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Chair

The Honourable MaryAnn Mihychuk

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• (0850)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP)): Good morning.

[Translation]

Hello, everyone.

[English]

Today I'll be taking over the entire committee.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Romeo Saganash): We have the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs for the main estimates 2017-18: vote 1 under Canadian High Arctic Research Station, and votes 1, 5, 10, L15, and L20 under Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

Good morning, Madam Minister.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs): Good morning.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Romeo Saganash): I'll leave the floor to you now.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you, Chair. It's great to be back here at the committee, acknowledging that we come together on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people.

I think you know my colleagues. The associate deputy minister, Diane Lafleur, has been with us now for a year. Is that right?

Ms. Diane Lafleur (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Yes.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: She came from Finance, so she is a very important part of our team, knowing how this stuff works. We also have the chief financial officer here, Paul Thoppil. I am very happy to have them by my side.

To begin with, we want to thank you for the ongoing great work, and particularly the study on default prevention and management policy.

[Translation]

In my opinion, this policy could be a lot more effective and must be modernized.

[English]

It's really important that we get this piece of work done, and hopefully you'll be able to give us some solutions in a system that even Chuck Strahl said needed to be changed, when he was minister.

As you know, we are reviewing the previous government's policy in partnership with first nations to ensure that we are facilitating capacity and promoting self-governance and decolonization. The goal is to build capacity and not spend money that should go to the people in the communities on other things. We are very much looking forward to the committee's findings and recommendations. I assure you that your important work will inform future reforms.

As you know, I am here to discuss the department's 2017-18 main estimates. I am pleased that we have the opportunity to have that discussion with the benefit of the important context of the additional investments proposed through budget 2017. As always, we have to look at these two documents together to provide a much more accurate picture of my department's proposed spending for the 2017-18 fiscal year.

[Translation]

I would like you to look at the briefing note distributed to all committee members.

[English]

I regret that this is not yet translated, which is unacceptable, but we will give it to you for future reference regarding the targeted investments and the way that, hopefully, we are honouring our commitment from last year that we are indeed a department that knows how to get money out the door. The allocations are there, particularly on infrastructure. We're pretty proud of the performance to date.

The 2017-18 main estimates, if approved by Parliament, will provide the department with approximately \$10.1 billion in appropriations. This is a net increase of approximately \$2.6 billion, or 34%, over last year's main estimates. The net increase primarily reflects the historic investments announced in budget 2016 to improve the socio-economic conditions of indigenous people and northerners, as well as the funding required to settle specific claims in 2017-18.

It is also important to note, as we have discussed at previous estimate meetings, that main estimates do not include the further investments outlined in budget 2017. We will come back to you with the supplementary estimates in order for us to access the money that was in budget 2017. Through the last two budgets, the government has committed \$11.8 billion over six years to improve the lives of indigenous people in Canada.

● (0855)

[Translation]

We are also striving to make sure that the funding allocated is distributed to the people for whom it is intended.

[English]

Of the historic investments made in budget 2016, 100% of the money allocated in fiscal year 2016-17 to my department for infrastructure, capacity-building, and employment strategies has been spent. These investments are making a significant and tangible difference in the lives of indigenous people in Canada. Some key examples of progress include the lifting the 19 long-term drinking water advisories and the 201 water and wastewater projects that are already under way. This means that nearly 200,000 first nations people in our country will soon have access to clean water, something most Canadians take for granted. All Canadians are embarrassed that it does not happen at the present time on first nations.

More than 3,200 homes are being built or renovated in first nations communities, which will begin to address the chronic shortage of homes and shocking disrepair of a significant proportion of the current housing stock. One hundred and twenty-five school projects are moving forward in more than 100 first nations communities, which will serve more than 135,000 people. Repairs and renovations to more than 200 child care centres will be completed by the end of this year, ensuring that they will provide the safe and healthy environment that every parent expects for their child. Forty-one community health centres are also under construction or undergoing major repairs and refits. Since broadening the government's approach to Jordan's principle, we have approved more than 3,300 additional requests for supports and services for first nations' children.

[Translation]

There is a lot left to do, but I am proud of the excellent work and the results achieved so far.

[English]

Budget 2017 will invest an additional \$3.4 billion in indigenous priorities over the next five years. It builds on budget 2016's historic investments of \$8.4 billion in government-wide spending on indigenous programs and will result in a combined increase in funding for indigenous programs of 27% by 2021-22. National Chief Perry Bellegarde was clear when he said, "Budget 2017 makes important and positive investments to help close the socio-economic gap for First Nations".

We are working in partnership with first nations, Inuit, and the Métis to ensure that these investments lead to meaningful positive change for indigenous peoples in Canada. These investments are being made in the priority areas of indigenous communities,

including health care, education, housing, and other critical infrastructure. These new budget 2017 investments will build, repair, and improve infrastructure on reserves and in northern and Inuit communities; provide support for post-secondary education, skills development, and training for indigenous people; deliver better health outcomes for first nations and Inuit; support Métis organizations in building their capacity; and preserve and promote indigenous languages.

While the 2% cap has been lifted through the historic investments in budgets 2016 and 2017, new long-term fiscal arrangements must be designed in full partnership with first nations. We have signed an MOU with the AFN establishing joint technical working groups on sufficiency, predictability, and mutual accountability, and the work is already under way. Through this joint process, we will establish a new fiscal relationship with first nations, which will provide predictable, sustained funding to support their communities' priorities. We are also working on the funding arrangements with the self-governing first nations.

In a poll released last year, 79% of non-indigenous youth believe they will see meaningful reconciliation in their lifetime. Canada's young people want to see meaningful reconciliation.

[Translation]

They are pushing us in that direction and the government will do everything it can for us to reach our objectives.

[English]

A fundamental part of achieving that meaningful reconciliation is making the necessary investments to close the socio-economic gaps between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Canada. The investments outlined in the 2017-18 main estimates, along with those in budget 2017, represent significant progress toward closing those gaps.

Meegwetch, mahsi' cho, nakurmiik. I look forward to answering any questions you have.

● (0900)

The Chair (Hon. MaryAnn Mihychuk (Kildonan—St. Paul, Lib.)): Thank you so much.

Questioning now begins, and our first questioner is MP Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): Thank you so much, Minister, for being here today. I think we all celebrate the historic investments that are being made for indigenous communities. It is going to make such a significant improvement in so many lives, for indigenous people across this country.

My first question is regarding a local issue of my own indigenous community, the Mohawks in the Bay of Quinte. They are one of the largest reserves in the country. Some of the concerns they have revolve around recognizing the needs of larger reserves and those in the southern part of the country, because their needs are also great.

They feel that sometimes, because they are in the south and are located close to urban areas, wealthier areas, there is a perception that they are also wealthy and therefore can take care of themselves to a great extent.

In my community, last summer 40% of their wells went dry. Most of the reserve has GUDI wells and, therefore, is subject to boil water advisories. Last summer in particular, they were waiting upwards of a week, and more sometimes, for tankers to bring water to their tanks because of the overwhelming need that they have.

We recognize the massive need that exists in the north, and the message has gotten through very clearly. Can the minister ensure that the southern ridings will also receive the kind of attention they need for their own water and infrastructure needs?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thanks very much.

I think that's a really important question because the perception of people in various communities is reality. We need to make sure that people understand that in the water situation in Tyendinaga, for instance, or for the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, we are moving on all water systems across the country.

It's not only that. We inherited a huge deficit in the water and wastewater systems, but as we have committed to lift all boil water advisories, it means that we're not only working on the communities with boil water advisories, but are also working on all of the communities that have medium- or high-risk systems that could tip into boil water advisories. It means that we're trying to get all systems across this country down to a low risk. That is happening for the Mohawk at the Bay of Quinte, where we have lifted all the boil water advisories for which our department has direct responsibility. There are private systems that we are concerned about, and we will work with the community on those, but it is a matter of going forward.

The flip side of that, Mike, is that sometimes it is the larger and sometimes southern communities, the communities with more capacity, that are much better able to do the project or proposal-driven funding, and get the money for those. Even on housing, we found that we had to do it in three tranches so that we could build up the capacity of the most needy communities, because otherwise the money went to the proposals sent in by the communities that have the most capacity to fill those proposals out.

It's a bit of both, because I think that in the north they would ask, "How come these communities that have better capacity are gobbling up all the funds?" I think we're trying to show that we're trying to be very fair about this. It's needs-based in a way, but we really do have a direct responsibility to the larger urban communities or closer southern communities—the less remote, absolutely.

• (0905)

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you very much, Minister. I know that the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte will be happy to hear that you've said their concerns are being heard.

I'd like to move to third party management. I know that you're probably going to get a number of questions on it, but initially I would like to say that in our study of third party management, the one thing that seems to resonate most is that all the carrots are with the third party managers, and all the sticks are with the indigenous communities that are being impacted by it.

By that, I mean that it's very difficult for these communities to dig themselves out of the hole that exists and, in a lot of cases, not through their own fault. It's just that they have rapidly growing communities and the funding hasn't kept up with that. Third party managers come in and are rewarded handsomely to be there, and that further penalizes those communities that are stuck in this hole.

I'll just say that I know there isn't much time left for you, and I'm sure other people will ask the same question, but I'd like to hear about what you feel are some of the potential solutions to help resolve these third party management issues.

The Chair: You only have one minute.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think you know that I've never understood third party management. I think it doesn't build capacity, it's too expensive, and it doesn't work. We're pleased that we're now down to 10. I think Paul tabled this chart on third parties with your committee

On co-management, for all of those, these are resources out of the community that could be going to their people. I'm really interested in the work this committee is doing, whether it's with the First Nations Financial Management Board, or even with CESO, where 700 volunteers are willing to go to help with better reporting and better ways of building actual capacity so that the band managers can be from the community and have great jobs in the community.

We want to work on this, and even with our post-secondary dollars, where a lot of the polytechnics and community colleges are teaching that kind of work, so that we can have those community members being able to set priorities and to do these kinds of administration jobs, not just accounting.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you so much, Minister.

The Chair: Our questioning now goes to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for joining us today.

I have a bit of a framing of my question, but in the end, it's actually a pretty simple question.

A year ago you went to the UN and indicated that we were going to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This year, of course, you said at the UN that you were removing the objections of Canada to the paragraphs around free, prior, and informed consent. I thought that was included the year before, but having said that, I note that it was official this year.

According to *The Globe and Mail*, you said that “‘free, prior and informed consent’ merely means there is a commitment to developing policies in conjunction with Indigenous people on matters that will affect them”. Also, stated the *Globe*, you said, “‘This is about making decisions together’ from the inception”, and that it’s not about “‘putting some fully baked project in front of people and getting them to vote yes or no.’”

Of course, National Chief Perry Bellegarde continues to say that the UN declaration gives communities the right to say yes and the right to say no.

I’m going to target that. We know that there are complicated issues such as pipelines, but there are also very simple issues, and we have a simple issue in the riding I represent. It’s a KGHM mine called “Ajax”, and it’s important for the industry, communities, and first nations to know what this is going to mean. The first nations in the area, the SSN, undertook an extensive environmental process, and they have definitively stated that they do not give free, prior, and informed consent to this project. They’ve been very definitive. They went through an extensive process, as it’s a mine.

The federal government now needs to make a decision about that mine. In regard to the fact that the SSN has said definitively that they will not give free, prior, and informed consent, does that mean definitively that the federal government will say no to this project?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It’s a great question, because I think there are the bigger pipeline questions that involve a number of first nations, and there are also projects that are very specific. I think the reason that the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers and so many other industry organizations are very much in favour of clarity on the UN declaration on free, prior, and informed consent is that, in the past, without developing projects together, you ended up in court or with blockades, and eventually the project doesn’t go forward anyway.

● (0910)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, Minister, but I guess this is a really cut-and-dried example.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: There was an environmental assessment process done by the SSN. They have worked with the mining companies since the beginning. They have said no. Does that mean the federal government is saying no?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I will defer to my Minister of Natural Resources and the Minister of Environment. We are setting in place a new process for approvals that includes indigenous knowledge and the communities. I can’t tell you right now, but it is really important that we honour our commitment.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: The expectation of the community, the SSN, is that it definitively means no. Obviously, it creates great confusion for industry, for investment, that you weren’t able to give a definitive answer. Having said that, I think we’re still no clearer about what you said at the UN and what your commitment to implementation is actually going to mean. I think this confusion continues.

The next area I want to focus on is the inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women. I think all parties are now on board.

Canadians are in favour of having an inquiry that is successful. I’m hearing an increasing concern from families and a number of people. In regard to this inquiry, we’ve heard about communications officers being fired, about the lack of an appropriate database, and about regional meetings being cancelled. We’ve also heard about budget offices not being set up. Significant dollars, however, have been spent already without the inquiry actually meeting families.

To what degree are you monitoring this and are going to engage and ensure that this process is successful?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you for the question.

I think it is really important that this commission be successful and that they fulfill our mandate to put in place concrete solutions to end this terrible tragedy.

I am also hearing excellent stories on things like the family information liaison units and what Kim Murray is doing here in the province of Ontario—setting up support and retreats for families of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. As we go forward in navigating the system, I think we will see that it’s working. We are working on shelters, on housing. We’ve always said that we’re not going to wait for the results of this commission to get going on the things that have to be. For me, overhauling the child welfare system is the most important thing. As we heard in the pre-inquiry gatherings from coast to coast to coast, the attachment to a child welfare system, by victims and perpetrators alike, was very much part of the problem and that’s why we have to fix it.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: So, I guess—

The Chair: Please be brief.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Within the structure of the inquiry, did you set up a requirement for regular reporting or regular monitoring? Are you keeping a very watchful eye on it, or did you set it up so arm’s length that the ability to intersect with what’s going on is very limited?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It was very important that the commission be at arm’s length. That said, it is supported by the Privy Council Office, and we are in regular touch with them. As minister, I need to know what’s going on in that I am responsible, but I cannot interfere with the work of the commission.

● (0915)

The Chair: Thank you.

The questioning now goes to MP Romeo Saganash.

[Translation]

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would also like to welcome the minister.

[English]

I want to begin with what you ended with in your presentation this morning. You talked about meaningful reconciliation with first nations and indigenous peoples in this country. You talked about a poll in which 79% of non-indigenous youth said they believed they would see meaningful reconciliation in their lifetime. I want to start with that, because I find it intriguing and troubling on one hand that you would say that—and your government has been repeatedly talking about reconciliation—yet on the other hand you continue to fight a compliance order by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. We are in the 464th day since the tribunal rendered its decision and talked about your government racially discriminating against first nations children. We're in the 464th day since that decision.

How is that attitude with respect to the tribunal consistent with reconciliation? How is approving the Site C dam, in spite of the opposition of first nations to it, consistent with reconciliation?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's a great question, and I think that as we go forward, particularly on the issue of the tribunal and the compliance orders, we are really serious about honouring the commitment to overhaul the child welfare system to honour the compliance order of needs-based funding. We are doing that, we are listening, and we know that we have to change how we do this. As Grand Chief Ed John says, having \$30 million go to lawyers in Vancouver—

Mr. Romeo Saganash: If that's the case—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —to apprehend children...

Mr. Romeo Saganash: If that is the case, Minister, why are you challenging the authority of the tribunal?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: At no time are we... We welcome the advice of the tribunal, and we are going forward based on theirs. We were thrilled to be able to go to the last hearings, and with the agreement with the northern communities on a remoteness quotient, we are making significant progress on this. We put the money in place; now we have to get the reforms done. It is not okay that more and more kids are still being apprehended and kids are dying. It is unacceptable, and for the deal that we have right now in Ontario, where the agency in Sudbury was able to say, "Please give the prevention dollars to communities, not to agencies...". And that's what we've heard coast to coast to coast. It's about jurisdiction. It's about communities knowing best about how to look after their children. This is not about an agency-driven approach; it has to be about communities and communities being able to look after their kids.

In some communities, such as Beausoleil First Nation, none of the kids have been apprehended. At Cat Lake, when we were there, it was really sad to hear about the number of children who have been taken out of their communities. We have to find out what's working well and help communities prevent their kids from ending up in the system at all. That is the way that we're going to fix this and prevent these tragedies.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Well, I think a lot of people, especially those who continue to oppose the Site C dam, for instance, do not understand or do not really appreciate your talking about reconciliation when they continue to oppose projects like that. I

think they're right in saying that that attitude is not in keeping with reconciliation with indigenous peoples in this country.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Romeo, I think it's really important that as we go forward with reconciliation, we recognize that indigenous people don't speak with a unanimous voice and that there are going to be some projects that certain first nations approve of and others don't. That's how we're going to work: nation-to-nation, government-to-government, in a way that is about recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership. There will be issues on which there is not unanimity, and we have to find the best way forward in that respectful approach going forward.

● (0920)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I think I have two minutes left.

I want to talk about this. The National Association of Friendship Centres made very clear requests prior to the 2017 budget for long-term, sustainable, predictable funding for 118 friendship centres across this country. They play an important role in our cities and urban areas across the country. We just finished a study of suicide among first nations, including indigenous youth and children, and we noted very clearly the important role these centres play in this country.

From 2014 to 2016, the government provided annually \$51 million dollars to friendship centres, to the urban indigenous strategy. The 2017 federal budget committed an investment of \$118.5 million over 5 years. If my math is right, that's a decrease of about 50%. We're talking now about \$23 million per year. Can you reassure us today that the friendship centres will continue to get that sustainable, predictable, long-term funding at the level they used to get?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes, they will have \$53 million per year ongoing, and we are very interested in this committee or members of this committee understanding that in the reforms to the urban programming, the friendship centres and their programming are essential. But there also were, as you know, concerns about distinctions-based programming, and some that needed to be Métis, Inuit, as well as other programs. We also know that in a whole-of-government approach, things like housing, early learning, child care, and all of those are also important, but the friendship centres, I think, know they will be able to continue their important work.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

That ends that round of questioning, and we move to MP Michael McLeod.

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

Thank you to the minister and her staff for the presentation, and for giving us some time to ask questions.

As the minister knows, we have been very busy in the north, and some very good things have been happening in working forward with the aboriginal governments on land claims and self-government discussions. We probably have an historic high number of discussions going on, and I'm very excited about that. There have been some new approaches the minister has brought forward, and I have to thank her for doing so.

There are still some concerns. We're getting some really good recommendations and advice from people like Mary Simon, who has provided her report. I haven't been able to digest all of it, but at first glance there are some good recommendations. She flagged some issues that have been concerning me and other people in the north for some time. There are some areas that are very blurry and continue to be blurry.

For example, the discussions at the different tables that were set up for the Kelowna accord talks do not include, for the most part, the Northwest Territories, and do not include the Métis. Our Métis don't belong to any national organizations. Most of the first nations also state that nobody speaks for the Métis at the national table. They need to find a way to get them to the table, and I think we need to work that through.

An issue I have raised several times, which Mary Simon flags also, is the blurry way funding is allocated to the north for aboriginal people and northern communities. We don't have reserves. We have public communities, but they're all made up of mostly aboriginal people, except for the larger centres. Even the larger centres have large aboriginal populations.

We have a hard time tracking what is coming forward and what's available for us to qualify for. Over the last couple of budgets we got better. We distinguished between on reserve and off reserve. However, it has also created additional concerns, because now other departments are pointing to money that is going to the indigenous affairs department and saying that the responsibility is there now. However, if we look at the money they've allocated historically, most of it in the north doesn't come from indigenous affairs. Housing, for example, does not come from indigenous affairs, and it's one of our biggest challenges. The last budget provided \$36 million over 11 years, which is a little over \$3 million a year. In the north, this is probably six houses, and maybe good for only repairs, yet it's one of the biggest issues that has been flagged as a cause for what's happening in our communities on the social front.

I wanted to ask the minister if she would commit to talking to her colleagues and doing an internal review in her department on the funding formulas in the government that apply to the north? Mary Simon has also pointed out that maybe the Arctic needs to be a little better defined; the three territories and some of the aboriginal governments that are out there should be budgeted a little differently. Maybe you could talk about how we could try to provide better clarity on funding for aboriginal people.

The mandate of indigenous affairs is mostly restricted to reserves, and we don't really have reserves. We have two reserves, and we have problems with funding there too.

● (0925)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you so much. I must say that the northern members of Parliament in the indigenous caucus have done

an amazing job in explaining to both the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Infrastructure this reality of not having reserves in the north. Certainly the parliamentary secretary is clear that north of 60 doesn't work anymore, because she lives at 58 I think.

It's a matter of our making sure that we're clear about a northern Arctic policy framework, and that's the serious work that begins now. How do we close those gaps that you're articulating in terms of a whole-of-government approach to the north with the territories and the provinces that have these concerns, and work towards the future together?

As you know, in the territories, where there are self-governing land claims, groups like the Inuvialuit in the Northwest Territories receive their own allocation for funding and for housing. We're excited that now the Northwest Territories and the Inuvialuit have signed a memorandum of understanding.

Again, it's a matter—not even within territories—of how you deal with what the land claims organizations and the territory are able to plan and the priorities they are able to set together for the good of all the people.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I have a quick final question. I think there needs to be a meeting of minds to try to find a way to satisfy the territorial governments, the aboriginal governments, the municipal governments, and the different populations in the north. Maybe what Mary Simon is suggesting in her report—to have a meeting with all the northern premiers, the indigenous leaders, the Prime Minister, and key ministers to talk about a new way to do things—would be a good start.

Can you talk about that a little bit, and see if you could maybe commit to doing so?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely. We need to know whether the work needs to be done separately and then come together with a summit as we move towards that Arctic policy framework, or whether we start with a big meeting and then divide up into working groups. I look forward to advice from the Northern Development Ministers Forum, which Quebec is hosting this year. I also look forward to advice about where we could do this work and what the structure would be to actually get this right so we have a forward plan over the next decade or decades that will really look after the north.

Indigenous tourism is another area where we really feel that with the Northwest Passage, we have to have a coherent plan as to what happens on that coast.

● (0930)

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

Questioning now goes to MP Arnold Viersen.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. It is much appreciated. I know you have a busy schedule, and it's early in the morning.

Minister, you and your government have often referred to a renewed nation-to-nation relationship with indigenous people. I know that right on the party platform web page one of the buttons refers to "a new nation-to-nation" relationship.

However, I put in an Order Paper question to your department, and they couldn't say what this nation-to-nation relationship was because, in their words, "Indigenous and Northern Affairs...does not define who is a nation."

How are you supposed to have a renewed nation-to-nation relationship if you don't know who they are?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's a great question. At the very first meeting with the Prime Minister, the Inuit said they didn't want it to be nation to nation, but to be Inuit to crown. Straight out of the gate we know that we have to be listening to how this should be.

The Métis nation sees itself as a government, as a nation, and that is pretty straightforward. In terms of the 634 Indian Act bands, there are ongoing conversations as to what is a nation. When you go to Haida Gwaii, I think you are able to clearly see that it is a nation, but in the 41 negotiating tables we now have that sort of aggregation—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: So you would say that "a new nation-to-nation" relationship was a misnomer?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: No—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You shouldn't have said that in the campaign.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's exciting because it's coming forward. The 41 tables would compromise about 250 Indian Act bands, so 41 tables are now thinking of themselves as a collective that would like to draw down jurisdiction as a nation.

This is the exciting work that's going on. Whether they want to draw down jurisdiction on a fishery or on an education system, these are the completely flexible and innovative approaches to nationhood that are ongoing.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Out of the six hundred and some first nations we've talked about here a lot, how many of them have you met with? Would you say they constitute nations, or have you met with the individual tables?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Both. Often we go to an Indian Act band or a first nation, but these 41 tables that have ongoing discussions about nationhood, about jurisdiction, are important. Obviously, in Yukon we have a number of self-governing first nations, and we meet with them annually in a summit with the Government of Yukon. That is a very exciting table where the new fiscal relationship is being sorted out with those self-governing first nations.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: The question I put on the Order Paper asked how many nation-to-nation meetings the government has had.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: There are many nation-to-nation... whether it's the bilateral meetings with the Prime Minister—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Because that's the promise that you made in the—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —with the Métis Nation of Canada, the bilateral meeting or the summit, the Prime Minister was there. At the ITK meeting, the Prime Minister, with the regions of the ITK, was there. When the Yukon...we were there.

But the 41 tables is where the exciting movement is taking place, where we will start to see those aggregated groups based on language. RCAP said that there were probably 60 nations in Canada, about 60 language-based aggregations.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Have you met with each of those 60 groups then?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's up to them to come together and invite us, and we go wherever we're asked.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: All right. I have about half a minute left.

I have three friendship centres in my riding, one in Slave Lake, one in High Prairie, and one in Peace River. I've met with all of them. Each one of them says that they struggle for funding because they're not part of a particular first nation. They're just an organization in the town, essentially. I think Peace River said they have 7,800 visits in a year. They're dealing with a lot of case files. They have 30 active case files every month.

What are you doing to help the friendship centres? When I was in Quebec, I met with the entire organization of friendship centres in Quebec. They were asking for \$6 million. Have they received that \$6 million?

• (0935)

The Chair: Sorry, but your time is up.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As I said in response to a question from Mr. Saganash, the work of the friendship centres is essential—it's imperative. I know you're not from Prince George, but I remember just being amazed at the work that happens in some of these friendship centres on employment, training, housing, and early childhood education.

There was a funding arrangement before it went through the national organization—

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We are now looking at the way that we can ensure that the friendship centres know they're going to get the money they need.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: The questioning now goes to MP Gary Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair and Madam Minister.

Indigenous languages are quite critical to the long-term sustainability of communities. I know we've invested another \$89 million over the next three years into indigenous languages. Can you maybe give us a sense as to what kinds of results we can expect and what kind of framework we're trying to put together in terms of the sustainability of the languages?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It's a great question. I think it begins with the Prime Minister's commitment to codify, for there to be a law to protect, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages coast to coast to coast. It means that the money there continues the kind of program funding that has been there for those really important initiatives.

Minister Joly and I, and a number of...are working to figure out what this would eventually look like, and whether we should be building up institutions instead of just program funding. It means as we come to consult on a law, would there be an indigenous-led institution that determined how much money they need? What would those dollars look like, from the very academic approaches to certain languages and possible extension, to the kinds of emerging canoe trips that Christi Belcourt and others are doing, to the kind of amazing program around a glossary we saw in Haida Gwaii, to the work that my department is doing all the time on language and culture in early childhood development and K to 12?

It is an approach where eventually, I think, it will be indigenous-led institutions that will make those determinations of the efficacy and value of the money we will dedicate to do this really important task.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: I know you and I were at the University of Toronto student-led gathering a couple of months ago. I do wonder what kind of role our institutions have, especially universities, in preserving languages. I know that U of T, for example, has an array of language courses and research, things like Arabic studies, and so on. What kind of support can institutions expect and how do you expect institutions to play an important part in this?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Again, this will be a whole-of-government approach. Obviously SSHRC and a lot of the granting agencies are there helping academics with their research, but we need a coherent approach. One of my former patients is the U of T expert on the Athabaskan languages, so there are these pockets of great stuff happening coast to coast to coast. As we become more intentional and coherent about this, we need to know what's happening in all these institutions and be able to support them in a whole-of-government way, obviously working with provinces and territories and Universities Canada and the polytechnics to find out what works and to put the money on the things that really work.

• (0940)

The Chair: You have about 50 seconds.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: With respect to offenders, I know the prison numbers are quite staggering and I think last year we surpassed the 25% mark. I know we're investing an additional \$65 million over five years in services. What can we do in terms of proactively making sure that the justice system doesn't commit the same mistakes that it's made in the past?

The Chair: Be very quick. You have 20 seconds.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I'd like two hours on this, if I could, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It is hugely important that we change what happens so that these people do not end up in prison at all in the first place. Too many times I hear that people only got back in touch with their language and culture when they were in prison. This

is not acceptable. I was at Headingley Prison, and almost every woman in that prison had not been sentenced to jail and was there on a breach of conditions. We have to change this system. The Minister of Justice is doing very important work on the Criminal Code, but we have to change the way we do everything. The kids of every single woman who is in that prison end up in care. This is part of a comprehensive approach. But I am very, very keen for us to change this whole thing around, because it is just not working for indigenous people in this country.

The Chair: Thank you.

The questioning now goes to MP Cathy McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, Madam Chair. At the two-and-a-half-minute mark, could you let me know? I want to get two questions in so we'll cut off if one's not quite done.

The Chair: All right.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Minister, a lot of work has been done and I'm particularly proud of some of the work that's been done around the First Nations Property Ownership Act. I look at the First Nations Taxation Commission and some of the other work that's being done by some of these organizations, which have truly created opportunities for the future. It started as a small group with a dream of how it could help its own communities, and then it grew from there. I see the First Nations Property Ownership Act opt-in legislation, and I think it's very important to say that "opt in" is something that will give some communities a future that they choose. A lot of work has been done, and I know that the finance committee actually toured and met with a number of chiefs who were interested in that particular piece of legislation coming forward.

I notice in your department plan for 2017-18 that you will continue to develop opt-in legislation. I understand that that legislation is essentially ready to go. As with indigenous languages, are you willing to commit that this is going to be something that your government is committed to moving forward on in the short-term future? I know that tremendous work has been done on this, and again, it's voluntary. It's giving certain bands opportunities that they choose in terms of their own future.

I guess that's my question: are you going to table legislation?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As you know, this is now known as indigenous land title initiative, and it's something that we're committed to continue to fund, the kind of work that Manny Jules and other leaders have done, particularly in your region.

As you know, it needs to be opt in because a lot of communities don't like the idea that non-indigenous people or companies could own parts of their reserve, and I think Gary Merasty used to describe it as having a paper punch go through their community such that they no longer had integrity in their community.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I understand my two—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: That's why it's opt in, and we are absolutely working toward the kind of legislation that would allow this land title initiative.

• (0945)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I mean, it's just a matter of moving forward, because I think there has been many years' worth of work, and I look again at the taxation piece and how successful that has been for some communities who have decided....

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: It was a joint working group, Cathy, between the First Nations Tax Commission and my department, and they have a technical discussion paper. I don't know if that's been shared.

Ms. Diane Lafleur: The first nations proponents right now are reviewing that proposal, so we're waiting for their feedback before we know what the way forward will be.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you.

With my little bit of time left, of course, it wouldn't be a committee meeting or a question period if I did not—

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think I know where you're going.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: —now note that it's been 17 months, and you continue to say that transparency is important. National Chief Bellegarde says transparency is important. He says his mother says it's important.

But 17 months have now passed, and we've had very compelling testimony that's come to this table on the transparency issue. I know that the chiefs and the AFN have a role to play in this, but the more important role is for community members. An online survey is fine, but we're 17 months in. I can't tell you how many emails and phone calls I get from people saying, "Please keep working on this issue because it's absolutely unacceptable as a community member."

I'll give you an opportunity to tell us when, perhaps, we can expect transparency for first nations community members and how you are engaging, not just the chiefs at the AFN but the people who have huge concerns about this issue more generally.

The Chair: All that in five seconds.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Well, it is important that the committee understand that this is a serious issue that you've been dealing with here, and I think, Cathy, you need to know that we're really serious about this in a holistic way. In the First Nations Transparency Act, only the money that came from INAC technically was accountable.

What I'm hearing from communities is that they want to be accountable for it all, whether it's the casino money, whether it's.... But it needs to be to their membership. This is the key to transparency. It's about their citizens having access to this. We know that band-owned companies are victim to predatory practices if the numbers around how they run their company or how much they pay their engineer ends up being used by their competitors.

We want to make sure.... And this table that has been set up and the work we're doing with the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association is.... How do we do the thing in the way Kelowna was asking for, a First Nations auditor general? How do we do this properly in a holistic way?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: The information they were compelled to share was less than any company shares with stockholders.

The Chair: We are moving the questioning over to MP Rémi Massé.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rémi Massé (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Bennett, the committee is always pleased to welcome you. Thanks also to the members of your team. I know a lot of work goes into preparing for your appearance.

In recent months, I have had the opportunity to meet a number of times with the chiefs and teams of the Micmac communities in the region, the Gesgapegiag and Listuguj communities. I am especially proud of our government and of you. Something was set into motion after our government was elected. We have clearly grown closer, the MPs and the MPs of neighbouring communities. Major discussions began 17 or 18 months ago. It is very positive and everyone truly appreciates the renewed energy brought to the table by our prime minister, you and our government.

Major investments have been made. These include for instance a Micmac language immersion program partially funded by your department and by Canadian Heritage. This is generating growing interest in the community in reconnecting with their language.

Investments have been made, specifically to improve a cultural centre and for training programs. For example, I attended one hour of training on how to build a traditional canoe. I really enjoyed it. It is made from roots and birch bark; it was great. The young people are really excited and really enjoy this training program.

Not everything is rosy, of course. As you know, our committee is completing its report on the suicide crisis. This is especially tragic. We have heard powerful testimony. We want to help overcome this challenge. The issues involve not only health, but also infrastructure, access to housing and drinking water. The needs are so great.

I was struck by something. A few of the witnesses we met were hesitant to take part in the committee's work. They said they had submitted numerous reports, had met with us multiple times and that, unfortunately, they had not seen any concrete changes.

I have two questions. First, what could you say to those witnesses who are hesitant to meet with us, who are afraid of certain concrete measures or afraid that other measures might not be taken?

Moreover, in the main estimates that were tabled, there is clearly a substantial increase in votes. How can we work to resolve the major problems on our reserves? I know this is the 50,000 dollar question, but I would like to hear your opinion. How can we address the important issues that are affecting aboriginal communities right across Canada?

• (0950)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Thank you very much. I appreciate your commitment and your visiting the communities, trying to find solutions and being engaged with the communities to identify their priorities. The great success of the Micmac language is an example for the whole country.

I am very concerned about the suicide crisis. This is a fundamental problem, as our report card shows.

[*English*]

That's the report card of how we're doing, and it's terrible.

But it's really important, here at this committee, that we are looking at my role as the minister, in some ways, of the social determinants of health, as opposed to health care. We have to get at the young people,

[*Translation*]

to give them hope, their own identity and self-esteem, and to make them resilient.

[*English*]

I am also really concerned that these root causes—

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —of language, culture, and being competent on the land, all of these things, are really important to these kids. I'm also very concerned about adverse childhood events —

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —the issues of sexual abuse in care. Why are these kids numbing themselves with drugs and alcohol? We have to get to what is actually happening—

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: —if we're going to turn this thing around.

The Chair: The questioning now goes to MP Romeo Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to refer to the report produced by Mary Simon. I think it's a pretty good report, with important recommendations with respect to housing in particular. In her concluding remarks she talks about the noteworthy signposts that have happened from the Constitution Act of 1982, Canada's endorsement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the commitment of your government to implement the that commissions calls to action. She says in her remarks that “these advances must become both roots and branches in a new Arctic Policy Framework”. I would suggest that these advances must also become the roots and branches of any future policy development of your government, any future legislation of your government, because the rights enshrined in the UN declaration, as you know, are

considered to be the minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of indigenous peoples in this country.

If you are true to your commitment to adopt and implement the UN declaration, I think we need to be clear about it. I asked you this question about a year and a half ago. Maybe you weren't prepared to answer it, so I'll take this opportunity to ask it again a year and a half later. We need to do away with that confusion of not responding clearly to questions about the UN declaration's call for free, prior and informed consent.

I have proposed a legislative framework. It's Bill C-262, which I introduced in April last year. It would provide that legislative framework as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as your leader proposed during the last election and recommitted to after being elected. Will your government, yes or no, support Bill C-262?

• (0955)

The Chair: Please make your response very short.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think the commitment to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is there to adopt and implement. How we go about it will have to be done in a collaborative way with first nations, Inuit, and Métis. We have to discuss how we see this working, not only at the federal government level, but also in the provinces, the territories, the municipalities, and the private sector. How do we breathe life into the rights that are in section 35? If it is important that those be codified, then we will work towards that with the Minister of Justice. It is a matter of collaborative approach, as opposed to just one piece of legislation.

The Chair: The next round begins with MP Michael McLeod.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to ask the minister a question on something that came up during my visit to some of the communities in the north regarding the Beaufort Sea moratorium and the study we're going to conduct in that area.

The budget indicated that there was \$18 million for the study, and we were quite excited about that. However, looking at it a little more closely, half of the money would go to Nunavut, leaving us with a little over \$9 million. We understand that part of that will also be used for administration, so we're getting a little bit nervous that there's not going to be enough money there. The department is saying that they'll be using about half a million dollars of that money a year for administration.

The last study cost over \$22 million. For this one we're going to try to do it with \$6 million or less. We know the work is important. The last study found a number of new species, and showed a lot of information that we need, but we know there's more that has to be done. Stock assessments are not cheap. There's a lot of work that needs to be done with traditional knowledge.

We won't be able to accomplish all of these things if we're going to stick to the formula and the work plan envisioned now. I wanted the minister to maybe take a look at it, or commit to taking a look at it, and give me some comfort—or give the north some comfort—that we will do a proper study in this area.

•(1000)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Sure.

As you know, as part of the moratorium we have committed to the five-year science-based review of the decision and a one-year consultation with the territories, and indigenous and northern communities and industries on the details of that review.

We will do whatever it takes to get the proper science to make a proper decision. As you know, industry has not felt there was an economic case to do those explorations, at the same time as knowing about this bill in response, and is thinking that the difficulty and risk involved in these kinds of explorations and projects is too great for them to go forward.

Again, we want to explore all the science around spill response and the kinds of things we could do. Also, as you know, incorporating indigenous knowledge and respecting will very much be a part of that. So again, as you know, it's only the offshore that is covered by this moratorium. The land-based programs are separate from that.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I'm hoping that we're going to have enough resources to do a proper job. I'm also hoping that we'll do a really good job providing good communications. Nobody has talked to the Inuvialuit yet on some of the issues, especially the oceans protection plan and the coastal strategy, so I'm hoping we're going to be able to improve it. In light of President Trump's directions on reversing some of the decisions made by the previous president, I think that communications are going to be even more important.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Mike, there is money for engagement and we're really serious. This has to be bottom-up when making a decision. Also, I must say that Joe Biden's wise counsel was that reality has a way of intervening. So if markets aren't supportive of projects where there is no economic plan and there is huge environmental risk, then green light/red light is a little bit separate from what governments decide.

Mr. Michael McLeod: But at the same time it has to be a balanced review.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes.

Mr. Michael McLeod: The review is not only to indicate what is there on the environmental side, but we also have to be looking at what it would take to make it an attractive place to invest for oil exploration. We have no ports, no navigational aids, no oversight, no spill response. In this country we have the longest coastline, yet we have no infrastructure at all.

I'm hoping that we're going to take a balanced approach and look at it from both sides, because there is huge potential for oil development there. At the same time, there's a huge potential for a real crisis to happen if there were a spill, so I'm hoping that while we have the five years and we're doing a lot of work in that area, we will start looking at it in a serious, balanced fashion.

Maybe the minister could give us a comment on what she thinks the impact will be of Trump's decision on this.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Budget 2017 has what, \$2 billion over 11 years, for infrastructure? The things you're describing, such as ports and all the real deficits in infrastructure needs in the north, are very interesting across the whole of government in terms of economic opportunities for Canada and the idea of what is a real Arctic policy framework. It means the tourism piece, and all the opportunities need to be explored, but we're serious about a scientific review, with engagement on the possibility of oil and gas.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Questioning now moves to MPs Arnold Viersen and Cathy McLeod. I understand you're splitting the time.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: It depends how long he goes.

The Chair: We'll start with you, MP Viersen.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to continue in a similar vein as my colleague Michael McLeod. On the northern development ban, the west coast tanker ban, and the northern gateway project, I know that a number of people have been concerned that consultation didn't take place on those decisions—particularly on the northern gateway. Some 30 bands had signed on to that project, and those weren't deals for agreements, but as equity partners in that project. What kind of consultation took place with those bands in terms of the “no” answers? We see consultation having to take place for a yes answer; was there any consultation for the no answer, specifically on northern gateway?

•(1005)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think again, in how we have to make decisions, it is about the big picture, whether it's the boreal forest or whether it's the risk that people in Kitimat identified of the tankers having to move many times. That was viewed as a very significant risk—what would happen once that oil ended up on a tanker. In the balance, that was the decision that was made. As you know, we—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: On the consultation, repeatedly you shot out, saying, “Oh, we have to consult, we have to consult”, things such as that.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes, and I think—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: At the end of the day, that just comes into your calculation for the decision.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: As you know, the Minister of Natural Resources and the Minister of the Environment are embarking on significant principles as we go forward now that include indigenous knowledge and indigenous consultation. You know it's never going to be unanimous.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: For sure, but did you consult with the "no" side? When the government made the decision to stop the northern gateway, did you consult with the 33 groups who were in favour of the project?

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes, absolutely, and I think you consult with all sides. As you know, the Nisga'a are not particularly happy with the tanker ban in that they had an energy corridor that they hoped would be an economic advantage for their community. It's a matter of how do we have a process that people believe in so that they're not upset; they understand that the outcome isn't what they wanted, but they understand there was due diligence in the process and that all the voices were heard? I think that's what we have to continue to do. It will be refined as the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Natural Resources come out with a new robust process where people will really understand—

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That gets back to the whole nation-to-nation relationship, and you have to define that at some point.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Yes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: All right. Thank you.

I'll share the rest of my time with Cathy.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Thank you, Madam Chair. Hopefully I'll get to ask two questions in my very short time.

Regarding the Qalipu Mi'kmaq, I've received emails and phone calls on this particular issue. Around 68,000 membership applicants were rejected, many of whom had actually already received Indian status.

There have been some very strange stories from people who didn't receive information up to the filing deadline. We've had situations where personal details were entered wrong. In one case of biological twins, one was given status and the other wasn't.

What are you doing to resolve the issue? What criteria were used in assessing applications? Are there appeal opportunities? It sounds as though it is a very difficult and confusing process that needs to be fixed.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: Absolutely. As you know, the process before had been agreed upon by the previous government and the previous chief, which resulted in probably 10 times more people applying than had ever been considered before. Therefore, there is no difficulty now as the criteria were applied and certain people were rejected. There is an appeals process going on now. A certain number of people have taken advantage of the appeals process, and a great number haven't nor have they submitted any new information. With the ministerial special representative, Fred Caron, we are doing the due diligence and understanding that status issues are different from what a community can do in terms of membership or whatever. There will be some people who require and will gain status, but there are others who will, perhaps, self identify as Qalipu and want to be associated with that community. However, as you know, a lot of the

people who applied had had no attachment to that region for a very long time.

• (1010)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I appreciate that. It just seems that when you have biological twins getting different answers, we certainly have a process.

Again, I do need to go back to transparency because we obviously haven't had enough time in terms of talking about this issue. Whether you are federal, provincial, or municipal, things aren't public. They are not shared with community members. If I want to know what the mayor of Kelowna or an MLA in Saskatchewan make so that I can compare...if it seems reasonable what the mayor of Kamloops makes, what the funding and opportunities are, I can do that. I can do that because it's not just available to the people of Saskatchewan or the people of Kelowna, but available broadly. The ability to compare is important. I know there has been considerable discussion about own-source revenue, and I appreciate that the federal government does not have responsibilities there.

The Chair: We're running out of time in this period.

I know it's so difficult when we have such a short time.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: She can have my 30 cents.

The Chair: All right. Agreed.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Companies are responsible to shareholders so you can go on and see what Telus or Bell does. To suggest that companies or bands are impeded because of the personal information.... If you go on to transparency, what is put down in terms of own-source revenue does not create any disadvantage for a company. Quite frankly, it's much less than what you would get as a shareholder. Again, Minister, it's 17 months. People are pleading. I think they have every justification to expect a framework and something in place that is comprehensive so that they can make decisions around their leadership.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: There's no question that we're working towards an approach of mutual accountability. That means our department too. We think that we should be accountable. However, I don't think I'm going to change my mind on a competitive environment of people bidding on contracts. If a private company that doesn't have to disclose anything is then bidding on the same contract as a first nation company that has to disclose everything, that is not even.... I don't think I'm going to change my mind on that.

The Chair: MP Romeo Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have five minutes.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to go back to my last question because the answer wasn't clear. In some ways, at least for me, it was disturbing.

One of the problems we encountered when we enshrined section 35 of the Constitution Act in 1982 was that the concept of aboriginal rights was so large and broad that, most of the time, we ended up in court because we couldn't agree on what was contained in section 35. At least with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it's pretty clear what those rights are. Those rights are fundamental human rights. I don't understand why anybody wouldn't accept them or why anyone would have to engage and consult.

My fundamental human rights are not up for debate. They exist. The UN Declaration confirms that the rights enshrined in the UN Declaration are inherent—they exist because we exist as indigenous peoples. It shouldn't be a problem for any government, especially if the government committed and promised and accepted all of the calls to action made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

If you read it carefully, under the heading, "Reconciliation" in that report, where it calls for action, there are two calls for action—43 and 44. Number 43 calls on the Government of Canada, the provinces, the territories, and the municipalities to fully adopt and implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework for reconciliation in this country. It's pretty clear and you've accepted that. Why is it such a problem to say yes to a bill proposing to do exactly that? Bill C-262 proposes to implement calls to action 43 and 44.

•(1015)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I think your advocacy on this is absolutely essential to Canadians' understanding what this means to indigenous rights.

I think we need to be moving on the vagueness in section 35 and how we can breathe life into this section of our Constitution, how we can implement the 94 calls to action, including the one that says we will adopt and fully implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. How we do that with provinces and territories is really important. There are some people who think a federal law that wouldn't be implementable in provinces and territories could be competitive with our being able to hold up section 35 as the way we need to go forward as Canada.

I look forward to those conversations and finding the best possible way for people to understand that we're serious about adopting and implementing the UN Declaration across all government departments and with the provinces and territories. It is going to be an interesting conversation with the provinces and territories, the municipalities, and the private sector.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Since the adoption or patriation of the Constitution Act of 1982, we live in this country in what the Supreme Court calls a "constitutional supremacy". Since 1982 we have moved from parliamentary supremacy to constitutional supremacy. The Supreme Court has confirmed over the years that even in your own areas of jurisdiction, federal and provincial, those jurisdictions are not absolute because, among other things, aboriginal

rights exist. I think Bill C-262 is one of the ways to move forward on reconciliation in this country.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: When I chaired the subcommittee on persons with disabilities, there was an ongoing debate whether we needed a Canadians-with-disabilities act, whether because we had the charter we needed to stand up a much stronger part of the Human Rights Commission, or whether we needed a disability commissioner. There are many ways for us to be accountable, for us to walk the talk of things. I'm very interested in working with you and figuring out the best way to do this in Canada.

The Chair: Before we conclude the question period for our committee, the final round of the seven-minute period goes to MP Rusnak.

Mr. Don Rusnak (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): I would say they saved the best for last, but....

Mr. Mike Bossio: We already went first.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Don Rusnak: As the minister may well know, and likely knows, the Chiefs of Ontario are having their special assembly here in Ottawa this week. I'll be meeting with several chiefs and the regional chief later on this afternoon.

Part of our role as members of Parliament is oftentimes to listen to complaints from individuals, whether in our constituency or because of who we are and the work we do here. Like a lot of my colleagues on this committee, I hear a lot of complaints from first nation communities and indigenous communities right across this country, including in my own riding. Of course, after the last 10 years of our friends' government on the other side, we heard a lot of complaints when we came into government. I'm noticing a lot fewer complaints now, especially with the historic investments in first nation and indigenous communities, but I'm still hearing complaints.

Can the minister update us a little bit on what she has done in terms of streamlining processes within the department and fixing problems that she's heard from first nations communities? I know she engages right across this country and speaks to a lot of first nation leaders—and not only the leaders, but also community members and community groups.

Can you update this committee on what you've done to streamline that and on what changes you've seen?

•(1020)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: One of the things that was clear to me when I first became minister was that too much, really, was done here. We needed to bulk up the work of the regions, who know their communities best and how they make decisions. Unlike other departments, where the regional director general has the ability to approve things up to \$100,000 or something, in our department our regional directors general can approve up to \$15 million. That means on such things as water systems, housing, and all of those things, they know the projects in the queue and they know they can get them done quickly and can respond to the areas of need.

We are trying to do a much better job of getting real relationships with communities from our regional offices and building that up. We're getting the people here in Gatineau out more, and getting the regional directors general in more, as we begin to develop policies that actually can meet the needs of those communities themselves. It's about putting human faces on the needs, about getting people to see those houses and to watch older people carry big water bottles back and forth from the pumphouse. You have to see it in order to do it, and I think that's been one of the changes.

I'm proud to say that almost 30% of our department is now indigenous. We know that their presence is now a critical mass in moving the culture of our department forward in a good way, and with the kind of respectful relationships that people expect.

Mr. Don Rusnak: In your speech to the committee, you indicated that all the money allocated to the department had been spent in 2016. In terms of major infrastructure projects, I know that the infrastructure gap and the infrastructure problems in especially first nation communities are enormous. How far have you gotten in eliminating a lot of the backlog in terms of INAC infrastructure? You mentioned the water projects that are moving forward and the communities that have been lifted out of their advisories.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: We'll get this translated and give it to you, because it's good news. As we explained with the water and waste water, it's now up, and all of these are on the NRCan geomatics site so people can track the projects, whether it's the \$275 million for the 201 water and wastewater projects, 965 housing projects, 125 education projects, 167 culture and recreation projects, or 88 energy sustainability and connectivity projects. On fundamental community infrastructure there are 135 projects.

It's really important that we let people know what's happening, and one of the things that's been really important to me is understanding the importance of comprehensive community planning. If the community comes together and decides what it needs and when.... That includes not just the chief and council but the principal, the police chief, the nurse, the youth counsel, and the elders counsel. Bring those people together to plot out what they need. That gives us the ability to work with them over time, whether on the youth centre, the arena, or the road.

We know that if you do comprehensive community planning, it also helps child welfare, as with Cindy Blackstock's touchstones of hope process, or whether it's missing and murdered aboriginal women, you can actually see the way forward. Then the chief and council are able to report back to their communities on the priorities

they set and the order in which they want them, and they can get that done.

We have 160 of those comprehensive community plans in now, and 75 more being funded, but we think this is going to be the way. With the long-term funding we have, we're able to know that we'll get this water thing done. But on the housing deficit and all of these things, we are also listening to communities about what they need.

For me to be in Kashechewan and see that there were 52 duplexes, five-bedroom duplexes, most of them, that were put there.... The community wanted housing. They didn't want their community to still be in Kapuskasing. They know they are going to move to higher ground, and so they chose projects that would be taken down into four pieces and moved to the higher ground. When you get out and see what happens and you listen to a community about what they want, you can then see the kind of progress that we know we need to make. Incenting those comprehensive community plans has been really important to all aspects of closing these gaps.

•(1025)

The Chair: So is your coming here to this committee to talk about estimates.

That concludes our question period. I want to thank all of the staff for participating, and especially Minister Bennett for coming.

We need to do the votes before we suspend.

We're going to start our vote on the main estimates of 2017-18.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will now dispose of the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2018, minus the interim estimates the House agreed to on March 21, 2017.

Do I have unanimous consent to deal with all of the votes in one motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$892,342,724

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$44,496,010

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$8,966,692,676

Vote L15—Loans to native claimants.....\$25,903,000

Vote L20—Loans to First Nations in British Columbia.....\$1

(Votes 1, 5, 10, L15, and L20 agreed to on division)

CANADIAN HIGH ARCTIC RESEARCH STATION

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$20,963,206

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the main estimates votes for 2018, less the amounts granted in interim supply, to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we need to suspend, and we will move in camera to deal with some committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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