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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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• (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Welcome, everybody.

We're going to get started. We're at the indigenous and northern affairs committee of Parliament. We are on the unceded territory of the Algonquin people. We always remind all of us and all Canadians that we're in a process of reconciliation and part of it is understanding Canadians' history in relationships with our first peoples.

Today, we're honoured to have the new minister, Seamus O'Regan. Minister O'Regan, welcome. We have you for 60 minutes. We're anxious to hear from you.

You have 10 minutes to present, and then we'll have a series of questions.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Indigenous Services): Madam Chair, thank you. I am pleased to be here today as you acknowledge the traditional territory of the Algonquin people and to speak with members of this committee in my new capacity as Minister of Indigenous Services.

Joining me is Jean-François Tremblay, Deputy Minister of Indigenous Services Canada, and Paul Thoppil, who is our Chief Finances, Results and Delivery Officer.

Fundamental to our work as a government is our relationship with indigenous people. I recognize the important work this committee is doing to further their priorities across Canada. In particular, I want to thank you for your recent report on long-term care on reserve, and I look forward to responding to your findings.

[Translation]

As Minister of Indigenous Services, my job is to advance work that closes socioeconomic gaps and improves the quality of services for indigenous peoples, in partnership with them, and in a way that promotes self-determination.

[English]

My predecessor, who is now President of the Treasury Board and Minister of Digital Government, identified five interconnected priority areas where our joint work is needed. They are the following: keeping children and families together, quality education, improving health outcomes, reliable infrastructure and economic prosperity. At the centre of each of these priorities are real people: individuals, people, communities.

Much progress has been made in these areas and the work is, of course, ongoing. To that end, Indigenous Services Canada requires immediate funds to continue delivering on our mandate.

[Translation]

That is what the supplementary estimates (B) and the interim estimates are about. Today, I will briefly outline my department's supplementary estimates (B) for 2018-2019 and the interim estimates for 2019-2020 to address the funding requirements of the first quarter of the coming fiscal year. Then, we will be happy to take your questions.

The supplementary estimates (B) for Indigenous Services Canada reflect a net increase of \$273.6 million. This brings the total appropriations for 2018-2019 to \$11.7 billion.

[English]

The largest item requested by these estimates is \$99.8 million for the emergency management assistance program. This is a critical appropriation in the supplementary estimates. In the past year alone, Canada has seen its share of floods, wildfires and severe storms, which have had grave impacts on a number of first nations. In fact, they have displaced more than 10,000 on-reserve residents in Canada.

Thanks to budget 2018 funding, we have been able to better respond, and reimburse communities faster for costs incurred due to emergency incidents. Indeed, this fiscal year, over 99% of evacuated people have been able to go back to their communities. We are working hard to get the others home as soon as we can.

Our government has also made historic investments to accelerate reforms to first nations child and family services. Budget 2016 provided \$635 million over five years as a first step, and budget 2018 committed a further \$1.4 billion in new funding over six years.

It is essential we put the safety and security of indigenous children at the forefront of what we do. There is a pressing need within indigenous communities to raise young people in their culture, in their language and in their communities with their families.

As such, the second item in these estimates is part of these investments to address funding gaps and support efforts to keep children and families together where it is in the best interests of the child. These funds are already at work, Madam Chair.

As you are aware, we put an item on notice this week. I look forward to introducing it in the House shortly. I am limited in what I can say about it until it is formally introduced in the House. What I can say is I look forward to talking with you and listening to each one of you in the very near future.

• (0850)

The next item I wish to bring to the committee's attention is \$64.4 million towards advancing a new fiscal relationship with first nations.

This funding will support communities in developing governance and community-led planning pilot projects. It will also ensure that first nations are no longer required to pay for third party management.

A key element of this new fiscal relationship is a 10-year grant starting on April 1, 2019, for eligible first nations to deliver core services. Interest in this grant has been very high. We are working now with eligible first nations to finalize agreements for the April 1 entry into the grant.

The last item I will touch on in the supplementary estimates (B) is the \$37.5 million in funding for first nations elementary and secondary education programs.

A new codeveloped funding approach for first nations kindergarten to grade 12 education takes effect April 1, 2019. This formula-based approach supports first nations' control of first nations education, and helps to ensure predictable funding that is more directly comparable to what students at provincial schools receive.

More concretely, this funding would mean real change for first nations kids. For example, thanks to budget 2016 funding for education programming, the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne is taking Mohawk immersion learning to the next level. It implemented a new math program in Mohawk, which is aligned with the Ontario math curriculum. This means that children can now learn math in Mohawk in their immersion classrooms.

We will start to see more and more successes like this replicated throughout Canada by way of regional education agreements.

I will now turn to the interim estimates and will highlight some of those items.

[*Translation*]

The department's interim estimates will be approximately \$7 billion. This funding would ensure that Indigenous Services Canada is able to carry out its activities in the first three months of the fiscal year, until the full main estimates are approved in June. Among other things, a timely appropriation of these funds would ensure that First Nations are able to take full advantage of the start of the construction season.

[*English*]

We know that healthy and safe homes are integral to creating healthy and safe communities. We also know, however, that indigenous people are more likely to experience poor housing conditions than the general population. According to Statistics Canada's 2016 census, 18.3% of indigenous people live in crowded dwellings.

With that in mind, we are making progress with the Assembly of First Nations on the codevelopment of a first nations housing and related infrastructure strategy. This will contribute to more sustainable and healthy first nations communities. With the AFN, we are also codeveloping a new operations and maintenance policy framework that will provide greater flexibility to first nations to manage their assets on reserve.

It is also why, among other things, the Government of Canada is working in partnership to address the serious housing needs of Cat Lake First Nation through immediate action and long-term planning.

We know that decades of neglect are challenging to reverse, but we will be working in partnership to achieve results for the people of Cat Lake First Nation and for all indigenous people in Canada.

I joined Cat Lake Chief Matthew Keewaykapow last Thursday to sign an initial framework agreement that means a solid plan moving forward. This agreement includes \$3.5 million to support 15 new housing units, as well as additional funding for demolition, site preparation and shipping of materials; \$2.1 million to repair 21 existing units; \$2 million for the delivery and installation of 10 portable housing units; and expediting the seven new units that are currently under way.

Chief Keewaykapow invited me to join the community, and I have gratefully accepted his invitation.

Madam Chair and committee members, I urge you to support the appropriations requested in these estimates. The funding will enable us to continue to address the day-to-day realities in indigenous communities in a holistic way.

Thank you. *Meegwetch*.

• (0855)

The Chair: Thank you very much. We see progress on many of the files this committee studied. I think all members recognize that.

We're going to start the questioning round with MP Robillard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Minister. Welcome to our committee.

Education is fundamental. The new approach for funding First Nations education from kindergarten to high school on the reserves will go into effect next April 1.

Can you be specific as to how the investment will help in a better design of primary and secondary education programs for First Nations?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Thank you very much, Mr. Robillard.

[English]

Budget 2016 provided \$2.6 billion over five years for education on reserve. We have completed 157 projects thus far, and some are ongoing. Providing sufficient predictable funding for education is a cornerstone for strengthening first nations education and improving outcomes, obviously not just now but for the future. It is essential to the future prosperity of indigenous communities. It is also essential for them to build up the capacity that they need in order to handle what I believe will be an extremely bright future for them when it comes to economic prosperity, but also in the governance of their own affairs.

That funding, as I say, has to be predictable. It has to be efficient. We are codeveloping an approach that's taking effect in April 2019 that will put first nations in the driver's seat when it comes to first nations education. It will support full-time kindergarten for ages four to five. It will ensure special education funding is more predictable, which they have raised with me personally. We will continue to work with them in an essential transformation of first nations education.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: In recent years, we have witnessed terrible situations where natural disasters have had major impacts on First Nations, who sometimes need to be evacuated and moved away.

Can you make your introductory comments more specific and talk about the increased funds being requested for the emergency management assistance program?

[English]

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I think it might have been my fourth or fifth day as minister that I attended the B.C. gathering of chiefs. That was an incredible eye-opener on the importance of emergency management assistance. Most of the questions that I took from the floor on that day were on exactly this, and for good reason. It involves their safety and their security.

We provide emergency management support to on-reserve indigenous communities through the emergency management assistance program for the four pillars of emergency management: prevention, mitigation, response and recovery. We reimburse first nations partners, provincial and territorial governments and other third party service providers like the Canadian Red Cross for any eligible costs incurred in the delivery of emergency management systems to first nations communities.

Supplementary estimates (B) includes \$99.8 million to reimburse first nations and emergency management providers for on-reserve response and for recovery activities in 2018-19.

If you look at what's driven those costs, there's \$16.58 million for flooding, \$26.92 million for wildfire response, \$1.86 million for response costs for other emergencies such as tornadoes, \$8.88 million for long-term evacuation costs and \$74.91 million for recovery costs for things like critical infrastructure that needs to be replaced as a result of a fire, for instance.

For the past four years, response and recovery costs have exceeded A-base funding of \$29.3 million. Options to address this persistent funding shortfall are being explored right now. I expect, to be honest, that it's not going to get any better.

The funds being requested will ensure first nations communities receive funding at a level to address that response and to recover. They support the Government of Canada's commitment to deliver consistent and high-quality programs and services to first nations.

● (0900)

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: I believe that Canadians are following our government's progress on long-term drinking water advisories.

Since we cannot imagine that, in Canada, some people still have no access to drinking water, could you tell us about the work that is underway to solve this problem, end the long-term advisories, and make sure that the situation does not happen again?

[English]

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'll begin with some good news, which is that we just lifted our latest boil water advisory yesterday, which now brings us up to 80. This is something that we heard very clearly during the election campaign and since. It's something that Canadians can grasp onto for exactly the reasons that you cited, the idea of a community not having access to clean drinking water.

Our government right now, as I said, is on track for our goal to lift all long-term drinking water advisories in public systems on reserve by March 2021. We also know that the work doesn't end with the lifting of long-term advisories. We're providing some sustainable investments to prevent short-term advisories, to expand delivery systems and to build capacity of and retain local water operators, training people on the ground in the community and putting in place systems for regular monitoring and testing.

Decades of neglect are challenging to these reserves, but we are working in partnership to develop plans to meet their specific needs. A lot of work needs to be done, but so far the results are encouraging. As I said, 80 long-term drinking water advisories have been lifted so far, including that one yesterday in North Spirit Lake, Ontario. That one had been place for 17 years.

I visited one facility in Piapot in Saskatchewan. The women who run this particular facility have trained long and hard. They work long, hard hours. My God, are they proud of the work that they're doing and the fact that they're doing that work in community, and they're the ones doing it.

I have to say that the other thing that really struck me, and it was pointed out to me by the leadership, is, how spaced out many of these communities are. I think that, when we see images sometimes in the media, we see some communities that have houses that are in close proximity to one another, but a number of these communities have great distances between the houses, which makes dealing with their water needs more complex than meets the eye.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

[English]

The Chair: That ends the questioning this time for the Liberals.

We move on to the Conservatives, and we begin with MP Kevin Waugh.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair; and welcome, Minister and officials.

Let's start with Piapot. We've heard from department officials, because they had a fire there last year. They have no water treatment. They're on a long-term boil water advisory again.

Also this week in my province, Carry the Kettle Nakoda Nation had a fire. They're out of operation now.

We've heard loud and clear with these long-term boil water advisories that there is no education after they are lifted. This is a major concern.

Minister, I know you've only been in here for five weeks, but it's interesting that you're talking about 80 boil water advisories being lifted. The website used to tell us how many were coming back on. I know your government wanted to be transparent, but all of a sudden, we don't see those.

I was on your website yesterday. There was no indication of any long-term boil water advisories coming back to short-term, and I wonder why that is.

• (0905)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I believe, and I can be corrected by my deputy, the reason is that we give it six months.

Is that the time duration?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services Canada): I need to check. We committed to be as transparent as possible and we will continue to do that. There's no change in our policy. If there's a mistake on the website....

Sometimes there's a delay, because it depends on when we get the information. That could happen, but it isn't a desire to not provide information that we were providing before. As you have noticed over the last few years, actually, we have increased the access to the information and we try as much as possible to make it live on the website.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Frankly, Mr. Waugh, if it is the case that we give ourselves six months before we get it back on track, that should be spelled out there as well so that it's transparent.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Then how long does a community need to be off the long-term boil water advisory before they're taken off the list?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: In regard to when the long-term advisory stops, the way it works is that as soon as it's done, there are tests of the water, a recommendation is made, and the chief and council and the band council decide if they're getting off and they say the water is proper for consumption. As soon as we have this information, we try to put it on the website.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Let me speak to the two examples that you brought up. In Piapot, I visited the interim water facility and it's really quite impressive. That is the interim one, and the women I met there were incredibly well trained and quite proud of that training. If they complained of anything, it was overwork. We need to get more people trained up so that they're not working the hours they are, which are pretty extensive.

They showed me the facility, the site that had burned down. We are committed to rebuilding that with them.

We're working with Carry the Kettle as well. I've spoken with them, or I should say, my officials have.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Yes. That happened on Monday night.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I have to ask you—because you're a former journalist, as am I—in yesterday's testimony you seemed to be the pawn in all of this. The former attorney general—

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Chair, on a point of order, what's the relevance?

The Chair: I was just going to indicate—

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I was going to ask about—

The Chair: Is it related to the estimates?

Mr. Kevin Waugh: No, it's related to the new minister.

The Chair: Well, I would ask all members—I know we're very anxious to be talking about what happened yesterday—to focus your questions on the supplementary estimates. I encourage you to keep your questions focused in that direction.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Fine.

The Chair: MP McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): On a point of order, there has always been considerable flexibility when we have a minister who has come to the table. It's probably only once or twice a year. In the past, considerable flexibility has been given by the chair in terms of more general things related to the department. I would just put on the record that we need to be consistent with how we've dealt with this in the past.

The Chair: I'm going to suggest that anything related to the fiscal management of the department and the services that Indigenous Services provides would be appropriate. We have been fairly lenient, but in my interpretation, testimony related to the politics revealed yesterday exceeds the demands or the guidance of it being relevant.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Well, I will ask a fiscal question, then.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Minister, I couldn't help but notice that you were in our province last week, and I couldn't also help but notice this one picture. You were in a jet. Was that a Challenger?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: No, that was an unfortunate tweet.

Georgina, what was it? It was a Beechcraft 1900, whose chairs are normally right on your knees. I had an official with me who got a new telephoto lens and put the seat down in front of me, so it looks as though I'm G5-ing it. However, I can tell you, it was absolutely not the case.

We were on a plane with elders, with members of the community, and if you don't mind my saying so, with the member of the committee here, Georgina Jolibois. This is a normal way for people in the north to travel. It's the most cost-efficient way when we're going from place to place.

I thought the view outside the window looked cool. It turned out to be an absolute disaster of a tweet, as they go. It in no way reflects the way we travel. It certainly in no way reflects our priorities. It's just a stupid old tweet.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: What was the cost of the...?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: It would be in keeping with our departmental costs. You know, these things would be out there.

Honestly, Mr. Waugh, if you saw the plane it's something that you would see normally in northern Saskatchewan. A Beechcraft 1900 ain't sexy. There is not much legroom. It's just how we get back and forth. I can say, as a former baggage handler at Goose Bay International Airport in Labrador and flying around all over Labrador, this is—

• (0910)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: It's fun, right?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: —pretty typical stuff. I have to be honest with you, I'm used to a Twin Otter or a Beaver, so this is pretty high end for me.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: You were in Regina that week and then you flew to Saskatoon—

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: —for the Fond-du-Lac announcement—

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: —and then you chartered this plane up north.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes, because there were a number of people with us. It also looks like I'm alone. Most of the people were near the front of the plane because they knew the heat was better up there.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: And you made an announcement in La Ronge, I think. Did you?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: How much?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: For the treatment and wellness centre there I think it was close to \$10 million. It will affect tens of thousands of people in neighbouring communities. It was something that they had worked on for quite some time. Addictions are a huge problem out there. In fact, I could expand on this at a later point but we recognize it's a huge problem in many communities in the north. The people there got together and they have done exemplary work in finding programming in a facility that will meet their specific needs. It was an honour to be up there with them.

The Chair: Thank you.

We move on to MP Georgina Jolibois.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, NDP): Thank you very much.

I want to make a clarification on travelling with you that I made it to La Ronge on my own and then because I wanted to be at the second announcement—

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Yes.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: —I caught a ride with the team to get to Saskatoon from La Ronge. It was one way, not a round trip.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We were happy to provide it to you and to elders who were present.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: That's right. The plane, with due respect to the minister, was full. It was well attended by various people from Saskatchewan. Thank you for making that announcement and for being in my riding and assisting when you can.

I do have some specific questions.

When you spoke about indigenous housing in your budget and you spoke about AFN codeveloping, exactly what does that mean? I would be looking for a strategy and a comprehensive plan to help these communities, these reserves throughout Canada.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We can't just go about investing in housing and renovating homes on reserves without taking a holistic view from the viewpoint of the life cycle of the asset, the home and the kinds of homes that we specifically need in the north and indigenous communities. We are making a lot of progress with the AFN on the codevelopment of this first nations housing and related infrastructure strategy, the idea being that we listen to them. Through them, we listen to particular communities about their specific needs because the old way of doing it and one-size-fits-all didn't work. We all know that. Even if you look at Cat Lake, a number of the houses there were just planted there. We need to dig deeper into the standards that are required. Houses are going mouldy.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Unfortunately—

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Temperature is constantly changing. There are even small things.... When I sat down with the chief when I landed in Thunder Bay, one of the first things he mentioned, which was frankly quite obvious to anybody like me who grew up in the north, is storage. We're bringing all these materials up on the winter road and we're not storing them properly. As a result, things like lumber can go mouldy before we even build the house.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Can I cut you off there?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Please.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Thank you for the explanation.

Again, I go back to what you said on codeveloping. We know from statistics and we know when we visit reserves what's happening in Cat Lake is the normal thing, unfortunately, from my riding to across Canada. Even residents whose homes burned down or residents who are living with the mould.... How quickly is this plan coming together? The urgency for many of these reserves is now.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I agree. With Cat Lake, we sat down and we did the deal. It will involve 36 new housing units and 21 new renovations and repairs. We are assessing those units right now with the community to determine what's more cost efficient. It may be better in some cases.... We can do repairs and renovation where the damage is not that extensive, and in other ones we need to demolish the home and provide temporary housing in the 10 portable units we're bringing up there, and will leave there. These are things we have to work out with them.

We are limited, as you well know, by the winter road. Most people in Canada don't appreciate what a winter road is. The community I grew up in had a winter road most of the time. It has a full tough year-round road now—it's no longer seasonal—but you have a very short window in which you can get construction supplies up there. The latest update I had, yesterday, is that we still cannot get heavy equipment up. We're still getting light equipment up. In the next four days, we're expecting very cold weather up there. This is one of those cases where Canadians are praying for cold weather, because that will sustain the road and we will be able to get the portables up there. You can imagine how heavy they are and how hard they are on those roads.

That is essentially the challenge we are facing right now. We are ready, on one end, to get as many materials up there as quickly as we can. We are working with the province and the first nation. I spoke with Minister Rickford of the Ontario government yesterday.

We are working with them to make sure we can get those supplies up there as quickly as possible.

Much of it is the circumstances of living in the north. The only way we can overcome them is by working closely with the community. I talk to local leadership there regularly.

• (0915)

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Unfortunately, these circumstances have been in existence for decades. This is not new, and the government seems to be acting as if this is a new thing: "My God, how are we going to help?" First nations across Canada have been asking endlessly, every year, almost every day, for the government to have a comprehensive plan.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I would simply add that you're absolutely right. That is why we are moving as quickly as we can, but we are also taking the time to listen and get it right. We are consulting extensively. When I'm in front of reporters, it's often, "Why can't you move faster?", but at the same time, "Why aren't you consulting more extensively?"

It does take time to get it right. I know that's frustrating, but I think what I presented to you, and what you will see, are long-term solutions and long-term budgeting. We are also looking at long-term block grants to communities so that they don't spend so much time on the administration level. Many of these small communities only have so many people to fill out the paperwork and do the calculations. When they are constantly reapplying for the funding they rely upon, that is time and energy wasted, which could be used for better planning and for more forward thinking.

We are saying, "Let us find you a more financially sustainable model, so that you know where your money is coming from and you can spend more time getting it right."

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: In the meantime, the residents continue to suffer, because the government is trying to figure a plan to assist when the urgency is now. As we know, people are sick from the mouldy houses; people can't afford many things and they're constantly struggling. When we send in the media teams to these reserves, they see the horrific realities on the ground, and the government doesn't seem to take that seriously.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Madame Jolibois, we will have trucks on the road within days.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Thank you.

The Chair: Questioning now moves to MP Will Amos.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you to our senior civil servants and to the minister.

Minister O'Regan, it was a real treat to go and visit the community of Rapid Lake, the most northerly community in my riding—Algonquin territory—with our parliamentary secretary, Dan Vandal, a member of your staff and one from the civil service, from your department, as well. It was a very successful visit. I appreciate how your department enabled that.

There's a bit of a story behind it. I want it to be on the public record, and then I'd love to hear your comments.

This is a community that has been challenged for a number of years on the housing front, on education infrastructure and on community infrastructure. It's still runs with a diesel generator. The power there is unreliable.

The Chair: MP Amos, you're going to be asking a question.

Mr. William Amos: Of course.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. William Amos: This is a community with needs, significant needs. To be able to go up there and make that announcement with the parliamentary secretary around new housing for teachers—that was fabulous. It was fabulous news that resonated across the riding, well beyond Rapid Lake. We certainly hope there's more to come. That's where the discussion went with Parliamentary Secretary Vandal.

That goes specifically to these supplementary estimates. There's the issue of securing the financing necessary to invest in a new school, to invest in a school that's connected to the hydro grid and not connected to diesel-powered generators. There's the issue of continuing to develop their community infrastructure, including but not limited to housing. All of these are just so important. I use that as an example of one community that reflects the needs across this country.

So thank you to you and your department for the hard work that continues on this file. I was in touch with your office this week about this. I really hope there is continued action. I think all of us on this committee agree that every single kid deserves a chance, and every family needs to have a healthy home with good running water in order to have a chance.

I'd like to hear more about the specific aspects around getting communities off third party management. That's been a big challenge in Rapid Lake. Success has been achieved there, but I'd like you to speak to how the monies that were discussed in your statement will be allocated. How do we shift away over time from the need to have funding so that the management of finances by indigenous communities is done in a sustainable manner?

• (0920)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I understand that the parliamentary secretary went there, as you said. It was noted that it was the first time a parliamentary secretary had been to the community, so I think that's terrific. As you said, there were two major infrastructure announcements in the community that were tremendously important—\$1.1 million in those projects, and the Algonquins of Barriere Lake band council contributed an additional \$300,000 to it. There's

the brand new waste-water pumping station, a residence to house Kitiganik primary schoolteachers who come in from outside the community, and the connection to the grid.

There's a tremendous desire amongst the indigenous leadership I've met. This was the case with the Cat Lake leadership. There were a few things, as I said, they wanted added to the agreement we had been working on, once I saw them in person. One of the first things they mentioned was storage facilities to make sure the equipment and the materials we were bringing up were adequately protected from the elements.

There were a couple of other things that I think were very telling. First of all, they wanted somebody to come in, in a full-time position, to help them manage their new homes and to help them maintain them. The other thing they asked for, and I think it's tremendously important, was financial training. They wanted financial training for their chief, for their leadership, for their council members, and for their administration workers. There is a lot happening, and they want to handle these resources respectfully and responsibly. Of course we committed to all of that. There's a tremendous want and desire for that sort of training and to have that sort of responsibility and to deal with the new funding they are receiving, as I said, responsibly and respectfully.

Mr. William Amos: In the one minute I have left, I'd like to draw the attention of the minister and the parliamentary secretary to the fact that today, during the time when members make statements, I'll be making a statement to recognize 40 years of public service by Jean Guy Whiteduck. He was the chief of Kitigan Zibi, and due to illness he has stepped back. This individual has served in elected and unelected capacities in a leadership role for the Algonquin for a generation and a half. That's a significant contribution.

I just wanted to highlight that, because I think it will be important to the people of this region, as we are sitting on Algonquin territory.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I would add he's borne witness to a lot over the years and he's pleased, I think, with the work that is in progress.

• (0925)

Mr. William Amos: Thank you.

The Chair: Questioning now moves to the five-minute round.

We begin with MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to start by reading an email that came directly me. It's way too common in terms of what comes to my door.

It's someone who is very concerned in terms of her band and in terms of how they're spending their money. This is a band that's non-compliant with the transparency act. It's a very lengthy email. I can't get into it all, but what at the end she says, "I trust that you will use this information for the betterment of all members under the Indian Act". She says that the Assembly of First Nations is useless in promoting transparency and accountability.

I looked at your department reports in 2015-16. There were 97% of the bands in compliance. In your departmental results report for Indigenous Services, your target is now 75%. It used to be that 97 out of 100 bands would have access to the basic information that every other Canadian gets—whether it's federal, provincial or municipal. You're now saying a quarter will not have access to basic information. Your new fiscal relationship is fine, but it is the people who have had a proven track record.... It is not dealing with the communities that have had challenges.

She is listening today to the proceedings at this committee. What have you to say to her and all those people who come to me regularly and say that they cannot have access to this basic information that they deserve access to? This government doesn't have the guts to repeal this transparency act and put something else in place. They are just letting it happen.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'll let Paul begin, and then I'll finish.

Mr. Paul Thoppil (Chief Finances, Results and Delivery Officer, Department of Indigenous Services Canada): While that's the target, over 92% to 93% of first nations across this country actually comply with that.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: The target's 75%. You're dropping it every year.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: That's the target, but the reality is different. There will always be anomalies in a large population. We need to emphasize that the majority of first nations are complying with and respect the principles of transparency and accountability.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Madam Chair, I'd like to ask why your department has not had the guts to repeal it? If you're not going to enforce a piece of legislation that needs to be enforced, why do you not have the guts to repeal it and replace it with something?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: The government has committed to—

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: The new fiscal relationship does not do it. You have the people who have good records over the years that you've entered into long-term.... I am talking about the communities that are struggling, where people who I get emails from are having a challenge.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: We are codeveloping.... The government is committed to a repeal of the First Nations Financial Transparency Act, but we're doing it in a respectful, reconciliation-oriented way with first nation communities across the country.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It's been over three years.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Through the codevelopment, we are looking at the development of a mutual accountability framework that has as its underpinnings the transparency and accountability that all first nation communities desire.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It's been over three years and we have nothing. There's nothing for these people who are writing me. I bet

she's listening to this answer right now and is just flabbergasted in terms of access to basic information.

I'm going to go on to my next question.

We know there was an infrastructure bank, which was, I think, a \$7-billion slush fund. It funded one project. We know there's a media fund that's perhaps going to be looking at friendly op-eds. That's half a billion bucks. We know that you created the vote 40 slush fund.

There was over \$100 million in vote 40 slush funds that didn't go out to the communities.

The Chair: How does it relate to indigenous purposes?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Was vote 40 indigenous? Because it's a slush fund, it doesn't go through the normal channels of being able to look at what's in vote 40. You created a slush fund that doesn't normally come through us. This is important stuff. This is \$100 million that Treasury Board said, "Oh, I'm not sure"....

I can tell you what it is. It was for the reprofiling of indigenous infrastructure allocation, support for distinctions-based housing—\$25 million; the first one was \$75 million—and renewing the matrimonial real property rights implementation support program. These are Indigenous Services programs, put in through a slush fund. The money didn't go out. Why?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: As part of main estimates reform, to ensure that main estimates are tabled with information that includes items that are in the federal budget...for the first time that has transpired through main estimates reform. As a result of trying to provide increased transparency to parliamentarians, they've created a central vote to put the budget items inside that vote and—

● (0930)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It's a slush fund, though, and it has no accountability.

The Chair: Please let the answer continue.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Madam Chair, it's my time.

The Chair: It's over.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: Through the TBS website, parliamentarians as well as Canadians can monitor the access to the money that is drawn down from that vote 40.

The Chair: That ends your opportunity, Ms. McLeod. Your five minutes is over.

We're moving on to MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you so much, Minister and staff, for being here today. We really appreciate your presence. Especially being so new in the job—I'm sure you came in still trying to get your feet under you, so we really appreciate your making the effort to be here and provide these answers.

I have a number of questions. First, the same as Will was saying, my Mohawk community, Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, is very grateful for the expanded services and infrastructure for eliminating boil water advisories. Our community has benefited directly from that. They are very appreciative. They have also received exceptional training; you highlighted that in your report. It sounds as if this has been a common theme, that wherever we're ending the boil water advisories, we're training people on how to operate these systems in a very effective and efficient way.

Are you seeing opportunities to use the same model of training for that—we're doing a study right now on capacity-building—to see if there are other areas where we can increase capacity around human resources in indigenous communities?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm going to get into that, but if I could just use a minute of my time here to allow Paul or the deputy, perhaps, to finish the answer to the honourable member's question on what she termed the “slush fund”.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Please. Yes, I'd be happy to take my time for that.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: I want to mention the new process with the new main estimates. Any dollar used in this department that is associated with programs uses the same terms and conditions that we use for all the money. We don't have a special fund where we use different norms and different standards to spend the money. The money on housing is under “housing”. We've got Treasury Board authority under this, and that's how we use this money.

When you hear about the full budget of the department, it does include all the budget of the department at the end. That's what I'm accounting for as an accounting officer. As Paul mentioned, this is the new approach to make sure that money is available up front at the beginning of the year—money in the budget—because in the past, as you know, departments had to wait for this to go through different processes. In many cases, this would delay implementation of programs related to infrastructure, for example.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: To the larger question of capacity-building, not only is it the right thing to do in empowering communities, frankly it's financially the smarter thing to do, rather than coming somewhere, building something, and then leaving without the ability of local leadership to be able to work with it and maintain it. It checks off all the boxes.

It does require some upfront costs; that you take the time and the money. It does take a little longer to make sure you build up the capacity locally. The long-term benefit is tremendous, as you said you witnessed. The more we do this, the more we'll see savings down the road from our end.

The idea that came to me in the very early days of my job here is that I'm a minister who is working himself out of a job. The more we can devolve services at the local level, the better. The more we can build up that capacity on the ground to deliver services directly

to indigenous members in their communities, by indigenous people in their communities, the better. It's better for us; it's better for them.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I'd like to give you an opportunity, Paul, to finish the answer on the First Nations Financial Transparency Act. These things take time if you want to do them properly. I know the First Nations Financial Transparency Act came into place in 2013, seven years after the previous government came to power. Is that reasonable?

• (0935)

Mr. Paul Thoppil: I think codevelopment and getting consensus from first nations community members across this country take time. What I have heard from first nations chiefs and community members across this country is that they all want transparency and accountability. How we get there by way of a policy formulation that works is what chiefs and community members are working together on as we speak, and we will get there.

In the meantime, there is positive momentum happening, in part through working with the First Nations Financial Management Board, that is implementing, together with first nations communities, financial administration laws that will include governance, internal controls, independent finance and audit committees. They will provide the rigour for community members to ensure that they are getting access to the financial information they deserve.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you.

The Chair: We now move on to MP Arnold Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here today.

I'm going to go back to the vote 40 matter. In budget 2018, just over \$71 million was assigned for the new fiscal relationship, but only \$6 million was allocated. What happened to the \$65 million?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm going to ask Paul to take it.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: There is \$64 million in the estimates here in front of you, and that \$64 million is broken down in a number of components. About \$15 million is what the minister referred to as being a result of the contribution of this committee's work on default prevention, in its recommendations to provide funding to first nations that had to pay for professional advisory services under third party management out of their band support funding. About \$15 million out of that \$60 million will go to first nations communities, to give them back...so that they can govern appropriately.

There is about another \$40 million that the minister referred to for providing the requisite capacity supports to first nations for improving their financial capacity, as in Rapid Lake for improving their IT and IM systems so that they can actually evolve and increase their financial autonomy.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It seemed, however, to have been rejected by Treasury Board first and then reallocated to your department from the other department. Is that correct?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: There are two new fiscal relationship initiatives under way. One is with Crown-Indigenous Relations for engagement with self-governing first nations; then there was another initiative for first nations under the Indian Act, led by the minister. Both items were inadvertently put in as one and then segregated out.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That's, I guess, the interesting piece. The last time we came around, we voted on this and it just seemed to be taken back and shuffled without a vote on it.

Is that correct?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: No, I believe a decision was made by the Treasury Board Secretariat and Department of Finance as to where they should class things in the parliamentary documents.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Now, the \$65 million you just talked about that has been allocated was allocated in budget 2018. Why is it that where it's going to go is coming out now? It seems that it hasn't been spent; only \$6 million was used up in the last fiscal year.

What's going on with that?

Mr. Paul Thoppil: The fact that an item is in supplementary estimates doesn't necessarily mean that the money is not spent. We have the flexibility, depending on the circumstances and needs, to "cash manage", post Treasury Board approval, where circumstances desire. Cheques are being issued as we speak, particularly to those first nations under third party management, to reimburse them for the costs of that third party management.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Minister, I went over this with the previous minister several times. The fundamental issue with the First Nations Financial Transparency Act is the rule of law. If you're not prepared to enforce the law, then you should change the law.

What is your understanding of the act, and when are you going to be tabling the repeal of that bill?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: We may get to that point, to be honest with you. I understand concerns here, but I have a number of other pressing priorities that are taking up my time at the moment.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Your government is suffering from a "rule of law" issue already, and right from the get-go your government said it was not going to enforce the financial transparency law.

• (0940)

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I would contest that we're having a rule of law issue.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You said that you were not going to enforce the rule of law when it came to the First Nations Financial Transparency Act. What day will you be...?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I would say that we will continue to work with indigenous partners to make sure that we get the results we need, and that we will continue to strive to make sure that we achieve the transparency that they and their members demand.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: What day will you be introducing the bill's repeal?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm not going to lock myself down to a date.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you have a date?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm not going to lock myself down to a date in front of this committee at the moment.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you have the bill drafted?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I am not going to comment on that at the moment. It's just not, right now, one of my top priorities.

I think my priorities are very clear, and those are priorities that we have dealt with, in conjunction with our partners, to make sure that we achieve the results that we need—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: The priority is clear: that you do not want to enforce the law, which is your job.

The Chair: The final couple of minutes now go to MP Kent Hehr.

Welcome to our committee.

Hon. Kent Hehr (Calgary Centre, Lib.): Minister, thank you for being here.

I am the member of Parliament for Calgary Centre. We're Treaty No. 7 people. We're the traditional home of the Blackfoot people, the Tsuut'ina people and the Stoney-Nakoda nation, and Métis region 3.

I was struck by your comments that we are moving towards an education system now that recognizes that we should have funding for first nations kids commensurate to what they receive in the city. I think I am a big believer in that equality of opportunity. Whether you're born of a rich family or one that struggles, you get an opportunity to build your life; whether you're born in the city or on a reserve, you get an opportunity to build your life.

There is an organization in Calgary called the Palix Foundation. The research that it is doing looks more towards the time frame from birth to three years of age, and it's recognizing that life chances are largely formed within that time period of an individual's life.

Is your department looking at better ways to support indigenous communities in that critical period of birth to three years of age, to help support families, to ensure that there are day care spaces where they're learning through play—all those activities that track and move children forward through the rest of their lives?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I have an answer ready to give you, but out of the corner of my eye I can see the unbridled enthusiasm of my deputy, who seems very anxious to answer this specifically, so I'll throw it to him.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: It's a very good question, and you're right. It doesn't start at the school; it starts before the school. There's a very big preoccupation with how you do that.

There are different things that we're looking at. In terms of early childhood development, we have programs that we're working on with first nations communities on how to address that.

You may notice that, with the new formula for education, we also provide kindergarten at the age of four now, so that's actually another plus.

All the work that we're doing on child and family services is another important one. How do we make sure that it's not about apprehending kids, that it's not only about protection, but prevention, supporting families to make sure that kids have the opportunity to grow in their communities with their families and actually be proud of their culture?

Here is another aspect. If you look at the new formula for education, there is \$1,500 per student for first nations languages, which we hope will also help improve their capacity to grow in their language and culture, close to their families.

Hon. Kent Hehr: I have one more quick question.

The Chair: Be very quick.

Hon. Kent Hehr: Again, with regard to the Palix Foundation and the research it's doing on addictions and the like—you mentioned that you're working with programs in that regard—it's tracking how adverse childhood experiences lead to addiction issues. I'd encourage you and your department to look at the work of the Palix Foundation and how you may need to have your agreements tailored to have an understanding of what adverse childhood experiences are.

I believe that the Alberta government is moving forward on a lot of these agreements, but I'll just leave that to you to look into.

The Chair: Thank you.

That concludes our opportunity to have you here. We really appreciate having you here as our minister, and your taking time to come out to see us.

The meeting is suspended. We have Minister Carolyn Bennett joining us in a couple of minutes.

● (0940) _____ (Pause) _____

● (0945)

The Chair: Welcome, everyone. We are in the second hour of our indigenous and northern affairs committee, and we're very pleased to have Minister Bennett with us once again.

We're anxious to get started, so I thank you for your co-operation.

We'll get going whenever you are ready, Minister.

● (0950)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations): Thank you for having me back.

I think we would like to begin by acknowledging that we come together on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people and that we're here to discuss the 2018-19 supplementary estimates (B) as well as the 2019-20 interim estimates for Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs.

[*Translation*]

Specifically, I will discuss the aspects of the estimates that pertain to my work as Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations.

I am joined by Alex Lakroni, Chief Finance, Results and Delivery Officer.

[*English*]

Also with me are Diane Lafleur, the Associate Deputy Minister, and Joe Wild, the senior ADM for Treaties and Aboriginal Government. I think you will come to know that Joe's work has been very helpful in getting us as far as we are in helping get people out from under the Indian Act.

As you know, our government is taking concrete steps to renew the nation-to-nation, Inuit-to-Crown and government-to-government relationships between Canada and first nations, Inuit and Métis and to accelerate self-determination.

In support of these fundamental goals, our department's 2018-19 supplementary estimates (B) present initiatives totalling \$174.9 million, which includes \$112.8 million in new funding and \$62.1 million in net transfers with other government organizations. This brings the total appropriations for CIRNAC in 2018-19 to \$5.1 billion.

Roughly half of that new funding of \$57 million reflects our commitment to resolving disputes outside of court whenever possible. As we've discussed here at this committee many times, our government strongly believes that negotiating settlements focused on healing and closure outside the adversarial court process is the most responsible way to resolve past wrongs and paves the way for a more respectful and constructive relationship with indigenous communities going forward.

I think it's important to reinforce that our work to support first nations, Inuit and Métis communities to implement their visions of self-determination is intrinsically linked to unlocking untapped prosperity and closing long-standing socio-economic gaps.

[*Translation*]

An excellent example of this is the new funding in the estimates of \$48.4 million for the Métis Nation Housing Strategy and the Métis National Heritage Centre.

[English]

We have been working in partnership with the Métis Nation to identify in advance shared priorities, including affordable housing. Through annual meetings between the Métis Nation, the Prime Minister and key federal ministers, we have codeveloped the Métis national housing strategy.

In July we had the honour of representing Canada in signing the Canada-Métis Nation housing sub-agreement with the president of the Métis National Council and the presidents of its governing members.

The housing sub-agreement is funded from budget 2018 with \$500 million over 10 years and reflects a shared commitment to narrow the housing gap between Métis Nation citizens and non-indigenous Canadians, and does so in a way that respects and supports the Métis Nation's right to self-determination.

Funding also supports the construction of a Métis national heritage centre in historic Upper Fort Garry, Winnipeg, by 2020.

[Translation]

The centre will showcase the history of the Métis nation and the significant contributions of the Métis people to the development of Canada.

[English]

Right now, no such Métis heritage facility exists in Canada, and this initiative will support the Métis Nation's management of its own culture, art and history.

Supplementary estimates (B) also include funding for first nations fiscal institutions to hire additional staff and open regional offices in Winnipeg, Halifax and Ottawa. This will allow the fiscal institutions to support more first nations to exercise jurisdiction over financial management and proper taxation and will provide better access to affordable financing for infrastructure projects.

Funding is also included for the renewal of the Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq education agreement, which provides for continued first nations self-governance over education programs and services and an inclusive and quality education for first nations students in that province.

• (0955)

I think at this table before, I have mentioned this huge success. It was 20 years ago that the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia decided to take over their education system. At that time, their secondary school graduation rate was 30%. Today, the Mi'kmaq education system in Nova Scotia has a secondary school graduation rate of 90%. That is higher than most of the non-indigenous population in Canada.

[Translation]

The evidence is clear: First Nations-led and First Nations-governed education systems, achieve better results for First Nations students.

[English]

For 2019-20, the department's interim estimates are \$2.2 billion. This will provide sufficient funding in the beginning of the fiscal

year to deliver regular programs and additional requirements specifically for out-of-court settlements, early settlements of specific claims and self-government agreements.

Our government has been working with first nations to resolve historic grievances through the specific claims process and has done so at twice the rate of any previous government in Canada. There are 475 specific claims that have been resolved through negotiated settlement agreements since 1973, with a total compensation value of over \$5.6 billion. Sixty-seven of these specific claims agreements have been reached since November 2015, with a total compensation value of over \$1.6 billion.

[Translation]

Payments of claims and tribunal awards up to \$150 million come from the specific claims settlement fund. Anticipated funding is allocated in advance to ensure prompt payments.

[English]

We are forecasting that funding will be required during the first quarter of 2019-20 for settlements, including the Mohawks of Akwesasne's Dundee claim. As I noted earlier, the best way to support the success of indigenous communities is to accelerate self-determination and ensure that communities have the tools they need to implement their vision of what that means.

An exciting new way that we are supporting indigenous people in realizing their vision of self-determination is through the recognition of indigenous rights and self-determination discussion tables. I'm very pleased to say today that now there are over 77 tables, with 380 communities and involving more than 800 000 indigenous people. When there are 634 Indian Act bands in this country, to have 380 communities at tables is I think a huge success and is an example of us accelerating the path to self-determination.

We are also implementing 25 modern treaties, 18 of which include provisions for self-government and/or accompanying self-government agreements, four stand-alone self-government agreements and two sectoral agreements in education.

Stable funding of self-government agreements is fundamental to nation-to-nation, government-to-government and Inuit-to-Crown partnerships. Most of the funding for self-government agreements is paid during the first quarter of the fiscal year. In fact, some agreements flow 100% of the funding in April.

[*Translation*]

In addition, Canada has the obligation to provide stable funding to implement its obligations under the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, including Inuit housing. These agreements require their majority or full annual payment during the first quarter of the fiscal year.

[*English*]

I look forward to discussing the supplementary estimates (B) and the interim estimates with you, and welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

We are going to begin with MP Yves Robillard.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Budget 2018 set aside \$101.5 million over five years to support the capacity development of indigenous peoples. It was anticipated that the funding would be placed at their disposal to support activities that would pave the way to reconstructing their nations. Clearly, investing in capacity building is fundamental in speeding up self-determination.

Can you tell us what is happening with that promised funding and what kinds of measures it is supporting?

• (1000)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you. It is a great story.

The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended that the nations should begin to rebuild themselves and to develop institutions that are strong enough to allow them to exercise their rights, including in the form of self-government.

Budget 2018 set aside a sum of \$101.5 million over five years to help indigenous nations reconstitute, including through capacity development and activities that will help them find their own way to reconstruction. It also set aside a sum of \$50 million to lead them towards self-government.

We received 300 proposals for 2018-2019. That is a great success. I place a lot of hope on the good work that indigenous nations are doing to gather and engage their members in the process towards reconstruction and then self-government.

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you for the answer.

Madam Minister, in the 2018-2019 supplementary estimates (B), I see an allocation of almost \$57 million to settle a number of indigenous claims. On a number of occasions in the past, you have told us your opinion that negotiation is better than litigation in righting historical wrongs and settling the grievances of the past. You have alluded to the greater flexibility that the approach provides compared to allowing the problems to be solved through a legal process.

Can you explain what you mean by that? Why do you believe so firmly that friendly settlements get better results for all parties involved?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you. That is a good question.

Communities prefer negotiation to paying a lot of money in legal fees to make their cases in court. Another fact is that negotiation means that more attention is paid to language, to healing and the rest, which is not possible to do in court. As things stand, it is preferable to provide money to the communities rather than getting involved in long legal processes.

Mr. Yves Robillard: Madam Minister, in your remarks, you stated that our government is working with First Nations to resolve historical grievances in their particular claims. You are working at twice the speed of any other previous government in Canada's history.

Can you tell us what you and your department have done differently in order to speed up the claims process?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That is another good question.

It is really about our government's attitude in accepting the errors of the past and making things better. The grievances are genuine and it is important for the settlements to be fair. In Alberta, for example, a lot of grievances deal with problems with agriculture. It is important for a lot of people that the grievances are settled.

• (1005)

[*English*]

The Chair: You have less than a minute.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Robillard: I will give my turn to whomever is next.

Thank you, Madam Minister.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

We'll move on to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to do a little bit of a history. We all know that it is very rare for the Prime Minister to stand up in the House and make a significant statement. Of course, we look at the residential school apology. About a year ago we had the Prime Minister stand up in the House on February 14, and he was pleased to announce that the government would develop, in full partnership with first nations, Inuit and Métis, a new framework that will include new ways to recognize and implement indigenous rights. Going forward, this will guide all the government's interactions. He also at that time said that they were going to have this framework introduced in 2018.

We then learned just a few days ago from Mr. Wernick that there was a very serious policy difference between the former justice minister and other ministers, including you. In Mr. Wernick's testimony, he also said there was a decision not to proceed with the rights and recognition framework. We also heard yesterday in testimony—

Mr. Mike Bossio: Point of order, Chair.

Once again, I'm hoping this is going to lead to a question, but I don't see the relevance here of once again dredging through what's happened between the attorney general over the last few days, with the minister here to answer questions in relation to the supplementary estimates.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Sorry, but the minister talked about the whole framework in terms of rights and recognition and how they were going to go forward as a government. I am talking about the Prime Minister's statement, and it is absolutely relevant to her complete purpose and role. I am focused on that particular aspect. I am not focused on SNC or the director of prosecutions. I am focused on what is very directly her role, and that is what the Prime Minister committed to, which was the new rights and recognition framework.

The Chair: I just urge MPs to try to stick to the estimates. I think that some concern was related to the Clerk of the Privy Council and other things that seemed to be delving into matters that weren't directly relatable.

We'll go back to you, Ms. McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Madam Chair, this was directly regarding his comments about the rights and recognition framework. They are not comments about anything else, and I would suggest that it's very important to the role.

We did finally learn, of course, that although there was a meeting, SNC was the priority for the Prime Minister to talk about, although they ultimately did get to this issue—

Mr. Mike Bossio: Once again, I have a point of order. Is she just here to grandstand and talk about SNC-Lavalin, or is she here to actually address the minister, who has taken her time to come down here and speak to this committee about the supplementary estimates?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Madam Chair, I have my first question for the minister right this minute.

The Chair: You're ready to place your question.

Thank you.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: This is important, I think, for this committee to understand, because we had the Prime Minister make a commitment. We've had you make a commitment. What is the serious policy difference? Can you share it with this committee?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I'm very pleased to be allowed the opportunity to explain that I believe that the policy goals of everyone in our government are to accelerate the progress to self-determination. What the Prime Minister spoke about last year was the kinds of really serious changes that we would have to make on behalf of Canada in order to reach that goal of accelerating the progress to self-determination. We, at the various tables we are at, know that the previous comprehensive claims policy was not working—cede and surrender, having to do that on loans, all of this. That is now all out the window. We are now working with our partners to get written down what would be a new approach to comprehensive claims—

• (1010)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: So, is it—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —what is the approach to the inherent right policy, and then how we put in place—

The Chair: Patience, because the minister is in the midst of responding. I think I was very generous. Please go on.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: And so what—

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Madam Chair, this is my time. I just want to ask her another question.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Cathy, I would just like to explain that what the Prime Minister described was an ability to change both the policies and the legislation where necessary, so we are now being able to put in legislation on language. We hope to put in—

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Madam Chair—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —language on child and family services. We are moving on—

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I would like to know—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —both the legislation and the policy changes that will help us do our job in the recognition and implementation of indigenous rights in Canada.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It appears that the commitment was made by the Prime Minister on February 14, which was very specific, about a framework around rights and recognition that would be tabled, and then there was a decision not to proceed. I think we could characterize that as a significant promise that really has resulted in chaos.

I will go on to my next point.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: You have to actually understand that this is a partnership. We have to take the time to get it right, and our partners set the pace for the kind of work we do together.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I acknowledge that you have done lots of work with the MNC, the AFN and ITK. We also know, though, that about 60% of indigenous peoples live off reserve, and we have other organizations, like the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. I notice that you signed an MOU with them, an MOA. Unlike groups like the AFN, which have, I believe, close to \$90 million plus to do some of the work they do, there is nothing flowing in terms of the work to implement the MOU with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. There were no dollars attached to the work they were going to need to do around that issue.

Whether it's the Daniels decision—and we don't know what's happening with that—or whether it's the 60% who, quite frankly, need some support, they are the poor cousins to your department.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We were very proud to sign the accord with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, and very happy to support their conference a year or so ago on the post-Daniels reality of Métis identity and how we go forward that way. We look forward to working with them in partnership, and to making sure they have the support they need with work plans.

We will need their help, and you are quite right that the next big challenge will be recognizing and implementing the rights of first nations, Inuit and Métis people who live in urban centres. That is something we feel very strongly about.

David Newhouse has research coming out of Trent, which will be very interesting in terms of how, in urban centres, there could be some governance or some organization that would be able to set priorities and identify the needs, interests and priorities of the people living in urban centres, in the same way as we do with the tables of people in communities.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I understand there was a comment in cabinet that indicated that there were no rights in terms of indigenous off reserve. You're clearly stating that there are rights that need recognition off reserve. I understand that's contrary to one of your colleagues' comments.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Section 35 rights are section 35 rights.

The Chair: Thank you.

Questioning moves to MP Georgina Jolibois.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Thank you, Minister, for coming. I appreciate this opportunity to ask you some questions. I only get a short period of time.

I want to acknowledge Chief Robert Bertrand, who is in the audience here. The work that the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples does is very important, because it speaks to off-reserve first nations, Métis and Inuit people across Canada.

Like the Conservatives, I've noticed that.... Is there a reason the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples is often left out in codeveloping important legislation with your organizations, as well as Minister O'Regan's? I'm curious about that.

• (1015)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Coast to coast to coast we have tried to be as inclusive as we can. In the meetings we held after the Prime Minister's speech on February 14, we chose not to deal just with organizations. We dealt with rights holders in all the centres we went to. We had over 50% of women at those meetings. This was about dealing directly with section 35 rights holders, and dealing with them as members of the community. It was not organized through the AFN, NWAC or ITK. It was organized by region and directly with rights holders.

We look forward to being able to codevelop future policies and legislation on the issues that would involve the members of CAP, but it's a matter of working with everybody to make sure we are able to get the best possible policies.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: I have another question regarding the indigenous languages legislation that Minister Rodriguez put forward, which the heritage committee is studying right now. Many witnesses have appeared thus far, and I understand that the commit-

tee will wrap up seeing witnesses this week. That is very important legislation—I cannot emphasize that enough.

In my opinion, it is being rushed. I'm not alone in that opinion; many witnesses have expressed a concern about the legislation being rushed. I'm hoping you can comment on what your involvement is in the legislation and whether the government is open to making changes to the legislation.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think it is hugely important. As so many of our partners will say, language is who you are. It is your identity. I think we know that a secure personal and cultural identity leads to better health, education and economic outcomes. This is about the identity of a people and peoples.

The legislation was organized based on codevelopment and 12 agreed-upon principles for the legislation. I think I see it much more like the Canada Health Act, where there are some principles. It's not prescriptive in any way, but in some ways the purpose of the legislation is to explain that language is part of section 35. It's not separate. It's not optional. Language is a right for first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: ITK is one of the codeveloping groups you speak about. As you know, ITK is very concerned with the legislation. They've expressed their concerns openly and in committee, and they've done a fine job of providing their reasons behind it. They weren't alone. There were other witnesses we heard from who also suggested this.

Is the government open to legislating indigenous languages as official languages like French and English?

That's what has come out so far. What is the government's position on that?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, I think that this piece of legislation is an excellent beginning, and it makes very clear how important indigenous languages are as we celebrate the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

I think there is a lot of work to be done, and the commitment with ITK and with the Inuit was always how we would go forward to be able to craft what they will need. We will continue these conversations to make sure that the rights are implemented in a way that's effective. As you know, and as the minister has said, the focus is on fluency and on us making sure that first nations, Inuit and Métis are part and parcel, and are able to direct the funding for it in a way that they find the most effective.

• (1020)

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: I have a quick question regarding the funding. How come the government hasn't provided the amount of funding to go to the legislation?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: March 19 is coming up. All of us have our requests in to the finance minister and the Prime Minister, and we eagerly look forward to being able to properly fund the priorities of the government.

Ms. Georgina Jolibois: Thank you.

The Chair: The questioning moves to Will Amos.

Mr. William Amos: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your senior officials. It's always appreciated when you take the time to come.

Today I want to focus a little bit on the Métis side of the question. You spoke about accelerating indigenous self-determination and the importance of closing socio-economic gaps, so I wanted to give you the opportunity to expand a bit on this.

By way of example, there's significant funding in the estimates for a Métis housing strategy. I think we all agree that more needs to be done to close gaps in housing for the Métis in Canada, but can you explain how this is going to be delivered? In particular, what mechanisms are going to be used that enable Métis delivery of this housing strategy?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The agreement now has been with the Métis National Council, but we are working with all of the governing members to look at their needs. At the moment, there is a formula for the first three years, and then in year four we'll move to a more needs-based approach that we will codevelop with the governing members.

Mr. William Amos: How have the Métis articulated their desire to maintain control over the delivery of this? What have been the key messages coming not just from the national organization but also from people on the ground, people who are deeply engaged with the Métis community?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think you've said it. They want control of how it's distributed, period. This isn't about us and a government program through which we fund this and we don't fund that. They want to make sure their members are properly housed. If it's to go to renovation, that's what they'd like. As you know, in Manitoba, they've moved to a first home ownership opportunity. President Poitras, in Alberta, has huge experience in housing. They've done an amazing job. It really is going to be them moving in a way that they design to be able to do the needs assessment, and then to be able to fund it in a way they choose.

Mr. William Amos: On the cultural side, you highlighted the funding that was requested to support the construction of a Métis national heritage centre in Winnipeg. I cannot wait for the opportunity to learn from that heritage centre once it's completed.

You noted also that the funding is going to support the Métis Nation's management of its own culture, art and history, which is great.

How will this change the way things have been done in the past around the telling of the Métis story?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I too think it's very exciting. It really is about nation-building and coming out of the shadows. It is about the forgotten people. This is about, once again, Métis having an opportunity to tell their stories and to be able to really correct some of

the misinformation that has been out there, from Louis Riel to Gabriel Dumont. These are not things that we learn in school.

What is exciting, I think, in terms of a place for artifacts, a place to tell the story.... I'm not sure yet, but I'm sure the chair would agree that the work that the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is doing now in virtual information dissemination coast to coast to coast is a real opportunity for understanding that it's never just a building; it is an opportunity to disseminate the history and the culture and to have young Métis youth be really proud of who they are and their heritage and how they go forward.

I must say that at every meeting, the Métis youth are so impressive. Whether they're paddling or beading or jigging, to see them back in touch with their language and culture is a total inspiration. So many of their parents are only now discovering their Métis heritage.

• (1025)

Mr. William Amos: I will make two brief comments.

I think this is a fabulous initiative not only for the Métis but also, as you said, for the rest of Canada. It should be a great driver for tourism. I expect that there will be a lot of people coming from places all around the world who are very keen to learn about our Métis Nation's history. In fact, all of the Americas have a whole history of mestizaje. That is absolutely of great significance as we trade more and more with the other countries in the Americas.

Minister, to you and the rest of your team, the first weekend of June is always the greatest of Algonquin powwows in Kitigan Zibi. It is a lot of fun. I go every year. Of course that community would love to have you. I'll take the liberty of inviting you formally to that event.

Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you.

The Chair: When we talk about the Métis, we must not forget the road allowance people, Rooster Town and Mary-Anne Gaboury. I had to get that on record, because—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's an excellent statement, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We move on to MP Arnold Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Just to get it on the record here, thank you, Minister, for being here as well. Earlier we had Minister O'Regan. I think there's one more minister, though, isn't there, a northern minister?

The Chair: The allocation in the supplementary estimates.... You are right, MP Viersen. We understand that we're in conversation with the Minister of Northern Affairs and that perhaps we'll find time to bring him—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Super-duper.

The Chair: —he'll come to the committee. So we'll have three ministers.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Madam, if I could clarify that, it's one department. Diane is the associate deputy for Minister LeBlanc. So it's one appropriation from our CIRNAC department. It's kind of ours.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That's precisely why I was bringing it up.

The Chair: ...had to be somewhere else.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I noticed in budget 2018 that just over \$70 million was budgeted and then only \$6 million was allocated. It seems that the Treasury Board did not allocate that money. That's not the only budget initiative that didn't.... That's for the "New Fiscal Relationship: Strengthening First Nations Institutions and Community Capacity".

In total, \$128 million was not allocated, or was withheld, by the Treasury Board.

This is like vote 40. Why was the total of \$129 million withheld from your department by the Treasury Board?

• (1030)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Alex will explain this. In terms of the Treasury Board processes in unlocking that money it's a technical issue.

Mr. Alex Lakroni (Chief Finances, Results and Delivery Officer, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): There is a distinction between funding and approvals of the initiatives. I think in terms of your question about the money, and you refer to the fiscal institutions, there is money in the main estimates. We're asking for \$1.4 million. There is also money in the base of the main estimates. The total in this fiscal year for fiscal institutions, if that's what your question is about, is about \$19.7 million.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes, but the particular budget line was the new fiscal relationship strengthening institutions and community, vote 40. It appears to be that the Treasury Board—

Ms. Diane Lafleur (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): That's because it's three-year funding. The amount that's been drawn down is the full amount for the first year—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Six million.

Ms. Diane Lafleur: —but the vote holds the funding for a three-year period.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Ms. Diane Lafleur: That's why it might be a little bit confusing.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It appears to be that the Treasury Board did not allocate the funds because there was no plan. Is that correct?

Ms. Diane Lafleur: No, it allocated the full amount for year one, and then in year two, we'll go seek that full amount again.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We have to go back every year.

Ms. Diane Lafleur: It was \$189 million over three years. Year one, the amount for 2018-19 was \$48.8 million.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It was \$48.8 million, but only \$6 million was allocated?

Ms. Diane Lafleur: No.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That's what it shows on budget 2018: \$70 million allocated, with \$6 million withheld, is 65.

Mr. Alex Lakroni: You are correct. The total budget is \$71.8 million.

Six million was allocated in vote 10, grants and contributions. There is \$65 million to be allocated in the next two years.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay, so it is coming.

Mr. Alex Lakroni: Yes, definitely.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Very good.

Minister, in the horizons items of the 2018-19 supplementary estimates, the funding for the reconsideration of the Trans Mountain expansion project, INAC received \$312,000 for operation expenditures to support consultations with indigenous peoples. I'm sure you've heard from first nations across the country that have said that there have been no real consultations on Bill C-48 or Bill C-69. They say these bills are flawed because they've proceeded without their consent. Do you believe that the consultation process for Bill C-48, the tanker ban, and Bill C-69 was flawed, considering that's what the first nations are claiming?

The Chair: Please give a very short response.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think the question around the TMX project means that, as we went back to re-engage in this very intensive way, there wasn't really an understanding of the need for accommodation in terms of the rights holders.

What we are supporting here is the ability to go into communities and find out what their needs are in terms of accommodation as we go forward.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Seeing what you have learned with TMX, though, would that—

The Chair: I'm sorry. The question period for MP Viersen has expired.

We're moving over to MP Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio: As always, Minister, it's a real pleasure to have you here at committee.

Thank you, staff, as well. You're becoming a regular fixture as well at our committees. We greatly appreciate you all taking the time out of your very busy schedules to be here.

I want to go to the specific claim side and the rights tables, because I think in your speech you outlined some real progress that is happening in this direction.

I will read it:

An exciting new way that we are supporting indigenous people in realizing their vision of self-determination is through the recognition of indigenous rights and self-determination discussion tables...there are over 77 tables, with 380 communities...

That's over half of the communities in the country. A speech in February 2018....

I would argue what was mentioned here earlier by a previous member. There's real progress that has happened, and real progress we've never seen before as a country.

I would like you to expand on that and where you now see the path moving forward towards a full rights table.

• (1035)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: To characterize the progress is to underline the work that communities are doing and how ready they were for someone to open the door. A lot of them had already been re-constituting their nations, working on their constitutions, writing their laws, doing all these things, and now it's up to us to step up and try to keep pace with them, with their ambition. That's what has been so exciting, as more and more communities are choosing to come together and do the hard work it takes to get to self-determination.

One of the exciting examples of the type of work that has been done is in the groups that are already self-governing and have modern treaties. The work they've done on the collaborative fiscal arrangement has been a real incentive for others to see how this could be hugely important for their community, to get this work done so that they can be self-governing, because they will be funded properly in terms of language and culture and all the things it takes for them to run a government, as opposed to being funded in a haphazard way, with never quite enough, and in the way that people were treated under the Indian Act.

On both of those things, Joe Wild's approach didn't start with the Prime Minister's speech. This has been going on really since 2015. It's a new way. As you know, in B.C., people weren't really happy with the treaty process. Some had left the treaty process because they thought it was too prescriptive. We've offered another way of going about getting to a final agreement. That means that we sit down with them and work on their needs, interests and priorities.

Over a third of them have put child and family services as one of their priorities. Here in Ontario, 23 nations have worked together on a school system. The Coastal First Nations are working on a fishery. We are being flexible to allow them to work in whatever way they want to get out from the under the Indian Act and assert their jurisdiction on the areas of their priority. That's why people are coming to tables to just say, "This is what we want to work on with you". Then our job is to get out of the way so they can actually govern themselves in that jurisdiction.

Others will want to move to a full modern treaty, and a lot of those, particularly in British Columbia, are doing that. However, even in that treaty process, I was very excited to see that there are

all these prescribed stages. Two of the communities have decided that it was too prescriptive for them and they want to step aside and do it differently. They're going for a core treaty in very plain language so that seven generations out will understand what they signed, and the legal stuff will be in side agreements. Again, it's really exciting to learn at each of these tables and then watch some of the other tables pick up the good idea and say, "We could do it this way."

The other piece that's important is that these communities and the leadership, chief and council, have to have their communities with them. They have to actually have it ratified by their community. Bringing their communities with them and the type of consultation they are doing is inspiring.

I was just thinking as I was coming here—

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —the social development and the self-government work—

Mr. Mike Bossio: And the funding.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: — that's done by somebody such as Ktunaxa at the same time is just totally inspiring.

The Chair: MP Kevin Waugh will round up the end of our allocated time.

• (1040)

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Do you want me to clean up?

The Chair: Yes. No pressure.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Okay, no pressure.

Thank you, Minister and officials.

TRC completed that seven-year mandate with roughly \$60 million, and I think we all agree it was very complicated. They did some fine work over seven years with \$60 million.

However, on the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, wow, Minister, your pockets are empty. Three months ago, you added \$38 million more.

It has been a disaster. I have talked to one of the people from Saskatoon who was on the committee. They couldn't wait to get off the committee.

Now we're up to, I guess, \$92 million and counting. This can't be good. Who wears this?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I would obviously take the opposite view of that. It is good. It is—

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Is it good that we're at \$92 million?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It is important that the families were heard. It's important that there is a way of putting in place the concrete steps to end this terrible tragedy. It's what the families have been asking for, for over a decade. The TRC was not a national public inquiry. It wasn't under the Inquiries Act, and it didn't have those kinds of constraints that you see in a national public inquiry. We had to have orders in council in all the provinces and territories. We were able to make sure that, again, like the TRC, there was support and services for families. There needed to be aftercare. We learned a lot about the need for aftercare, and certainly the families have made that very clear to us.

This is a very important exercise that will help to bring, as we've heard all of this time, justice to the families, support for the families and concrete measures to make sure it doesn't happen again. As we go forward, I think we responded in a meaningful way to the interim report around the commemoration fund and the healing, as well as the RCMP's ability to deal with major cases and best practices.

From the TRC, plus everything we heard at the pre-inquiry gatherings, even the changes and the needs for reform on child and family services.... Almost every family at those gatherings had an attachment to the child and family welfare system, whether they were the victims or whether they were the perpetrators. The incidence of child abuse, sexism and racism in policing and child and family services—all of these are things that we have always said we weren't going to wait until the end of the commission to get done, but we did need families to know that they would be heard.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: When will this be done?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: They will present their final report at the end of April.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Were you shocked at how much more money they needed? You know, when this first started, it seemed they were driving backwards instead of looking forward. There didn't seem to be a coherent.... Well, they just didn't seem to be together at first. There were more people leaving the commission than staying on.

Have we learned anything by it?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think what we've learned is that it's really hard work. This is really tough stuff to hear. It is that people need a time out and need to be able to heal themselves. We are just so grateful to the families that have helped, the grandmothers council, the commissioners. This is hard work, and I know it will be worth it.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: I'm looking forward to seeing the report in April.

The Chair: Thank you.

On behalf of the committee, thank you once again for coming and sharing your thoughts, answering our questions. We appreciate it. *Meegwetch. Dobryj den.*

[*Translation*]

Until we meet again.

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