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**Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills
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Chair

Ms. Candice Hoepfner

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (0850)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. I would like to call to order meeting number 25 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

It's very good to see all of you here and to reconvene for this session.

I'd like to begin by welcoming and thanking our clerk and our analyst for being here. We have a new analyst with us, Sandra Gruescu.

Chantal is still with us via conference call, so she's listening right now.

[Translation]

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Good morning, Chantal.

[English]

The Chair: Bonjour, Chantal.

If we have questions, we are fortunate we still have Chantal with us to help us through some of the processes.

We are going to begin our meeting today with committee business and motions that we have before us. Following that, because we do have a government bill to look at, we invited the officials to come to answer questions. Once we decide how we're proceeding and what we'll be going forward with, we'll know what our future meetings will look like.

We will begin this morning with two motions that have been given, and I will ask Mr. Savage if he wants to move the first motion he has brought forward.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

We're going to have a discussion in a bit about the order of the rest of the committee business, but I guess we'll do this first.

The Chair: I thought we should probably deal with the motions first because of the context of committee business.

Mr. Michael Savage: Okay. The first one is dated September 21.

Shall I read the motion, Chair?

The Chair: Yes, please do.

Mr. Michael Savage: In light of the Conservative government's decision to cancel the mandatory long-form census, a decision opposed by hundreds of organizations, including anti-poverty advocates and disability groups, organizations that value and respect quality data and evidence, I move that the HUMA committee study the impact of cancelling the long-form census, particularly as it relates to planning and tracking of vital social trends related to economic security, labour markets, and social program development for those Canadians living in and on the cusp of living in poverty, and that this committee report back to the House its conclusions and findings.

Chair, this is somewhat self-evident. When it was announced that the long-form census was going to be changed and would no longer be a mandatory census, among the groups that were most concerned—frightened, really—are those who deal with people who need help the most, who rely on this kind of information to provide data so that social trends can be determined so that we, as parliamentarians, can then propose solutions to help them.

Disability groups are very concerned about this. This follows on the heels of cancelling the PAL survey, the participation active living survey, and the Canadian Council on Learning no longer being funded, which did a lot of work to ensure there were studies on how low-income Canadians, including people with disabilities and aboriginal Canadians, would be affected by not having access to post-secondary education.

This is a very important issue for the disability community and for social advocacy groups. I think it would probably be as relevant for this committee as any committee—more so than just about every other committee—to have a look at the impact of this decision on the people we're here to represent.

The Chair: Is there any other discussion?

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Madam Chair, as you know, we have a number of studies before this committee that are fairly significant, and one that we haven't yet finished. There are at least three or more other studies in the queue, including some government bills and other private members' bills. This is adding to it.

This issue originates from industry; it has been looked at in that committee. They are seized of it. They have called witnesses on it. That's the minister who is in charge. They are just as able to study that issue as we are here. They've already embarked upon that.

We're interjecting ourselves into that issue. It seems to me that this motion would be better stayed pending resolving a number of other matters before this committee, and that we leave it to the industry committee to deal with in the course of time as they see fit.

I know this has perhaps been more of a political issue than not, and it's maybe an opportunity for some members to make some political hay out of it, but there is already a committee that has looked at this issue, and it will continue to look at it.

Obviously we will be opposing this motion because I think it's somewhat opportunistic. Given everything else we have before this committee, it can be dealt with better elsewhere, particularly when it's already been started.

Thank you.

The Chair: I'll just comment for the record so we know the context. We obviously have Bill C-31, which is a government bill that we need to look at. There is also Bill C-343, a private member's bill. I believe our deadline for when that has to be reported back to the House is November 5, so just keep that in mind, in context.

Mr. Savage, before we go to the other comments, were you thinking you wanted to look at this once all the other things were finished? What was your timeline?

Mr. Michael Savage: There is a timeline, because if the decision on the long-form census is going to be reversed it has to be done fairly quickly.

There's no reason why this can't be dealt with at this committee. The industry committee could look at the aspects of the cancellation of the mandatory long-form census in the ways that affect them. Bank of Canada Governor Mark Carney has indicated great concerns.

I am specifically interested in how this hurts low-income Canadians. That is the mandate, the responsibility, and the obligation of this committee, and that is why we should have a look at it.

I don't have a timeline. I'm open to discussion by the committee, but if we could schedule a couple of meetings before the end of November, I'd be satisfied with that.

●(0855)

The Chair: Madam Minna.

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

I just want to say a couple of things. I understand Mr. Komarnicki's sensitivity to this, but the reality is it is not a political issue—not for me anyway. I've been in the field of social policy for 35 to 40 years, Mr. Komarnicki, and this is not a political issue. This is very much a personal and sociological issue.

We have the report on poverty, which I think we need to finish before Christmas. I'm prepared to work overtime if we have to. Yes, we have other things, but with all due respect, even the study on disability relies on stable, reliable information from Statistics Canada. Without reliable information we can't even do our studies, so all of the work that HRDC does and we are charged to deal with is affected by not having adequate data and appropriate information if we lose the long-form census.

At the same time that the long-form census was dropped, the department also dropped the study on post-secondary education that they were doing on a regular basis. I forget the correct name of it. An actual study and evaluation survey used to be done to see where post-secondary education was, which kids got in, income situations, what universities were offering, and all kinds of things. All of that has been dropped as well.

So as a department we're losing the ability to do any of our work because we have no data. All of the witnesses who come before us would have access to no data either. We're blindfolding ourselves.

For all of those reasons, this is urgent, and I really believe we need to do it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Madam Chair, I feel that this motion is one of the most relevant to our work in a number of years, particularly in relation to poverty. The arguments raised by our colleague Mr. Komarnicki greatly surprise me because this is anything but a political matter for us. It is fundamentally to do with a basic level of knowledge that we must have about Canadian reality, Quebec reality in our case, and that guides us in the studies that we do.

Mr. Komarnicki says that we have some studies underway. That is true, but, for a good number of them, we have been guided by statistics that are available to us because of past long-form censuses. In addition to which, the decision to abolish the long-form census has been based up to now on arguments that seem to me to be frivolous at best.

According to the Conservatives' first argument, one that we have heard over and over again for weeks, if not months, we have no need to know how many bedrooms a property has. That is a misunderstanding of the way in which the scientists and all the others who work with the responses use them.

For example, if people declare that they are in a family of eight and that their dwelling has two bedrooms, we can see that they are not adequately housed. So data can be cross-referenced, and so on. I will limit myself to that example, since it is a fairly striking one; we do not ask for this information out of curiosity.

When they saw that they were not getting anywhere with the first argument, they came up with a second one, claiming that they were receiving 1,000 complaints per day from people who were upset at the questionnaires. The truth, as CBC found through access to information, was that there were about 30 complaints in three years. You can see that the real reason why they want to abolish the long-form census has no basis in reality.

Now, are there any basic reasons that we may see as justified? We have to look into that, and, up to now, parliamentarians have not been allowed to do so. Madam Chair, the only way to do it is through Mr. Savage's motion.

It is also inappropriate to suggest that the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology can deal with it. That committee does not make the same use of the information as we do, as Mr. Savage says, because of the very nature of our committee.

That is why we are going to support this motion, Madam Chair.

● (0900)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Komarnicki is next, and then Mr. Watson.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: When I hear words like we're going to abolish the long form or we won't have a long form that will have information, I mean, that's just simply not correct. It's not true. The long-form census will continue to exist. The difference is that it will be voluntary, as opposed to mandatory and compelling. I wonder how many members of Parliament had to fill them out themselves, under threat of being fined or having to go to jail, and that's in there.

It's not fair to say that it's being abolished; it's being done in a different way that balances the right. I'm quite surprised that there aren't any defenders of the private interest of personal information, of personal detail, as opposed to government intervention. There is a balance, and this is trying to strike a balance.

What's important is the industry committee is looking at not only the aspect that would relate to poverty or other areas of concern to us; it's looking at the big picture. That's where it should be looked at. It can deal with these issues you're talking about here. We don't need to duplicate that, unless we want to play some political mischief. To say that this isn't part of what's happening is simply not correct.

The fact of the matter is when people answer those questions under compulsion or threat of consequences, the answers aren't necessarily the same. Those who would wish to answer them can answer them. We haven't come so far in our society to have a multi-paged form that obligates people to complete it when they may choose not to.

At the same time, we are dealing with a poverty study that has significance. We're talking about embarking on a study that deals with persons with disabilities and how they may become more active in the labour market. We have things we can do that are constructive, that aren't dependent on whether the census is voluntary or mandatory. There are others who can deal with it.

To suggest somehow that we can't carry on our study because this one is so important and must be dealt with now is simply a bunch of nonsense.

There is a place for it to be studied. It has been studied. It can continue to be studied. We have priorities here that should be looked at. We should look at doing that.

Information that can be obtained from this form, because of the way it's going to be handled, will still be reliable. I know people can speak from their talking points, and many have, to try to make an issue of this. I would suggest this is not the proper place to deal with it. There is a place. It is being dealt with. That's where it should remain.

The Chair: Mr. Watson.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

In listening to Mr. Lessard, I think he was more interested in a study examining the government's decision with respect to the long-form census. As I read the motion, it's on the impact of the government's decision.

Having said that, if we're looking at the impact, or if there's a desire to look at the impact, and Mr. Savage thinks two meetings will do it, I'm not sure why that can't be caught up in Mr. Tony Martin's study on disability, which is already part of the committee's business. It would be an impetus, of course, for the committee to get on with some of the important work that is there. I suggest that might be a good fit for bringing that in as one aspect of a disability study.

Those are some studies we'd like to get on to, I think, as a committee. So that's just my suggestion.

The Chair: Would you consider that, Mr. Savage?

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you for the suggestion.

The Chair: Mr. Vellacott.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

This may have come up earlier—I know it has within the chamber over there a bit as well—but to suggest that because we don't have the mandatory long-form census we're not going to get information required for tracking some of these things, such as economic security, labour markets, and social program development for Canadians living on the cusp of poverty.... In fact, some of the Scandinavian countries for close to a decade have not had a census, because they're able to collate, correlate, and bring together material from the computer age we live in. The members opposite as well as on this side of the table obviously should be aware of this.

It almost seems like a bit of a time warp here. I would suggest and it would seem to me that the modern countries—democracies, if you will—have moved beyond taking a census in the old traditional way, because they have ways of linking or bringing together all the information that is required. But as well, as my colleague says, the long-form census will still be done, just not with the force of the law and the strictures that presently exist.

People should do a little bit of personal reading on this. The industry committee, which has looked at it, would be pretty adequate. If more personal reading needs to be done on it, people could get a pretty good understanding of how Sweden and Norway and some of these other countries—left-leaning countries that have every bit as much, and some would suggest even more, interest in those issues as our country has.... And they get all that information.

There are ways to work with the provinces, I would think, Madam Chair, in terms of correlating information and getting agreements so that we could get all this very adequate information. In fact, it might be a superior method. Somehow we seem to be in a little bit of a time warp and a little bit out of date almost, it occurs to me. I suggest modestly that other advanced countries with modern computer technology and so on use other methods to get the very same information and can bring those to bear in terms of all these areas that Mr. Savage is concerned about—labour market, social program development, economic security, and so on—and they don't lack any of it, as Mr. Lessard seems to imply.

I think that would be good reading for all of us.

• (0905)

The Chair: Unless there's actually anything new that anybody would like to add to this discussion, we have talked about the motion and we could probably vote on it right now.

Mr. Michael Savage: Point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Michael Savage: Are we suggesting, then, that we would vote on this and that it would mean two meetings before the end of November?

The Chair: No. We're going to vote on your motion. Then we'll talk about your second motion. And then we'll decide if we're going to go in camera. We'll discuss future committee business and the timing of it.

Mr. Michael Savage: I'd like an assurance that we would do this, though, before the end of November.

The Chair: That's not in the motion.

The challenge is we have to look at two bills. One is a private member's bill.

Mr. Michael Savage: That's understood, but I'll amend the motion, or I'll accept an amendment to have two meetings before the end of November.

The Chair: Is there consent to amend the motion?

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: All right. We'll vote on—

Mr. Michael Savage: It's my motion. Can I amend the motion?

The Chair: You can't. You need consent, or else you need a new motion. And then we would need notice for the new motion. So in order to amend it—

Mr. Michael Savage: What would happen to this if it passed? Would it go to the subcommittee?

The Chair: I know we'd have the subcommittee. But there seems to be a lot of discussion.... People like to have discussion on what we're doing moving forward.

Again, I would like us to deal with both of these motions, and then we would know in what context...if they both passed. Then we could talk about future business and have that discussion.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

The Chair: Let's pass this or not.

(Motion agreed to) [See *Minutes of Proceedings*]

The Chair: We have Mr. Savage's second motion. Do you want to read it? Do you want me to read it? Do we need to read it? Everyone has had a chance—

Mr. Michael Savage: I don't think we need to read it. I'd rather just speak to it.

The Chair: All right. Can you speak to it, please?

Mr. Michael Savage: The second part of it sort of undertakes what I'm looking at, which is that we undertake a comprehensive review of the student loans program, including an assessment of the blend of repayable and non-repayable assistance.

The issue here is that the Canada student loans program is now at that \$15 billion statutory loan limit. And I think it brings up—

Mr. Jeff Watson: Point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Does he not have to move the motion before discussing it?

The Chair: I think we just agreed.

Mr. Jeff Watson: It hasn't been moved.

The Chair: Actually, yes. I understand. Mr. Savage is moving the motion. Thanks.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Fair enough.

Mr. Michael Savage: This brings up the important issue of post-secondary education in Canada at a very important time in Canadian history. We're entering what could be a sustained period of time in which we could have people without jobs and also jobs without people. Post-secondary education is going to be more important than ever, given our demographics.

If it's the will of the committee, I would accept that we pass this motion. I'm not asking for a definitive date for this right now. I will reserve the opportunity to come back to it as a committee at some point in time and schedule it in. But at this point in time, let's just acknowledge the importance of it by passing it. We can schedule the meetings at a later date. That is my suggestion.

• (0910)

The Chair: All right. Is there any discussion?

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Again, it's another study. We haven't completed the major study, and we have a number of things we need to be doing. The Senate social affairs committee is doing a comprehensive study on post-secondary education. Certainly it would seem that this would fit into that study.

I appreciate that Mr. Savage is indicating that this is not pressing and could go at the back end. I suppose, to that extent, it's understandable. But again, it's something that is receiving active study, and we might want to wait for that to conclude and have a read of it before we proceed with this one.

The Chair: I think that's what Mr. Savage said.

If I understand you correctly, you're not necessarily stating a specific time.

Mr. Michael Savage: No, I'm not. What the Senate does is the Senate's business; what we do is our business.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I appreciate that.

Mr. Michael Savage: Both the Senate and this committee have done simultaneous reports on poverty. I don't think that if one chamber does something the other chamber should not do it.

As I say, I'd like to get it passed. I'd like to get recognition that at some point in time we should have a look at this. It is a hugely important part that is tied into poverty and tied into disability as well. This is a very significant milestone, this \$15-billion statutory loan limit. I think it bears some scrutiny.

The Chair: Is there any other discussion?

All right, we'll vote on the motion.

(Motion agreed to) [See *Minutes of Proceedings*]

The Chair: At this point we are going to discuss future business, so we can stay public or we can go in camera.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I would like to go in camera.

The Chair: You'd like to be in camera. Would everybody like to go in camera?

All right, then we'll suspend for five minutes while we clear the room and go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

• (0910) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1005)

[*Public proceedings resume*]

The Chair: We're ready to begin. We have just over half an hour. Actually, I think these clocks are a little fast, so we have a good half-hour to speak to the officials from the department on Bill C-31.

I welcome Mr. La Salle and Mr. Paquette. Thank you for being here.

I understand that you don't have any opening statements and that you would be prepared just to take questions from the committee. Is that correct?

• (1010)

Mr. Jacques Paquette (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Security and Social Development Branch, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): That's correct. We thought it was the best way to proceed.

The Chair: That's very good. Then we'll begin.

Because we have a shortened time, we'll just have five minutes for questions so that hopefully everybody can get some questions in. Then, at the end of our meeting, if we decide that we still need more time with the officials, would you be willing to come back and answer more questions if we don't have enough time today?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Sure.

The Chair: We may be able to get through them, though.

All right. We will begin with Mr. Savage. Did you want to begin on your side?

Mr. Michael Savage: Oh, I'm sorry. There's no presentation...?

The Chair: There is no presentation. Do you have any questions for the officials?

Mr. Michael Savage: I'll let Madam Minna go first. I'll go second.

The Chair: All right.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for coming today.

I'm just trying to put this bill in a frame in my own mind in terms of the impact and so on. How many people currently incarcerated in the federal penitentiary system would be affected by the bill at this point?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: According to our estimates—and these are estimates—there would be a little fewer than 400 people who are presently incarcerated in federal penitentiaries.

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm sorry—how many?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Fewer than 400, and we're talking about people over 65 years old.

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm just trying to get a sense of the makeup of the population. How many of them would be married, with family or a wife or a spouse that they would be sending money to in order to help financially?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: We don't have that information.

Hon. Maria Minna: I think that would be important, given the fact that if we're going to stop the payment... I'm trying to understand this, because this is important: it's one thing to deal with the incarcerated person, but then there's the family out there as well, and potentially a spouse and what have you. The reason I ask this is that my understanding is that the spouse, if there is one, would be or might be treated as if they were single by the OAS, so that they wouldn't suffer the financial loss should this cheque, this payment, be stopped.

I guess what I'm asking is, how many of these people are sending money to a family member who needs the income elsewhere? I just want to make sure that we don't punish someone else in our attempt to stop something.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: What I can say is that the first thing is that there are two elements for the OAS benefit. The first one is the general OAS. This is a monthly payment that is paid to individuals. In the OAS system, there is no reference to children, for example, if that's one of the questions. The OAS is paid to individuals, so to the wife, for example, or to the husband. It's an amount based on their own purposes; in other words, there is no relationship to the fact that they are or are not a couple.

If they are low-income seniors, you have the guaranteed income supplement. In that case only, there is a reference to the fact that they are single or a couple. In that case only, what would happen with this bill is the fact that the GIS for the incarcerated person would be suspended. Then we would consider the other spouse as a single, because the rate for singles is higher than the individual rate for a couple. That would be to minimize the impact.

I should say at the beginning that the purpose of the bill is that the OAS was put in place to support seniors in dealing with their basic needs. That's one of the supports. The fact that a person is incarcerated...the housing and the food are being provided by the government, so in other words, the bill is to avoid the duplication of these funds. That's the—

Hon. Maria Minna: This is my last question, as I'm sharing with my colleague. When these people leave incarceration and go back into the community, they have no money saved. They have no money for first and last month's rent or even for a room or to buy food or clothes. What happens to them when they leave?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: When they leave incarceration...?

Hon. Maria Minna: When they leave the—

Mr. Jacques Paquette: When they are being released—

Hon. Maria Minna: When they are being released.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: —in other words? The pension or the OAS will be re-established as it was.

Hon. Maria Minna: Yes, but they'll have no money. When they hit the street, they have no money in their pockets to pay rent. They're on the street. What are the chances that they will have to go out and steal or something? They have nothing. Are we making provision for that? That's all I'm saying.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: My assumption is that we're talking about seniors. They are 65. That would probably be similar to someone who has a job who is incarcerated and the revenue from the job is stopped. Then after, the person is released. The issue here is more that we are avoiding paying twice for the same thing. That's basically the purpose of the bill on the benefits of the old age security.

• (1015)

Hon. Maria Minna: I will be sharing my time.

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds. We probably will have a short second round.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

I want to come back to the issue of the provinces, but I'm just going to read from the editorial in this morning's *Winnipeg Free Press*. Like most of us, it's generally supportive of the bill and the fact that people like Clifford Olson, who is cited a lot, obviously shouldn't be entitled to pensions. There are lots of other prisoners who have different circumstances. But what they're speaking about is the 90 days. It says:

Ninety days, however, may be too short a duration to see the move as cost-effective, given the administrative work in processing and the fact that prisoners may lose the house or the apartment if jailed for a couple of months.

I wonder if you can shed light on that issue.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: You are talking about a shorter period of time. I'm going back to the purpose of the bill, which is to avoid paying twice for the same thing. The question is whether we can do it in a manageable fashion. Under 90 days would not be considered cost-effective, because then it basically costs you as much as what you would save.

Mr. Michael Savage: Cost-effectiveness is the question.

The Chair: Thank you, sir. Your time is up.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Lessard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Thank you for being here to shed light on things for us and to answer some questions.

First of all, the bill is simple and clear. The basis for it, just as you said a little earlier, is to avoid paying twice. It says nothing about people's income or the contributions they have paid, for example.

I have two questions. Question 1: can you tell me if you have looked at the effects of an inmate having no income prior to his release from prison on his ability to reintegrate into society afterwards? Have you looked at how someone with no income at all can prepare himself to reintegrate into society when he leaves prison?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: What we have looked at, to an extent, is the precise nature of the program objective. The objective of the old age security program was to provide assistance in meeting immediate basic needs. In this case, the immediate basic needs are mostly housing and food. When people are incarcerated, those basic needs, the housing and food, are met. The old age security program's sole goal is to provide for immediate needs. There are probably other things that can enter the equation. That is why the answer I have to give you is that we are looking after immediate needs. When a person is released, the basic needs are no longer covered by the prison. At that point, the payments that are intended to meet those basic needs start again.

Mr. Yves Lessard: So you have not evaluated the ability of a person to reintegrate into society when that person has no income before he leaves prison. That is how I understand it.

I have another question. We want to look at the possibility of the money no longer given to those people being made available to victims. Of course, with 400 people, the fund will not be huge, but, as a principle, could a fund not be established? Could all the savings not go into a fund designed to support victims who are deprived of their income as the result of a crime committed against them?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I would like to make it clear that the old age security program is a statutory appropriation. In other words, we have the authority to pay the obligations established by the act. So it is not like other programs that have envelopes that are, or are not, spent. It is about an authority and an obligation; payments are made and, if there are fewer obligations, the amount paid is less. That is why the only amendments being made are to the Old Age Security Act. All the questions that you are raising really are separate and distinct issues that have to be discussed elsewhere.

• (1020)

Mr. Yves Lessard: Those issues could be examined by other areas or other departments of government. For example, in Quebec, the Fonds d'aide aux victimes d'actes criminels comes to mind as an agency that could become involved. As soon as the government saves some money, it can use it for something else.

Did you discuss using it for victims when you worked on the bill, even if it is not your responsibility?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Because that is a matter that depends on other forms of authority and because the Old Age Security Act is mainly based on a spending authority required to meet other obligations, that discussion becomes... It is a long discussion that is completely separate from this one. The Old Age Security Act is being amended specifically in order to meet these objectives. The other discussions should be held separately because the tool is different.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Yves Lessard: Just on the—

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Lessard, I'm sorry, your time is up, but we may have a chance for another round.

Mr. Comartin.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Paquette, in response to the question from Ms. Minna, you said your estimate was less than 400. What was the source of that estimate?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: The Correctional Services of Canada.

Mr. Joe Comartin: My figures show that there were in fact 398 as of a month ago; 121 were serving life sentences and 19 of those 121 were multiple murderers. Do you know if those figures are correct?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I heard about the 398, yes.

Mr. Joe Comartin: All right. Do you know about the murderers, as opposed to people who are serving sentences for other purposes?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: No, because what we do here is not about the nature of the sentence but the length of incarceration, which is a different angle.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Let me ask you about that. How did you determine what the length of incarceration would be?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: The first thing is that for the federal system this is automatic for anybody who has over two years.

Mr. Joe Comartin: What I'm asking is how you figured out how long they were going to stay in custody. People are eligible for parole under the correction system in this country.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Right.

Mr. Joe Comartin: How did you figure out how long they were going to stay in custody, whether they were there for a life sentence or for armed robbery that would be less than a life sentence?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I do not make that determination. Basically, what the—

Mr. Joe Comartin: Well, my government has put out the position that this is going to save \$2 million. How did you come to that figure? Without knowing how long people are going to stay in custody of that 398, how did you come to the figure of \$2 million?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: The calculation is based on roughly how many people at any given time will be in jail. It doesn't mean that each individual will necessarily be in jail, as you said, for a certain determined time. But this is an average that is done. These are estimates based on roughly how many people are incarcerated in the

federal system at any given time, and at the moment based on the current numbers. That's basically what it is.

Mr. Joe Comartin: This \$2 million figure is \$2 million a year, is that right?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, \$2 million to \$4 million, depending.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Okay, and that's based on the number of 398?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Right—at any given time; that might vary from time to time.

Mr. Joe Comartin: In terms of the preparation of this bill, it's obvious you spoke to at least Corrections Canada. Did the department consult with anybody else?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: In the federal system we would always consult with the Department of Justice. Because this is a bill, we would have to consult with the Department of Justice.

Mr. Joe Comartin: You say that would be the normal process. Was it in fact done in this case?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Of course.

Mr. Joe Comartin: And who did you deal with at Corrections Canada?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I dealt with my counterpart, the assistant deputy minister there. We dealt with Correctional Services as well as with the Department of Public Safety.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Is the government considering using the principle that's being applied here not being one of punishment but one of simply not having people get double compensation? For people who are in long-term care and covered by provincial plans, is there consideration being given to extending the principle to those people?

• (1025)

Mr. Jacques Paquette: That was not considered at this point. We looked only at incarceration.

Mr. Joe Comartin: So similarly, our veterans who may be in long-term veterans hospitals, you did not consider applying the same principle to them.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: No.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Was there any discussion? Was there a paper prepared on the impact on the universality of our pension programs and the impact this would have on them?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: There would not be an impact on the universality, because people we're talking about here are eligible, but their payments are being suspended while they are incarcerated. When they come back the payments are being reinstated, so they are still eligible then as clients.

Mr. Joe Comartin: Do you know how many of the 400 would be people who would already be receiving OAS when they went into custody?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Because we did not look at individual cases, we don't have that information. The moment we have the information sharing agreement with Correctional Services that is referred to in the bill—if the bill is passed—we will be able to start working on individual cases. That's the case.

The information you're asking about is more related to individuals, and we don't have access to these specific cases at the moment.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Dr. Wong.

Mrs. Alice Wong (Richmond, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think everybody probably understands why this is close to our hearts. I come from the province that actually has been telling its representatives that we cannot allow the previous action that is going on.

I think we all agree that Canadians who work hard, pay their taxes, and play by the rules deserve taxpayer-funded government benefits such as old age security, but definitely it is wrong and obviously unfair that prisoners who break the law should also receive the same entitlements.

To our government public servants here, thank you very much for coming. You have repeated again that prisoners already have their basic needs met at the expense of taxpayers and Canadians should not be paying again by providing them income support through OAS.

These proposed changes would ensure that mass murderers such as Clifford Olson do not receive entitlements while in jail. You all know that he murdered eleven children and altered the lives forever of the victims' families. This is close to our hearts.

Are there any other federal payments extended to criminals while they are in prison, and if so, which ones?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, there are other payments. For example, the employment insurance program seizes payment of benefits to individuals when they are incarcerated. Of course the justification is clear, as people are not available to work. There are also others. An example would be the Income Tax Act, which would suspend the eligibility of individuals for the GST rebate when they are incarcerated. So there are these examples in the federal system, among others, yes.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Thank you very much.

What about the provinces? Are there any provinces or territories in Canada that suspend any payments to incarcerated criminals, and if so, which ones?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, there are. According to our information—and of course we're talking about seniors—the provincial authorities would deal with other categories of age. There are eight provinces and territories that suspend their social assistance when people are incarcerated. They are British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I'd like to share my time with my colleague Ed.

•(1030)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you very much.

I find it remarkable that Mr. Comartin would try to somehow compare people in prison with long-term-care people or veterans. I

think the very important distinction is that they have not committed a crime against others in society.

I'll ask you whether there are any international precedents. You could maybe mention that.

I do want to read from a letter from a constituent of mine, who wrote from Redvers, Saskatchewan, and perhaps summarized it well:

The taxpayers of this country are providing room, board, and medical care for these people, (and that's part of the premise, I take it, behind the bill), who have chosen to disregard the rules of our justice system and the rights of those they have acted against. We should not be providing pensions.

In other words, this is not meant to be a savings account or a way of saving, particularly for those who have committed offences.

Is that the general principle behind this bill? Secondly, is there precedent for this on an international basis?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Yes, other countries have a similar provision in place, including Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. So they're doing the same thing. They are preventing pensions being paid to people who are being incarcerated.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I find it remarkable, and I think Canadians would perhaps find it outrageous and shocking, that someone who would commit a heinous crime and that those who would commit murder, and particularly multiple murders, would, for their lifetime, accumulate a pension. What was the basis for that in the first place, and how is this changing that?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Do you mean why it was still happening?

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Yes.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: I would say that the main challenge was to find a way to avoid any adverse impact on the spouse and especially on allowances. So what we have here in the proposed bill is that there are some measures that are being taken to minimize as much as possible this impact. That's really why this bill can work in these circumstances.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I think we will have time for one more very short round, a three-minute round, and we'll begin with Mr. Savage.

Mr. Michael Savage: Thank you, and thanks again to the witnesses.

The savings, you tell us, will be somewhere between \$2 million and \$4 million a year. Correct?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: At the federal level.

Mr. Michael Savage: It will be possibly up to \$10 million with the provinces on board.

We've called, as some others have, for those savings to go into programs dedicated to victims of crime. Has the government earmarked those savings for victims of crime?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: No, and that's why I was explaining that this is a statutory program, so the way it is managed is very different from another program. So all I have, basically, is an authority to spend to meet the obligations according to that act. So any decision to—

Mr. Michael Savage: I understand the statutory obligation, but the government hasn't indicated that these savings will go to victims of crime.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: That would be up to the ministers to make that decision.

Mr. Michael Savage: I want to just ask you a question about how the process actually works. Proposed section 9.2 of the bill says:

Payment of a pension that is suspended...shall resume in respect of the month in which a pensioner is released but only after they notify the Minister in writing of their release.

So is the process such that if somebody is incarcerated and is impacted by these changes, they will, I assume, automatically lose their pension, but when they come out, they would have to notify the minister in writing. Can you explain that to me?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: There are two things. The first one is that we will have the information-sharing agreements so we will have access to the information, but what is essential for the individual who comes out is to inform the minister. When we say the minister, it's basically through a Service Canada account, for example, to say that not only have they been released, but where they are, where the payment should be made, and so on, because what we want to be able to do is to re-establish the payments to the right person in time and at the right place, basically.

Mr. Michael Savage: But on the front end, it's automatic, I assume. If they're drawing a pension and they're incarcerated for over 90 days—

Mr. Jacques Paquette: That's right, because in that case when you stop the payment, you just stop the payment. When you re-install the payment, you have to know where the payment should be made.

Mr. Michael Savage: And when they come out and they go into a Service Canada office or send a letter saying this is now their address, how long will that take?

• (1035)

Mr. Jacques Paquette: That should be fairly quick. We're talking about weeks, nothing more than that, because they are already in the bank. What we have to do is to make sure that all the information on where the payment should be made and so on is up to date, and then the payment will be processed.

Mr. Michael Savage: I understand that; I have no issue with that. I just want to understand exactly the process. How likely is it that some prisoners will get missed in this process, not when they come out, but having gone into prison? How foolproof a system do we have that this will stop the payments of prisoners who shouldn't be getting pensions?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: That's part of the work that we will have done upfront. The information will have to be given to the people so when we are suspending the payment, people will be informed of how it should be reinstalled and what would be the work they would have to do to make sure they will get their money the moment they are released.

Mr. Michael Savage: Okay, thank you.

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

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I find it remarkable that all of a sudden there is interest in some of this money going to victims, when the issue is to get this bill passed so the victims aren't further victimized.

I have a quote here from Sharon Rosenfeldt, president of Victims of Violence and mother of an Olson victim. She said,

It's great to see that this government is putting victims and taxpayers first ahead of criminals. The suspension of OAS benefit payments to inmates does just that.

David Toner, the president of Families Against Crime and Trauma, said:

We are thrilled that the prime minister and the minister have taken leadership and are putting victims ahead of the entitlements of prisoners. I commend the government for introducing this legislation.

And there's a quote by the Vancouver police chief.

It's just a fundamental kind of thing. Victims have a hard time seeing prisoners get savings accounts, while they have been victimized. It just adds to their injury. That seems to be a common sentiment of the public. If anything, they're urging for this bill to go forward quickly to remedy that injustice.

This bill addresses that, but as you indicated earlier, it makes sure that the spouses or partners of those imprisoned are not hard done by this. Is that correct?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: That is correct. There are some specific clauses in the bill to do that, and in some cases to even adjust upward the allocations under the GIS, for example, to the spouse.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: It's not meant to punish spouses or partners; it's meant to sort of prevent prisoners from receiving additional funds when their basic needs are provided.

A question I had following from that is about those who are released from prison. I don't see where the legislation provides automatic notification to either the department or the minister of their release...without requiring the person released to do so. It seems to me that short-term inmates might not have as easy a facility or understanding about doing that, when the procedure might be easier handled from within. Have you given thought to that?

Mr. Dominique La Salle (Director General, Seniors and Pensions Policy Secretariat, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): The information-sharing agreement will stipulate that information has to be automatically provided to the department on who is freed from incarceration. Then the individual will notify us.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Beaudin.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here, gentlemen.

Since I am from Quebec, I wanted to check if you have already started talks with the Government of Quebec with a view to coming to a reciprocity agreement on this bill.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: No, we have started nothing, first of all because the bill has not been passed, so it would be prejudging the decision of Parliament. But we have informed all provinces that the bill is being studied, that it mentions the need to have information exchange agreements, and that we will commit to discussions as soon as it is passed by Parliament.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Have you checked the position of the Department of Public Safety on this and have you had discussions with its representatives on the major issues that could arise, or are you unable to talk about it at all?

• (1040)

Mr. Jacques Paquette: No, not yet.

Normally, information exchange agreements should be relatively simple. In a way, we are talking about two parameters: a person's identity and the age of 65. We have to ensure that we get that information so that we can do the work required.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: What would happen to former inmates going through halfway houses? Will they be able to receive their benefits?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: The bill deals with incarceration. From the moment that people are no longer in prison per se, and move on to other places, we resume pension payments. As a matter of fact, prisoners in other situations often have costs to meet.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Even if they are housed and fed in a halfway house?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Actually, they have to pay some costs themselves that must be considered.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: In principle, in halfway houses, they are housed and fed, just as they are in prison.

Mr. Jacques Paquette: Realistically, they have activities outside the halfway house, so their situation becomes different from when they were limited by their incarceration.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Just now, one of the things Mr. Savage asked you was how soon after leaving prison would these people get their first benefit payments? You mentioned a delay of several weeks. To give us an idea, are we talking about 2 weeks, or 25? And have you thought about putting mechanisms in place to facilitate the process?

Mr. Jacques Paquette: From the moment people contact a Service Canada office, the staff enters their information into their electronic file. Then they have to wait for the next general old age security cheque run. So the time can vary. It can be a lot shorter if the person is released close to the date on which cheques are issued. Service Canada sends out cheques each month.

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much to the department officials for being here. We apologize that you had to wait a little longer. The government would be next, but we don't have time for another round.

Mr. Joe Comartin: I want them to come back. I have a ton more questions for them.

The Chair: Okay. I think we spoke about that, and you can go ahead and add that to your witness list.

Again, we apologize for the delay. We thank you for being here.

Our meeting is adjourned.

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