



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

INAN • NUMBER 021 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, June 16, 2016

—
Chair

Mr. Andy Fillmore

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Thursday, June 16, 2016

• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

We have Minister Bennett with us today to talk about the supplementary estimates (A) for 2016-17. I would raise with members that we have about 15 minutes of committee business to conduct at the end of the meeting. To make sure we have time for that, given our late start because of votes, I'd like to propose that we just do one complete order of questions at the end of the minister's presentation, and then, after a short suspension, proceed from there right into committee business.

Is there consent for that plan?

Looks good.

Minister Bennett, thank you very much for being with us today.

The minister is joined today by H el ene Laurendeau, the deputy minister of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, as well as the chief financial officer, Paul Thoppil.

We're pleased to have you here today. You may recall that we'll give you 10 minutes, Minister, and when there's about minute left, I'll wave a yellow card, and then a red card when we're at 10.

With that, you have the floor. Thank you.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs): Thank you. It's a pleasure once again to join you here on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people. We're also pleased to have Mr. Yurdiga here with us in that we missed you last time, and we hope that everything is progressing in your territory.

[Translation]

As the chair said, I am joined again today by our deputy minister, H el ene Laurendeau, and our chief financial officer, Paul Thoppil.

[English]

We want to thank the committee for your work to date, particularly for the ongoing study on suicide among indigenous people and communities. I am pleased to let you know that the parliamentary secretary will be travelling to Nunatsiavut in July to be with ITK as they release their youth suicide strategy.

As you know, we feel that we're beginning to address the most urgent aspects of this crisis, but I know that your work will enhance and inform the government's response to the ongoing tragedy. From

my point of view as the minister of the social determinants of health, our job is prevention and providing hope.

Here we go again. We're here to discuss the supplementary estimates (A) for Indigenous and Northern Affairs. As I mentioned last time, we are more than aware that the current estimates process is arcane and that it is particularly challenging for this committee to do the essential job of holding the government to account for proposed spending.

The President of the Treasury Board has been clear in his commitment to work on this problem so that the government can provide Parliament with more timely and accurate information.

[Translation]

In the meantime, I am happy for this opportunity to be here to answer your questions and provide you with as much information as possible so you can do your jobs effectively.

[English]

As you can see, the estimates reflect a net increase of \$1.2 billion in appropriations for our department, which brings the total appropriations for INAC for 2016-17 to \$8.8 billion. That funding, once approved, will target investments in many important areas, which I'll highlight later in my remarks and through your questions.

I want to make clear that these supplementary estimates are only the first of several, which will account for both the additional funding flowing through budget 2016 and the new funding needs that will be identified throughout the year. Your scrutiny is paramount to this process, and as more of the budget and other new funding is reflected and approved, I look forward to returning for future estimates to ensure full transparency.

[Translation]

These, the first supplementary estimates of the fiscal year, primarily reflect infrastructure stimulus as identified in Budget 2016.

[English]

However, I want to make it clear up front that just because budget commitments are not reflected in these estimates, it does not mean that no new money is flowing. Where there are existing authorities, the department can accommodate new spending using existing funding in anticipation of future estimates being approved, because they were in the budget. This is the case for the remaining budget 2016 commitments not included in the supplementary estimates (A).

For instance, by July 1, 2016, we will have advanced \$4.1 million in new funding from budget 2016 to the recipients for the existing network of 41 emergency shelters for victims of violence. That money is flowing even though you don't see it in the supplementary estimates (A).

As well, in anticipation of future estimates, we have advanced approximately \$28.4 million to first nations child and family services program providers for initiatives such as the enhanced prevention approach, which we know is working. We've been able to put it into the provinces and territories that didn't previously have it.

We have no doubt that some of your questions will be about these estimates, but some will be about what's not in them.

● (1550)

[Translation]

I would, however, like to use the rest of my time today to highlight some of the key initiatives that are included in these estimates.

[English]

The \$1.2 billion of funding sought in these supplementary estimates is primarily for investments in water, waste water, waste management, affordable housing and social infrastructure, education infrastructure, and settlement of outstanding claims. As we have discussed here before, all Canadians expect access to safe, clean, and reliable drinking water, and first nations should expect no less. Frankly, that is one of the most well-received parts of the Minister of Finance's speeches. Everybody gets this.

Through these estimates, INAC will access \$308.5 million to support first nations in the operation, maintenance, and construction of water and waste-water facilities, as well as waste-water management infrastructure. The \$1.8 million over five years is earmarked for on-reserve water and waste-water infrastructure, and is part of our commitment to end the boil water advisories on reserves within five years.

Housing is also a fundamental need. All Canadians should have access to a secure home. I think we've all been in those homes on reserve. The conditions are, quite frankly, a disgrace.

[Translation]

To address urgent housing needs on reserve, Budget 2016 proposed to provide \$554.3 million over two years for first nation housing.

[English]

Through these estimates, INAC will access \$206.6 million to address the immediate and urgent housing needs on reserve and the renovation and retrofit of existing housing on reserve.

Cultural and recreational infrastructure can provide an important focal point for community activities, contributing to social cohesion and, most importantly, a safe place for youth. As you know, that wasn't previously funded.

[Translation]

This infrastructure connects individuals and families to their communities, and contributes to the healthy development of young people.

[English]

These estimates will also provide \$34.4 million of budget 2016's \$76.9 million to support the construction of cultural and recreational infrastructure on reserve.

Budget 2016 funding will also support investments in a range of complementary infrastructure needs, such as roads, bridges, energy systems, and broadband connectivity.

[Translation]

This will help communities as they develop and grow, and support significant improvements to the environment and quality of life of first nation communities.

[English]

Through these estimates, \$104.3 million will be accessed to support the construction of public infrastructure on reserve. I'm also pleased that an additional \$96.1 million will be accessed to support the first nations enhanced education infrastructure fund and the building and refurbishing of first nations schools.

As you know, the amount for school infrastructure is actually twice what was in the platform, and this was viewed as very urgent. It means safe and healthy places in which students can learn and achieve academic success, along with the funding for the maintenance of these facilities.

I'm also pleased that the funding will help reduce the environmental and human health risks posed by federal contaminated sites. Through these estimates, \$199.9 million will be accessed for the assessment, management, and remediation of these sites. This funding will contribute to the wide range of tools to reduce the risks, including treating contaminated water and soil and removing hazardous waste.

This has been a priority of the department. When there have been extra funds at the end of the year, this has been one of the areas where we do it. Certainly we heard this week from the chief of Attawapiskat that being able to rebuild where the school burnt down was very important, so that becomes an urgent contaminated site where we will be able to progress in that community.

As you can see, there are many other important investments as well, including waste disposal, claims and negotiations, and funding for northern priorities, such as housing and a Canadian high Arctic research station.

The funding will contribute to a more prosperous Canada and contribute significantly to closing the social and economic gaps for first nations, Inuit, Métis, and northerners.

● (1555)

[Translation]

But these estimates are just the beginning.

[English]

I very much look forward to taking your questions today as well as returning for future estimate appearances.

Thank you. *Meegwetsh.*

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll move quickly into the seven-minute questions.

Mike Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Thank you very much, and thank you, Minister, for taking the time to come to our committee and answer our questions. We're appreciative of the fact that you have done this a number of times now, and it is great to see that commitment.

You mentioned in your opening remarks that not all the budget 2016 commitments are in the estimates. Can you expand on how the government is planning to deliver on the budget without putting commitments in the estimates?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely.

In order for us to move forward on all of the initiatives in budget 2016 as planned and without delay, even though not all are contained in the supplementary estimates, the government prioritized the initiatives that were considered stimulus funding and shovel ready. Those were prioritized, and they're being accessed in supplementary estimates (A). The department will then prioritize the remaining initiatives to move forward in future estimates.

We believe that things that aren't there are proceeding and flowing as required without impeding the program delivery because we can cash-manage it in the areas where we already had authorities.

It means that we have the internal flexibility within the department to advance those funds, and then, when we come back for the supplementary estimates, finance reimburses our department for what we advanced. The cash management allows us not to interrupt the flow.

We have to go after the things that we felt were stimulus, and I'll give you two examples.

In the first example, we already had authority for emergency shelters, so we advanced \$4.1 million of the new funding to the recipients for the existing network of emergency shelters, but we would have to come back for authority for the new shelters.

In the other example, we already had advanced the \$28.4 million to first nations child and family services providers for initiatives such as the enhanced prevention program. That was already in place in some provinces, but not in B.C., Yukon, Ontario, New Brunswick, or Newfoundland. We advanced that money on enhanced prevention in order to prevent children from having to be apprehended.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Great. Thank you, Minister.

We talked in the past about how the estimates show that a lot of it is grant and contribution based, rather than ongoing long-term stable funding that enables the indigenous communities to establish their own priorities and their own criteria for where the investments need

to be made and not have the stringent ties they have now, which define how much is invested in what area.

There are some communities that have established self-determination and self-government. When I spoke to the department, they said, "Yes, we're hoping that more can come on", but they're not ready yet.

Is the department looking to end those paternalistic ties? Are we looking at moving forward so that those groups that have established self-government will use them as guides and to assist those that haven't got there yet or who aren't ready yet to establish self-government?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's a great question.

I think we are trying more and more to use the self-government first nations people in the land claims coalition to be an example of how you can move forward in self-determination. They're funded with a transfer, not with this program spending that they can spend on this but not this, and that kind of paternalistic approach.

In trying to establish a new fiscal approach, we first want to urge more and more communities to get to self-determination and self-government. That's what we've talked about here before with Joe Wild and his much more flexible new approach to self-determination. In this approach, if people want it for education or fisheries or those kinds of things, we can make an agreement with them on those parts, even if they don't feel ready to do a full treaty or full self-government.

We've taken quite an interesting approach to that.

Regardless, we know we have to change the fiscal arrangement with all first nations. That means stable, predictable, and adequate funding so that first nations can plan like any other organization is able to plan, and not just one year at a time. If they don't know whether the money is coming the next year, it's impossible for people to plan. That's the work we're doing with the Assembly of First Nations, using the self-governing nations as an example.

● (1600)

Mr. Mike Bossio: Instead of just using them as an example, can we use them in helping to train those other indigenous nations to become ready, to become self-sufficient, and to reach that level of self-government, instead of the department doing it? Please don't take it the wrong way, but instead of the bureaucrats doing it, I think it makes sense to have those who have gone through it themselves, and have been burned by the fire so to speak, to lead those other groups toward that ability.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely.

I think you'll see that is happening informally, but I would love a better way of doing it. As you know, some of the former chiefs are doing that work by consulting other first nations, but it would be excellent for more to move that way.

Even some of the first nations that are successful but are not yet self-governing are also helping with the governance and the priority-setting of some of the more struggling ones. We were keen to hear when we were in Labrador that the Natuashish have reached out to Conne River to help them with setting their priorities and being able to move forward.

Mr. Mike Bossio: I understand at the same time that—

The Chair: You're out of time there, Mike. We're going to move along.

The next question is from Cathy McLeod, please.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the minister for joining us here again.

First I want to say up front that we do support the expenditures that are planned, both in the budget and in the supplementary estimates, while ensuring the effectiveness of every single dollar that's spent in terms of making a real difference in the lives of the communities.

I want to focus my comments on the comprehensive land claims and the \$44.2 million that's allocated for them. In British Columbia, of course, that is particularly important.

If you'll indulge me, I want to take maybe two minutes of my time to set the table for what I consider to be a significant concern that we have to deal with.

As I say, we have the comprehensive land claim process in the supplementary estimates. I think things started in good faith in the nineties. There was engagement at a local level and comprehensively with all the players. Somehow, over the years we have drifted away from that in terms of communities. As National Chief Perry Bellegarde indicated, we need peace in the nation at times.

In the spring of this year, 58 of our ranchers were called in and told that due to a treaty settlement, significant components of their land were going to be removed. Their ranches are tenured on leased land and some of it is owned land. This was part of the Shuswap agreements. We have 58 ranchers who were given maps with significant sections of land removed and winter pasture and summer pasture cut off.

These ranchers are very much behind settling treaties. There is nothing about them unsupportive of treaty settlement, but in actual fact, the impact is that 17% of the caribou herd is going to be lost because of being cut off from spring pasture. There are very complicated formulas. We have 58 ranchers who have probably gone from a marginal operation that made some money to an operation that will make no money.

Another example is someone who owned a trapline. He was shut down. Again, he appreciates the need for settlement. Someone else had access to his property and said, "Well, we hope that you can negotiate access to your property." His property was cut off.

As happened with other organizations, they're looking at compensation for significant business loss, as was the case with fishing licences. In this case, it's the ranching community.

I know the province is responsible for the land selections, but the province is saying the federal government is responsible for money. If there's an impact to third parties, they believe that the federal government should be at that table.

• (1605)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for the question.

I think the last sentence is really important. This was crown land. When you said it was their land, in reference to the ranchers, it was land that the ranchers were using that was crown land.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It was for 100 years.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, on the caribou piece, everybody wants to protect the caribou, and nobody more so than first nations. This is huge.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Sorry; this is the regional area of the caribou, but the tenure has been there for 100-plus years.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: There's no question that people need to sit down and have a conversation about these issues. Land claims are never easy and the issues of overlap happen, but, again, lots of first nations would love the rent paid by farmers or ranchers.

It needs to be understood that in order to be able to settle these land claims, some land is going to have to be parcelled off and given as part of the land claim agreement.

That's why, in terms of the B.C. Treaty Commission and the kinds of areas in which we're trying to work, we want to have those conversations. I think these are still good, ongoing, positive conversations that are happening.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: My point, minister, is that there were win-wins for everyone, but because there was not a conversation, the win-wins didn't happen. What we have now is a significant impact. We're sort of repeating the mistakes of the past by creating new mistakes.

I do think we need to look at the issue around third parties. We need to look at how to include people at the table during the negotiations. The ranchers could give example after example where, had they been sitting at the table with their neighbours, they could have come up with better options, such as maybe not having to cut off the spring pasture.

That's something that we need to—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think that's what we're saying. Even the UN declaration is about getting people sitting down early to find the win-win, and I think you'll see in Manitoba or in other places where they need to move to higher ground that often it's land that is occupied by ranchers, but there needs to be a conversation.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I'll leave that with you. I can give you some significant amounts later.

On May 5 you indicated.... The friendship centres do amazing work, at least in the community that I represent. They haven't got their money yet. They are laying off staff. It's an issue.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I agree with you that the friendship centres are doing amazing work, and I've been in a lot of them. In Mr. Yurdiga's riding in Prince George—no, it's my friend, your other colleague. They're doing hugely important work, and we need them to keep doing it. We probably need them to do even more in years of reconciliation and those kinds of things.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: There is just no money....

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The agreement is with the national body. The money is there; it's just that the national body needs to sign off. They needed to submit their work plan. We've now seen the work plan. I think we dealt with the work plan within two weeks. It should be signed, and that money should be flowing within days, but we only got the work plan only two weeks ago.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you.

Charlie Angus is next, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Madam Bennett. It's always a pleasure to have you at our committee. We appreciate your engagement on this issue.

I'm looking at the overall numbers the department is putting out this year. Will you confirm that the money for base funding for programs will be 2% this year?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Base funding?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, the base funding for Indigenous Affairs for 2016-17 is at 2% this year.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That is 2% of what?

Mr. Charlie Angus: A 2% increase.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Oh, it's way more than that.

Maybe Paul will go over it.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I have this on an order paper question signed by you. The increase is for base funding, so this isn't discretionary funding. In 1997-98 it's 2%, in 1999 it's 2%; 2000.... Let's skip forward to 2008-09, it's 2%; in 2015 it's 2%; and in 2016-2017 it's a 2% increase of base funding.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie—and Paul will carry this on—that's in terms of the basic escalator, and then there is program funding that goes on top of it, which has been seriously ramped up. Maybe Paul will explain how the base funding changes.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I understand how base funding works. The issue is that the base funding has been capped at 2%. Discretionary funding never was—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No.

Mr. Charlie Angus: The previous government talked about record investments, but that's money that is announced. It's specific program funding, but the base funding has been capped at 2% per year, so it's still capped at 2%, correct?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No.

Mr. Paul Thoppil (Chief Financial Officer, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): No, that's not true. We're in a transition period between what was the previous

government's 2%, and in future supplementary estimates you will see a ramp-up in escalators through items such as education.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Okay, but education is program funding.

The Prime Minister said,

As a part of this, we will immediately lift the two percent cap on funding for First Nations programs.

Budget 2016 said,

The Government has committed to lift the two percent funding cap...to establish a new fiscal relationship [of]...sufficient, predictable and sustained funding.

However, in this budget the base funding is still at 2%.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie, the 2% cap included program funding before. All the money that's being ramped up now breaks way out of the 2%.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I hear that, but I'm looking at what this government is spending on waste water and what the previous government spent on waste water, and it looks to me that they spent more on waste water, and that is separate from the 2% cap. We're talking about the base funding, which is still at 2%.

Excuse me, but with a population increase of 4.22% this year, why is it that overall program funding in the base funding that goes into the communities is still at 2%? The cap is still in place.

You can have discretionary funding for all manner of things—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie—

Mr. Charlie Angus: —such as what the previous government spent on waste water. They spent billions. The rest of the program funding was still 2%.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie, this is the problem with estimates and what's in a budget. The 2% cap is gone, and there will be a time lag until the next supplementaries in how this ramps up.

Mr. Charlie Angus: You're saying from the supplementaries.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie—

Mr. Charlie Angus: This is from your Order Paper question that shows that in 2016-17, base funding—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie, yes, but you're talking apples—

Mr. Charlie Angus: No, I'm talking apples to apples.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No.

Mr. Charlie Angus: It's 2% by 2% for every single year of base funding. It's still 2%.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No, that... When we said we'd raise the cap, we said that we would raise the cap, and that means... The project funding was also at 2% before. This is very different.

I wouldn't waste your time on this, because the 2% cap is gone.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, I don't know. I'm looking at 1995-96, when there was a 6% increase for base funding. It was 3% in 1996-97. Every single year, the base funding has been clocked at 2%, and for this year the base funding is still at 2%.

You can have discretionary funding and you can promise to put spending on special projects. That's money that gets announced in press releases. It has a limited lifespan. However, the base program funding was always the issue. That's what the National Chief had said: the one thing to move communities forward is to get rid of that cap.

Therefore, why is base funding still at 2% for 2016-17?

• (1615)

Mr. Paul Thoppil: There is a time lag between budget 2016 and what you will see in terms of escalators and the lifting of the cap in future estimates.

What you haven't seen through supplementary estimates (A), sir, is those escalators lifting the cap on education and other programs that you will see through future supplementary estimates.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: But the money is flowing.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: We are in transition, and the money is flowing notwithstanding that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, I get that, but I'm looking at the Order Paper question when I asked what your base funding was for the year and what your planned spending for the year was for increases, and you sent to me, just a few days ago, that it was going to be 2% for this year.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: That was based on the main estimates.

That's what that number is, and it does not include the future escalators beyond the 2% in the future estimates. What you got was a

Mr. Charlie Angus: Then in supplementary estimates (B), if I ask again, will we find that the 2% has moved to 4.2% or whatever, or will it remain the same?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The base funding is the base. It's the starter.

The cap used to be on everything, right? This is the base. This is what finance and Treasury Board do, and then we have to justify everything we set above that.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I get that, but again, when I look at waste water, I see that the previous government spent billions. That cap wasn't on waste water; they actually put billions of dollars into waste water. They were putting the \$1.9 billion into education, but the cap was still in place on base funding.

Right now, for 2016-17, the base funding that serves all the communities is at 2%, so is it going to be lifted, and when?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's lifted now.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, that's not in what you gave me two days ago, so shall we have this conversation in a couple of months?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's lifted.

Lifting the 2% cap isn't just talking... The cap included everything. We are lifting all of the program funding. We would

like it to be that everything was in a base that was just a transfer to first nations—that would be excellent—but at the moment, it's done on proposals. The proposals we're funding are way above 2%.

Mr. Charlie Angus: That's what the last government said. They said “record funding”, but they still had the cap in place.

The Chair: We're out of time, Mr. Angus.

Michael McLeod is next.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you to the minister and her team for presenting today.

It's been a real pleasure to see all of the different initiatives moving forward. I'm happy that some of these are being unrolled and presented to the aboriginal population right across Canada, more specifically in the Northwest Territories.

One of the concerns we had throughout the last 10 years or so was the reductions in funding to the band councils. I'm looking at your budget, but I don't know if it's in here.

Maybe you can explain if we are planning or will be reinstating band council core funding to historic levels.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Do you mean the ARO funding, the aboriginal representative organizations?

Mr. Michael McLeod: I was talking about band council funding.

I don't know what program it came from, but it was for core funding for band councils. That had been significantly reduced by the last government, and there had been discussion about reinstating it. I'm not sure if we have done that or plan to do that.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Hélène will explain how we do that.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau (Deputy Minister, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): We have increased the funding of bands based on the new needs. In terms of reinstating per se, we are in conversation with them to see what the needs are and we are addressing the needs. We have already amended a series of funding agreements to inject the new money, depending on various programs.

Mr. Michael McLeod: You're saying that if I go back to the communities in my riding and talk to them, they will have seen an increase in their core funding, or they should be seeing it.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: They will have seen an increase in their funding, yes.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I see there is money for land claims and I am very happy that some of the discussions have started up again. There have been some really sincere and dedicated people around the table talking about land claims, but we are still working with a mandate that was set quite a while ago, in the 1990s.

I am hoping that now that we are in 2016 and we have taken a different approach to aboriginal people, indigenous people, we are going to look at revising or changing that mandate, or working on some type of policy that will help us move forward. We still have a number of large aboriginal-organized governments in the north that want to settle, but there are challenges when we are still working with a document from the 1990s.

• (1620)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As you know, Michael, both the comprehensive land claims and the specific claims have been criticized in terms of what the approach was: “Take it or leave it” or “You love it, don't you?”

That is not the approach our government is taking. We are taking an approach of “What will it take to get an agreement?” Even though Cathy hasn't had a positive situation in her riding, we are trying to work with all stakeholders, including provinces and territories, to find the land that is required, the money that is required, and other, more creative and innovative ways of getting to a claim settlement. I think it is exciting.

You have heard me say before that the treaties and aboriginal government part of our department, with Joe Wild, is really leading to positive approaches, and people who walked away from the table a long time ago, thinking they were getting nowhere and this was a waste, are now back at the table and really interested in pursuing a customized kind of agreement.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I have said it publicly a couple of times: I am really keen to see this move forward. I have indicated to my constituents that I would like to see some of these claims resolved during my four-year term. I am going to be watching closely.

We have been talking about the suicides across the Northwest Territories for some time now. We have had lots of presentations, yet the concern continues. I have had two suicides in my riding since our study started. Nunavut had two suicides this week, and in fact one today or yesterday. This is still a huge issue in aboriginal communities across the board, across Canada.

I am looking for something in the budgets to try to meet some of the issues in the short term. A lot of our small communities—and I am from one—don't have any facilities. They don't have drop-in centres, restaurants, or coffee shops. There is no place to gather. There are no cultural centres. We have programs that haven't moved for a long time.

Friendship centres could fill that role. Aboriginal Head Start could be very useful to deliver programs. We have junior ranger programs and we have cultural centres that are set up and proving themselves under the urban aboriginal strategy. I am hoping that we are going to look at all the different pieces that are out there, regardless of what department they fall under, and try to see if we can find a mechanism, including the facilities and infrastructure that are needed.

I would love to see all these combined, presented, and built, one in each isolated community. I think that would go a long way, but first of all, we have to start talking about it.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I'll go at this back to front. On the urban aboriginal strategy, we hope all of you will do consultations in your communities as we go forward, because we know it has to change. We've heard distinctly from the young people in Vancouver about the importance of culture and language. Even in downtown Vancouver, they want this.

We've heard that even getting urban kids out on the land and understanding and having those skills is really important. We're working across all departments. Aboriginal Head Start, obviously, is still in the Public Health Agency or Health Canada.

We are embarking on a whole-of-government strategy. The parliamentary secretary, plus I think the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, Adam Vaughan, plus the parliamentary secretary to Canadian Heritage are going to go out to see what we can do in the consultations on the urban aboriginal strategy, but in those remote communities, even more important than language and culture and land-based programs are the recreational and cultural centres.

There are also other organizations, such as Right to Play and all of the other things that we know. Everybody's trying to help, and my personal thing would be to get some canoes and tents and paddles. If the south wants to know how they can help, then there are lots of things that the kids are asking for.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

The next question will be from David Yurdiga, please.

Mr. David Yurdiga (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the minister for taking questions from us today. Many of our questions are difficult to answer because it's such a broad spectrum.

Budget 2016 proposes to invest about \$2 billion over five years specifically towards improving on-reserve water and waste water. My first question is in reference to on-reserve potable water. Has a list of priority projects been established, and how many communities will see construction starts this year?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's a great question.

I have to tell you that this is the most fun I've had in the last two days. For all of the places that have asked or that need them, we have a beautiful diagram showing the ones that are already being built marked with a hammer, as well as the ones that are at least in the planning phase. For some of these communities, it takes a feasibility study. In the places that really have no soil, what are we going to do?

I'm happy to share this with you. It came late-breaking, since the deck was distributed. The way in which the infrastructure people are working with first nations communities so that they can get the water structures they want is really impressive.

Also, what happens is that in certain communities, one proper water plant will relieve the community of four, five, or six boil water advisories, because each of the pumphouses is on a boil water advisory now. With a decent plant and distribution system, you can get rid of six boil water advisories in one community. We're working on needs, but we're also listening to the technical advisers who advise first nations in some of the regions and identifying which first nations have the greatest need.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you.

What is the current status of the circuit rider training program, given that the first nations water and waste-water action plan appears not to have been renewed or included?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It has been expanded, actually. We know that just building the plant doesn't work if nobody can run it. Also, it means that the communities are now learning to pick something that is workable and repairable, something that their people can be trained up to use, because they want jobs for their people and they don't want people having to come from other places.

We're also working on remote monitoring systems. In certain places they can now electronically monitor the systems at a distance and then train the people how to fix whatever problem has been identified.

I think, then, that there is really good work being done on training. If you listen to one of those young men or women, as water plant operators, they're so proud. They can talk to you about E. coli or about emergency management. There is pride in keeping their communities healthy, and we know that the training has to be there.

Mr. David Yurdiga: You mentioned the program has been expanded. How did you expand it? What direction did you guys go as far as expansion goes?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Maybe Paul....

Mr. Paul Thoppil: We're fleshing out the program.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: We're fleshing out the program on emergency management, but it's also to support, as the minister said, the capacity for things like water. It's to be able to provide the training in the first nations communities, but on a rotational basis. We added \$3 million, and if we need to add more, we're going to add more.

Mr. David Yurdiga: How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have three minutes.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Three minutes—

The Chair: —Oh, sorry; we're in a five-minute round. I beg your pardon. You have 45 seconds.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you. I preferred your first response.

Okay, here's a quick one: what percentage of water treatment projects deals with upgrades versus total replacement?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That is done case by case, based on what the community needs. I guess it was in Neskantaga that the old

system had been patched up for as long as it could be. Our regional offices are to have those conversations with the communities. The first one on my list says, "repairs to leaks in water system". That is being fixed now, so it gets the hammer. There's—

• (1630)

The Chair: Speaking of the hammer, Minister, I'm afraid we're out of time.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —Kitigan Zibi, which gets 34 flawed expansions, so that's under way. It depends on which community and what the community knows it needs.

The Chair: Thank you. The next question is from Don Rusnak, please.

Mr. Don Rusnak (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Did my time get eaten up?

The Chair: No, you're good. You have five minutes.

Mr. Don Rusnak: Thank you for coming, Madam Minister.

First nations are excited about this historic investment in infrastructure and the historic investment in first nations people and indigenous people across the country, but first nations people and indigenous people don't want delays in their infrastructure projects. We've talked about this before.

When I have spoken to first nation leaders and technical service people in my riding and across the country, they've expressed their concerns about dealing with infrastructure through the department. Can you elaborate on what's been done to alleviate some of those delays within the department with regard to infrastructure projects?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think we've come to understand that the regions know their communities well and that we can move a much greater number of approvals into the region, where the regional office can just approve anything up to...what is it, \$10 million? Each regional office can approve any project that's under \$10 million. After that they have to come to the centre. Even that is frustrating sometimes, for things that are \$11 million.

Because there was such a large infusion in this budget, we're able to flow the money to many shovel-ready projects and renovations to things like housing.

Maybe Paul wants to explain.

Mr. Paul Thoppil: In terms of fast-tracking, we're also trying to lift the approvals based on risk assessment of the projects. Notwithstanding the higher dollar values beyond \$10 million, if the project is deemed less risky from a technological or financial or complex engineering perspective, then the regions will have the authority to proceed further.

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: We also have bolstered the engagement we are doing to assess the priorities, and there will be elements that will primarily be done jointly with first nation organizations at the regional level.

Mr. Don Rusnak: Does that \$10 million fast track include all the technical services related to a project? Is that included in that amount?

Ms. Hélène Laurendeau: Yes, it would be.

Mr. Don Rusnak: I've been talking to Chief Peter Collins at Fort William First Nation. He has a number of infrastructure priorities in his community, which borders the city of Thunder Bay. He expressed to me a concern about the technical part of the projects, and getting all the engineering and the environmental assessment work done. Is that going to be available for first nations, or is it going to be flowing to another organization or to technical service organizations?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As the deputy said about technical organization, there's a lot of assistance that's now coming from the committee of the Chiefs of Ontario. They're trying to help first nations with the usual stuff. On the customized issues, the regional office is able to provide the technical people. Sometimes it requires a feasibility study—sometimes—but I think we are really trying to just get on with this stuff.

There were many frustrations as I went coast to coast to coast. They thought they had had this approved and somebody asked for another feasibility study, or somebody asked for something else. Once we have a plan, we want to be able to effect the plan.

● (1635)

Mr. Don Rusnak: The requested allocation in budget 2016 is \$255 million over two years to help support infrastructure programs from the department. What specific infrastructure projects are being funded under this allocation?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's in your deck, I think.

On other infrastructure, Mr. Chair, I can table the most current list.

The Chair: Please, and thank you.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think we almost have the Attawapiskat contaminated site on some of our lists now, meaning that the things we hear about, we add.

On other infrastructure, it's things like connectivity to Nunatsiavut in Labrador. It's road repair at Tobique First Nation. It's Sheshatshiu road upgrades. It's fibre optics. Those are the kinds of things that go in the column under "other".

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The next question is from Arnold Viersen, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister Bennett, for being here today. I appreciate the opportunity to ask you a few questions.

I see in the estimates that a lot more mental wellness teams are being brought in. As you probably know, we're currently studying the state of suicide in indigenous communities across the country. I hope that you're following our study as well.

I see you've increased the number of these mental wellness teams from 11 to 43. We've heard from different people that it is difficult to come up with some of the professionals, or even finding professionals to work on these committees. I'm just wondering how finding people is going, and who you are finding.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's a great question.

When we met with the NAN youth on Monday morning, it was quite shocking to realize that this young man, at 23 years old, has been a mental health worker for four years with no training. When a crisis breaks, it's very hard if the people who are there in a community really don't have the training.

The formal health teams will be able to move into a crisis area as fully trained organizations, and then we will endeavour to get the mental health capacity built up in each of the communities, with two specifically for Attawapiskat because of what they're going through right now.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You're definitely leading in the direction I was looking for. They said it's very difficult to find appropriate people to work on these teams. Chief Isadore Day said that often it takes years to build up the trust to even have the ability to do anything.

Are these teams being made up of local people? I guess that's the question. Is that an avenue you're looking at to some degree? He said that often spiritual leaders are the people who are doing these jobs anyway and, as you mentioned, often without training.

Are these the people you're looking to to perhaps give the training and to build the team around, say, three or four individuals from the local area?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: There are a couple of things.

The teams that are mobile will be set in regions and then will go in during a crisis. We are learning a lot, as you say, in terms of how we build capacity. We heard from the kids when we were in some of these remote communities that trust in speaking to somebody locally is not there. They're worried about confidentiality, worried about telling their stories, so sometimes having somebody come from outside feels safer to people.

I've been very interested in looking at Peggy Shaughnessy's program, RedPath. They go in, but then they stay in touch online and are able to stay in touch with people they've made that primary relationship with.

We're exploring all of these. Obviously, it's in Dr. Philpott's department. My job is to make sure that these kids have hope and are getting what they know they need in language, culture, land-based programs, housing, and water, the things that the kids are really worried about, as well as the recreation centres that weren't previously on the agenda.

● (1640)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: How many members are on one of these teams, generally? Do you know?

The Chair: Keep to one minute, please.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's being negotiated, but I think the moving teams are of four people. I would sort it out, but it's in the backgrounder to the press release that came from Dr. Philpott.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Where are these 43 teams going to be located?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Those 43 teams are in communities that have been deemed as high risk. There are the four moving teams, and then the 43 teams will be.... In ramping up, there will be a priority-setting as to the people who really have been struggling and need it most.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It's the 43 teams I'm talking about. What is the composition of those looking like? Is it going to be two or three local people giving training?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: What it looks like will be determined with the first nation.

I think you know that sometimes it's the great hockey coach or the great teacher. There are other people, we know, in communities. We can build their mental health capacities so that they can do the most they can for these kids. As opposed to a health care problem, we get these kids feeling good about themselves by creating health.

The Chair: Thank you.

The next question is from Gary Anandasangaree, please.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Minister and your colleagues, thank you very much for joining us once again.

I want to talk about child welfare. Last week we had Cindy Blackstock here. She gave a very engaging presentation, and we had a very candid conversation.

I'd like to get a sense from you of your strategy for child welfare and how we move forward.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for that question. It's something that has bothered me for a very long time, I think even in my first set of remarks at the AFN. Overhauling the child welfare system is what we have to do. As you know, we have more kids in care now than at the height of the residential schools. This has to stop.

If kids are not able to keep their language, culture, and personal cultural identity, they do badly in health choices, education, and economic outcome. We are really interested in looking at a new way of doing this. We as a government don't see ourselves just as a funder anymore; we see ourselves as a provider, and that means working with the provinces and territories.

I'm very pleased that Minister Duclos will have a summit with the social services ministers, I believe in September. We'll have a conference that leads into the negotiations concerning how we overhaul this.

In the meantime we're working with Dr. Blackstock to again stand up the advisory committee. They had two good reports on the changes that needed to be made. In this first tranche, we've been able to provide the enhanced prevention dollars that allow it to be in the provinces that didn't have it until now. We are going to make these changes, particularly around the delivery of services in a culturally based way.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: She is suggesting that the adequate amount of funding for that is about \$200 million per annum. I know that the way we're structuring it, most of our resources for it are back-loaded.

How do we gradually get to \$200 million? I think one of the frustrations she expressed was with the concept of incremental equality, which is a problematic notion. How do we get to a point at which we actually have equality of funding?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We want to move to a system that has a plan and is funded appropriately. In the meantime, I think we are worried about capacity in terms of what is on the ground and how we can build capacity in communities. It's not only the money; it is about the capacity and about principles.

Dr. Blackstock and I talk often about how removing children from their families because of poverty seems absolutely wrong. They have a nice project in North Dakota and South Dakota whereby you cannot remove a child for poverty. If there's no food in the fridge, we should get some food into the fridge.

Some of the values and principles around the rules, such as about every kid having to have their own bedroom or their own cupboard or about there not being a fire extinguisher.... I think many families have felt that these are just excuses to take the kid away. Also, there's apprehension....

Everybody knows that we have to make changes, because the risk-averse way this is run now, about.... Obviously, you don't want to have a child who has been harmed at all. Going back to the basics, the best interests of the child have to include cultural safety.

• (1645)

The Chair: You have one minute, please.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: I'm going to ask you to put your doctor hat on, or professor hat. We're hearing about the lack of indigenous doctors, and the discussion we had last time was about psychiatrists.

What do we need to do, how do we recruit, and how do we make sure we have people going through the system who will eventually build that capacity that we're talking about? How do we get there?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Gary, I think I've been worrying about this for all the time I've been here, but I think that organizations like the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada have ended up with MOUs with the AFN. We have to get kids excited about that.

I have to say that in the early days, all the brightest and best kids wanted to be lawyers because of land claims, and we actually have to persuade them that being a doctor or an engineer or all of these other things is also exciting.

First we have to make sure these kids are finishing high school, but we need role models in place. I think we can do that with virtual classrooms, exposing kids to great indigenous doctors, great indigenous nurse practitioners, and great social workers, even online, even if they don't have somebody in their home community.

People like Dr. Evan Adams and Dr. Alika Lafontaine are amazing people. So is Dr. Marcia Anderson in Manitoba.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We're going to get there.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: The final question is a three-minute question from Charlie Angus, please.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Madam Minister.

I want to follow up on my colleague's questions regarding our testimony with Cindy Blackstock. She came for the supplementary estimates (A) because there wasn't any money for Jordan's principle. In the following supplementary estimates, will we see money for Jordan's principle?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely. We are absolutely committed to broadening the definition of Jordan's principle and making sure this happens.

We are going to honour what was in Jordan's principle, which we all voted for, and it means the provinces and territories have to work together. We'll make sure those kids get what they need.

As you know, in the present definition, not one case qualified. That is unacceptable, so we are very much taking to ourselves the broader definition in terms of children with need, not some funny formula that makes sure nobody qualifies.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Well, thank you, because we're still seeing children being denied orthodontics at 99% and 100%. I know that's over in Health Canada, but if we don't see money for Jordan's principle, the denials are going to have to continue.

I want to ask about child welfare. The government has identified \$121 million. Cindy Blackstock puts it at \$200 million, but the government has only \$71 million, so even in five years the shortfall will still be higher than what the government has put as its minimum base.

She said to our committee that the government is closer to being in contempt of Parliament than being in compliance. How do you get there if in five years you're still not going to be meeting the needs?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think, again, that we are committed to changing the system and putting reforms in place. We also know that right now we're paying other families to look after kids who are being taken from their families because of poverty. We have got to change this system, and we're going to get it done.

It was really important to ramp up the money, and then we will get this done in terms of... There will be the adequate money for the provinces and territories to fund this adequately, and also to fund healing for the moms so that they go back being moms again.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I have to cut it. They give me only three minutes. This guy is a tough guy, so this is my last question.

I just want to get this straight on the issue of the temporary investments, the money that's flowing.

You say the 2% cap is off on base funding. What have you identified as the escalator, then, to address all that base funding that right now is only at 2%? Is that in the budget for this year?

• (1650)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie, again, the base funding piece is separate from the program funding.

Mr. Charlie Angus: I know.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The program funding used to be capped, and that's where we got into big problems on—

Mr. Charlie Angus: The base funding has been capped for 20 years, so do you have an escalator?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No, the whole budget was capped.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Yes, but I'm looking at the base funding. Do you have an escalator for it?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Program by program.... A lot of it will be at 20% in—

Mr. Charlie Angus: I have 2% here, and this is what you gave me. I just wonder if there is an escalator. That's all I'm asking for.

The Chair: We're over time, Charlie, I'm afraid.

Mr. Charlie Angus: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Charlie, base funding is not how much money is flowing. It is the beginning. It's no less than 2%. Then we get to add on all these exciting dollars program by program on the various things—

The Chair: Okay, thank you. We'll have to leave it there. Thank you so much—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: The cap was there on everything—

The Chair: Thank you.

It's a sign of how compelling that subject matter is. Thank you for that.

Thank you all for coming today and for sharing your information with us. It's very helpful.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's over?

The Chair: It's over.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We'll be back.

The Chair: We going to suspend for a short time and come back in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the Parliament of Canada Web Site at the following address: <http://www.parl.gc.ca>

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

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la *Loi sur le droit d'auteur*.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web du Parlement du Canada à l'adresse suivante : <http://www.parl.gc.ca>