program. If that's less than true, we need to know that, because the public has a lot of faith in the Office of the Auditor General. We shouldn't be bandying around her good housekeeping seal of approval if no such approval has been given.

• (1240)

Mr. Wayne Wouters: I think what the minister said today was that he and the Minister of Finance consulted with the Auditor General on the economic stimulus package and the measures that we were going to take to speed up the process.

I was at that meeting. We went through, with the Auditor General, how we were speeding up the policy and Treasury Board process, what authorities we were looking at, because of course Treasury Board has certain authorities and departments have certain authorities and giving the departments a little more leeway on those authorities allows them to move somewhat more quickly, and, at the same time, the vote 35 and the \$3 billion and what it was being used for.

Mr. Pat Martin: You were at that meeting, sir?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Yes, I was.

Mr. Pat Martin: Did the Auditor General raise questions regarding the fast-tracking or the possible reduction of oversight, scrutiny, and due diligence associated with this proposal?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: No. This was to make her aware of the various measures that we were taking. She listened. That was the purpose of the meeting.

Mr. Pat Martin: Then it would be wrong to imply, directly or indirectly, that she has approved of this process and that she doesn't have the same reservations, although we should be clear, and the public should know, that the Auditor General's job is to review the spending after the fact to see if there was good value for the taxpayer.

It's really our job as the government operations and estimates committee to review the proposed spending and to make sure that the appropriate checks and balances are in place. If we keep coming back to that as a line of questioning, that's exactly what our job is.

I come from the province of Manitoba, where the estimates process goes on all through the night, where the ministers will stay for 12 hours at a time and be grilled line by line on their proposed spending, not spending after the fact. I've always found that ours was a little light in our process.

The Chair: That's time.

Mr. Wouters appears to agree with you on that, Mr. Martin.

Mr. Brown, for five minutes.

Mr. Patrick Brown: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate the fact that we've been able to delve into this today. I know that in my riding there is certainly a lot of concern that we get this funding out quickly. People don't want to see Ottawa dither-dither on this and wait and wait to get money out the doors to support projects that are needed to stimulate our economy. That's why I think there's a lot of support in this country for the economic stimulus plan.

I find it bewildering that on the one hand we hear the opposition saying to get the funds out the door more quickly while on the other hand they're providing criticism when we're doing just that. I thought it would be helpful to highlight some of the accountability mechanisms in this so that we don't put the opposition in this hypocritical role having to attack two different approaches.

First, maybe you could provide to the committee some assurances on the accountability measures that exist on how these funds will be dispensed and at what point there will be an opportunity, through estimates or other mechanisms, for review by Parliament and committees.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: As a first step, every initiative outlined in the budget requires either policy approval through the cabinet system, or some of them, as the minister noted, could be extensions or top-ups to existing programming, which don't require additional policy approval and would come directly to the board. So on that first step, we've been working very hard with our colleagues in PCO to ensure that the process for policy approval is as swift as possible. That work has largely been done now. At the same time, though, every single item in the budget that has funding associated with it requires Treasury Board approval.

We are not changing our approach here vis-à-vis our own due diligence of the Treasury Board Secretariat, my staff, in assessing every one of those programs. We are looking at every one. Of course, as the minister noted, extensions or top-ups already have

clear terms and conditions, so that's less of an issue. It's in a new programming area that we work very closely with our colleagues in the departments to ensure, as a new program comes forward, that the terms and conditions are clear, that the oversight is there, that departments have the appropriate management systems in place. That work is being done, and it means my people are working extraordinarily hard. They're not taking too many days off these days, because we want to apply that same rigour on the approval process and the advice we provide the board, as we always have. We feel we're able to do that, we're able to accomplish the task.

At the same time, though, you have to recognize that at the end of the day it is the departments that are responsible for the spending once the board approves, and they have to ensure that they have their own oversight mechanisms in place to manage spending on a day-to-day basis.

The minister noted that as deputy ministers we are now designated as accounting officers, which gives us a responsibility to ensure that those dollars are being spent prudently. I think it is fair to say that if you look over the last two to three years you'll see there's been a lot of work done through the Comptroller General of Canada to improve overall financial management controls. A lot of work has been done by the board in working with departments in improving the overall management regime.

So for me, yes, it is a significant change in the spending pattern of the Government of Canada, but I do feel, as a personal view, that with the work we're doing at the board, plus the department's overall capacity, we are in a good position to have this funding move forward as expeditiously as everybody wants it to be.

• (1245)

Mr. Patrick Brown: At our last meeting, Minister John Baird was asked a question about being able to write a blank cheque. His response was, "I couldn't even if I wanted to. All the Treasury Board rules and guidelines would not allow that, even if I wanted to, which I don't."

Can you expand upon what the minister meant by saying that Treasury Board rules and guidelines would not allow a blank cheque to be written? That's one of the myths that's being pushed out there in the media, that there's this blank cheque, which the minister suggests is not possible under the Treasury Board rules. How do those rules prohibit that?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Treasury Board is the management board for the Government of Canada. It sets out what we call policies, directives, and standards. That's the set of rules, if you will, with which departments must comply to spend, to procure, to contract, to purchase IT. Whatever it is, there are those various policies in place. Therefore departments have to comply with those, and they have to ensure they follow good financial management practices. Also, most departments are constrained in their authorities as to how much they can spend. If the project is over a certain size, then they have to come to the board to seek approval for that project. In seeking that approval from the board, the board will ensure that they do have appropriate oversight mechanisms in place to spend the money.

That's how our system works. There are checks and balances, both at the departmental level and at the board, when it comes to spending.

Mr. Patrick Brown: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brown.

Mr. McTeague, for five minutes.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Chair, I'll be splitting my time with Ms. Martha Hall Findlay.

Mr. Wouters, very quickly, if I could, sir, I'm impressed with what you said about this being a significant difference from the past. You've made accommodations. I'm wondering, to look a little further ahead, assuming we're not going to get an idea specifically of what programs are going to be funded under this \$3 billion vote 35, if you would see that there might be precedent of any type in allowing or establishing a routine response by the Treasury Board Secretariat, you in particular, to report shortly after the funding allocations or decisions have been made to this committee or to Parliament. Is this possible? Is this something that would go hand in hand with the unusual times in which you have had to make enormous changes, for which the minister has rightly complimented you?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: I think the government has declared how they will report on this, which is they're going to report quarterly, report through the estimates process, so we basically will follow the direction that's provided by the government in following up. I'm quite prepared, once that report has been issued, to come here before this committee and discuss any of the elements in which that \$3 billion funding has been allocated to any of those programs.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Perhaps you could discuss with your other colleagues or anyone who would want a chance at this that there might be an opportunity to communicate these funding decisions in terms of the precedents. Would you see any difficulty with doing that, among the changes that you've undertaken within the department?

• (1250)

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Could you repeat the question?

Hon. Dan McTeague: What problems would it present to you in the Treasury Board Secretariat to communicate funding decisions to Parliament or to this committee? Do you envisage any obstacles to doing that? And if not—

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Again, it's the government that makes the decision on how they want to report to Parliament and to Canadians. I think the government has declared in terms of the vote 35 how they will do that, which is they will report through their quarterly reporting, and of course the first report then would be in June, because that is the second report that's required.

Hon. Dan McTeague: That's existing.

Sorry, I didn't want to interrupt, but I want to give this to Ms. Hall Findlay.

We have that already. I'm just wondering if we might take the extra step. The government could consider the extra step of reporting after a funding decision has been made or allotted. It could be done on a weekly basis.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Again, Mr. Chair, I think the government has made its decision on how it's going to report. And what I've said was that at any time following the issue of that report we'd be prepared to come and talk about how the funding is being allocated.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Hall Findlay.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate, Mr. Wouters, your comments as well. None of these questions, of course, has to do with any comment on your ability and the ability of all of the people working in the civil service. We appreciate and we understand that an awful lot of work has been put in. I also want to stress that we, as Liberals, understand the need for speed and understand the effort going on here. You can understand that we also, as parliamentarians, have an obligation to make sure that we look after the accountability on behalf of Canadian taxpayers.

I do want to stress that there is no confusion on our part whatsoever on the difference between the Building Canada fund and the \$3 billion as part of Budget 2009. Our point only is that in the understanding of the need for speed—and we do want to support that, provided we have sufficient accountability—it seems just a bit inconsistent with the approach of the government in not having spent earlier money that was allocated. But, to be clear, we understand completely. There's no confusion on our part on the fundamental difference between those two baskets of money.

I have a quick question on the \$3 billion. The provision is to have the \$3 billion allocated over the course of the three months, not spent, right?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Allocated.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Allocated.

So there's no specific requirement on when that ultimately would be spent, and it is a question of as long as it is allocated within those three months then it stays?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: The expectation is that a large share of that will be spent between April 1 and June. That's why we've said that it is a bridge funding mechanism. However, you can never predict in any one program area that what you forecast in April will actually always be done by the end of June. Some of that money actually can slip into future months, but the discipline in the system is to ensure that when we allocate we will allocate only between April and June. As I said, the intent is largely to provide that bridge funding, but some funding can go beyond the end of June.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Understood. Thanks for the clarification.

The Chair: Thank you.

I had a couple of questions. I have one comment and another comment leading to a question.

The first thing is with respect to these lists. I've noted that in the budget documents there are lots of lists. I'll just refer to the English version, on page 139, where there is a list of 14 infrastructure projects. A couple of pages later, on page 143 in the English version, there are some 13 projects, all of them major, big-spending projects. So I can only assume that the lists mentioned by Mr. Martin and other colleagues around the table have something to do with those lists. Already we have some 27 items. Perhaps, if there is a list going up on a website today, it will be a consolidation of those lists, with a refreshment of some sort.

The point I want to get to is that Parliament's job here is to scrutinize public spending. That is our job. The measure here, vote 35, the \$3 billion vote, is an extraordinary measure. So it is not unnatural for parliamentarians—some of them, all of them—to want to probe or to perhaps even propose extraordinary scrutiny of the extraordinary spending measure. It's a large amount of money, and the speed attached to the spending and approval has already been acknowledged to be faster than normal. I know that Treasury Board won't want to make any mistakes.

Projects are approved. Somebody somewhere—the top person—has given the green light. Then you have the issue of when the money is spent. In this case, and in almost all cases, as you've explained, the money is not going to go out until work is done, which will follow that decision by months. In some cases it will be by many months. I don't know who picks up the bridge financing on this, but somebody does.

Lastly, you have the announcement, and we all love announcements in this place. I have a sense that Parliament accepts that the decision to approve a process or a project will take place behind closed doors, as it normally does, in a government office somewhere. All the papers are in and all the boxes have been checked off, and someone signs it. Maybe it's you, Mr. Wouters, or the minister, or somebody else. Somebody says that it's done. The approval's done. Then you contact the counterparties. Then there's an announcement. Somebody is going to want to make an announcement.

Why is it that Parliament can't be informed at that point about extraordinary spending? Why do we have to wait six months?

●(1255)

Mr. Wayne Wouters: There seems to be some confusion here about projects versus programs.

The Chair: That's true.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: First and foremost, in order to fund a project, you need to have the program approved. The role of the board, first and foremost, following this economic statement, is to ensure that all the appropriate programming is approved. That's what we're doing now, and that's largely what the \$3 billion vote will be used for. We will look and say that for this program they have the resources in place, the personnel in place, and the program designed, and they're ready to go April 1. Therefore, we will recommend to the board, the secretariat, that of that \$3 billion, x amount can be used now to bridge-fund, because they're ready to go. Another program may not go until the middle of April, because they don't quite have everything in place to get the program off the ground.

The primary role of the board is to approve the various programs. Projects, then, will be determined depending on the authority each

department has to decide which projects under that program will be approved. Now, some of them may be large enough that they have to come back to the board and get project approval. The role of the Treasury Board is very much one of approving the programs. Then it goes back to the line ministers and the departments for approval of the projects.

So when I hear that people are looking for a list.... We're always talking about the programs we're going to fund with the \$3 billion, not the projects.

The Chair: I just think there's been an appetite expressed from some members, and remember this is a committee that scrutinizes all of this spending. It seemed rather dumb for Parliament to be informed of the spending out of the \$3 billion several months after it's already been publicly announced. To me there's a misfit there. Isn't there some mechanism in relation to spending envelopes out of the \$3 billion envelope, so that Parliament could be informed forthwith when those decisions are taken?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: A ceiling was in effect at the time. I don't think we could do it, even if we wanted to.

The Chair: I realize you wouldn't do that normally, but then you wouldn't take \$3 billion normally either. So that's my question.

Mr. Alister Smith: I can't really add too much to what Mr. Wouters said. The projects really are at the departmental level. At this stage we're dealing with the rather large agenda that's in this budget—all the various programs—especially the new programs that require more effort. We can't really get in front of decisions on projects and relay that information at this stage.

●(1300)

The Chair: I'm asking you after, not in front. It comes down to one person and the decision is made. In relation to money out of the \$3 billion envelope, would it not be possible to construct a notification mechanism that is tighter than the existing one that would see this published something like six months or nine months from now? Or the mechanism proposed by the leader of the official opposition, where you get these quarterly reports, which isn't too bad, but there's a lag time there. I'm just asking if there couldn't be a mechanism tighter than that.

Mr. Alister Smith: As you mentioned, we will certainly be reporting the allocations from this \$3 billion vote in supplementary estimates along the way. There will be reports of these allocations as well in each quarterly report in June, September, and December.

The Chair: Okay, I thank you for that.

Are there any other colleagues who wish to ask a question?

Mr. Warkentin.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: I think it's important. I'm reading through press reports that have come out during this discussion about vote 35. I would just like to quote something that I've heard quoted from other opposition members, but it was quoted here in a Canadian Press story quoting Mr. Goodale. He's quoting somebody within Treasury Board. At least he says that somebody in Treasury Board used these words: "to fund things that haven't even been thought of yet", and he goes on to say, "which would imply that it's not in the budget". Could we get some clarification on that? There is this quote out there—I've heard it from members opposite—that Treasury Board officials are telling Liberal members of Parliament that vote 35 could be used for anything out there, anything that hasn't been even thought of yet, and it wouldn't simply be limited by the provisions and the programs outlined in this economic action plan.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Mr. Chair, I'm not aware of where that quote comes from. Again, to reiterate what the minister said, vote 35 can only be used to fund initiatives, programs that were announced as part of the economic plan.

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Further on in this article that I am quoting from, again, your assurance of that and the government's assurance of that seems to be the hinge on which Mr. Goodale indicates that his support would be contingent. In this news article he says that with that assurance he would be happy to support vote 35. So we appreciate your clarification on that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Can we wrap up now, colleagues?

I can allow you one minute, Ms. Hall Findlay, if you want to put a quick question. Did you want to make a comment or did you want to get another round?

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: Can I ask you a question?

The Chair: Yes. We don't have time for another round, but if you do have a question, go ahead and put it.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I was advised by the clerk that there was actually a bit of time.

The Chair: Usually he's right, but not always. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I'm figuring the clerk is right.

We heard earlier today, and I'm still waiting for confirmation, about a website going up this afternoon with a list of programs. And I understand the distinction, Mr. Wouters. It will be interesting to see if that in fact happens. Given that we are continually being reassured that any of these allocations will require Treasury Board approval,

your not knowing about the website strikes me as a bit odd. When you said you don't know what they have done, who is "they"?

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Again, this is all speculation—

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: I hate to put you on the spot, because apparently none of us know about it.

Mr. Wayne Wouters: Somebody quoted an article or something that was on Newsworld. I know there has been work on creating a website with our colleagues at PCO. There has been work done in that area, but I don't know the current status of this, so I can't comment on what the honourable member has raised here.

The Chair: Mr. Wouters can speak for Treasury Board, but he can't speak for the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister's Office.

Ms. Martha Hall Findlay: No, it was actually a comment, that Mr. Wouters actually mentioned "they must have been...", and I was just curious who he meant by "they".

The Chair: Sure. It was probably relating to the Prime Minister's agenda, but it's up to Mr. Wouters to clarify.

You don't have to clarify if you can't.

• (1305)

Mr. Wayne Wouters: We all have our own responsibilities. We're rather busy these days worrying about getting the appropriate authorities through. I know there is other work being done in terms of the communications around the plan, ensuring that Canadians are made aware. I'm just not aware of these details here and the status of that.

The Chair: All right. I can allow the witnesses to withdraw.

Thank you very much for coming today. We may see you again sooner or later. Thank you very much for your time.

Mr. McTeague had a point of order.

Hon. Dan McTeague: Mr. Chair, it is to help all committee members. I have not received the presentation of our Treasury Board president. I understand that it was only made available in one language. I would ask that you ensure that witnesses who come before the committee provide that in both official languages, especially if you are a minister of the crown.

The Chair: I want to assure members that I have made the point with the minister and his staff this afternoon on that point.

Thank you.

The committee is adjourned.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

Publié en conformité de l'autorité du Président de la Chambre des communes

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