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Chair: The Honourable Anthony Rota



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• (1205)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Anthony Rota (Nipissing—Timiskaming, Lib.)): We'll call this meeting to order.

Welcome to the fifth meeting of the House of Commons Special Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to the order passed on Monday, April 20, the committee is meeting today to consider ministerial announcements, to allow members of the committee to present petitions, and to question ministers, including the Prime Minister, about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tomorrow, May 8, Dr. Andrea McCrady, Dominion Carillonneur, will give a special recital to mark the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day.

[*English*]

Victory in Europe Day, VE Day, commemorates the formal acceptance of Germany's surrender by allied forces at the end of the Second World War. While the pandemic prevents us from gathering to celebrate in person, tomorrow at noon the voice of our nation will ring out in remembrance of this milestone in our history.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee. I would like to remind members that, as in the House of Commons or committee, they should not take photos of their colleagues or film the proceedings.

[*Translation*]

In order to facilitate the work of the interpreters and to allow the meeting to proceed smoothly, I would ask you to follow some instructions. The video conference will be interpreted as in normal meetings of committees and in the House.

In the lower part of your screen, you can choose the language: floor, English or French. Please wait until I call on you by name before you begin to speak. When you are ready to speak, click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone, or hold the space bar down while you are speaking. If you release the bar, your microphone will revert to mute, just like a walkie-talkie.

[*English*]

Honourable members, I would like to remind you that if you want to speak English, you should be on the English channel. If you

want to speak French, you should be on the French channel. Should you wish to alternate between the two languages, you should change the channel to the language that you are speaking each time you switch languages.

Please direct your remarks through the chair. Should you need to request the floor outside of your designated speaking time, you should activate your mike and state that you have a point of order.

[*Translation*]

If a member of the committee wishes to intervene on a point of order raised by another person, you should use the "raised hand" function to indicate to the chair that you wish to speak. To do this, click on the "participant" button at the bottom of your screen. When the list appears, you will see the raised hand option beside your name.

Speak slowly and clearly at all times. When you are not speaking, leave your microphone on mute. It is highly recommended that you use a headset with a microphone.

[*English*]

You have to remember to switch languages.

Should any technical challenges arise, for example, in relation to interpretation, please advise the chair immediately by raising a point of order, and the technical team will work on resolving them. Please note that we may need to suspend during these times in order to correct a problem.

I want to remind the honourable members to mute their microphones when they are not speaking.

If you get accidentally disconnected, please try to rejoin the meeting with the information you used to join initially. If you are unable to rejoin, please contact our technical support team.

Before we get started, please note that in the top right-hand corner of your screen is a button that you can use to change views. Speaker view allows you to focus on the person currently speaking; gallery view allows you to see a larger number of participants. You can click through the multiple pages in the gallery view to see who is on and how many more participants there are.

I understand there are no ministerial announcements today.

We will now proceed to presenting petitions for a period not exceeding 15 minutes.

I would like to remind members that any petition presented during the meeting of the special committee must have already been certified by the clerk of petitions. In addition, to ensure a petition is considered properly presented, the certificate of the petition and each page of the petition for a petition certified in a previous Parliament should be mailed to the committee no later than 6 p.m. the day before.

Now we'll go to presenting petitions.

Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Mr. Chair, five years ago when Parliament passed Bill C-14, then justice minister Jody Wilson-Raybould said that it represented a finely tuned balance between access and safeguards. It also included a five-year review.

Petitioners on the first petition I'm presenting are very concerned to see Bill C-7 before Parliament, which removes safeguards ahead of that five-year review. Petitioners specifically mention their concerns about the removal of the mandatory 10-day reflection period, which can already be waived in certain circumstances. They are concerned about reducing the number of witnesses required to oversee it and ensure that a request has been properly made. I commend that petition to the consideration of the House.

The second and final petition that I will be presenting today is with respect to Senate Bill S-204. This would make it a criminal offence for a person to go abroad and receive an organ from a person who did not consent. This responds specifically to concerns about organ harvesting in the People's Republic of China involving Falun Gong practitioners and increasing concerns that this is being or about to be applied to Uighurs as well.

Canada can and should take action on this. Petitioners are noting that in the previous Parliament there were bills on this, Bill C-350 and Bill S-240. Now, in this Parliament there is a bill, Bill S-204, and the petitioners hope that this 43rd Parliament will be the one that gets it passed.

• (1210)

The Chair: We will go to Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's an honour. This is my first occasion to present a petition in our virtual format of the COVID-19 committee.

Thank you to you and your staff, Mr. Chair, for developing a system that allows us to present petitions electronically.

The petition I am presenting today, which was previously approved, is from a number of constituents who are concerned that we pursue the Paris Agreement to hold the global average temperature increase to no more than 1.5°C. The Paris Agreement itself embeds in it the concept of "Just Transition" with a capital "J" and a capital "T", the concept of just transition ensuring fairness and support for all workers in the fossil fuel sector.

The petitioners call upon the Government of Canada to move forward with an act to ensure just transition and to ensure adequate funding so that workers and communities dependent on the fossil fuel sector receive meaningful support to ensure security in their lives in the transition to more sustainable energy use.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Chair: Those are all the petitions for today.

I want to thank the honourable members for their usual collaboration and now we'll go on to—

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, on Tuesday, at our COVID-19 committee of the whole meeting, I was asking a question which started at 12:56:06 and was cut off at 1:00:32, so I still have 34 seconds of time remaining in my question time of five minutes. You said it could be no more than five minutes but that I had up to five minutes. Thirty-four seconds leaves a lot of time to have a quick question and a quick response.

If you believe that my time was unjustly cut off and that it was unfair treatment of the official opposition when we were raising our points of order, I would ask that the 34 seconds be tacked on to the opening round for the opposition and credited to Rosemarie Falk, who will be leading off for the Conservatives.

The Chair: Normally what happens is the chair uses judgment, and with 35 seconds, there isn't enough time obviously for a full question or answer, most of the time.

I'll take it under advisement. I can't allot it.

I want everyone to know that I do have a timer next to me and I am timing the questions, and I will be treating the answers the same way. If it's a 25-second question, it will be a 25-second answer.

Thank you for bringing that up. I believe that issue has been remedied. We've taken a little bit of the chair's ability to give judgment on it, but it will be from now on. Thank you.

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Chair, 34 seconds is a considerable amount of time to do a short question and a short answer.

The Chair: I appreciate the advice. Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

We'll now proceed to the questioning of ministers.

I would like to remind the honourable members that no member will be recognized for more than five minutes at a time and that members may split their time with one or more members by so indicating to the chair. Ministers responding to the questions should do so by simply turning on their microphone and speaking.

Our first questioner is Ms. Falk.

• (1215)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Mr. Chair, yesterday, Elizabeth May and the leader of the separatists declared oil to be dead. It's certainly not dead, but it's dying under the Trudeau government. Will the Prime Minister stand up for Canada's energy workers, or does he agree with the fringe left and those who want to destroy our country?

Ms. Elizabeth May: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. May.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Chair, I believe that the language that the honourable member just used is unparliamentary—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: That's not a point of order.

Ms. Elizabeth May: We can have differences of opinion, but it is absolutely—

Some hon. members: Debate.

Ms. Elizabeth May: —unacceptable and violates my privileges to—

An hon member: Debate.

Ms. Elizabeth May: No, it's not debate.

I would ask the chair to rule on that, not the member from the Conservative Party.

It is unacceptable to assert that anyone who wants to make a point about our economy is trying to destroy the country. This allegation is a violation of my privilege.

An hon. member: She was also named by the—

The Chair: Order. I didn't recognize anyone. I don't know who is speaking, so I'll just start talking myself.

I want to remind honourable members to have respect in their questions and in their answers. When you refer to someone, please refer to them respectfully. This is a committee of the House, and I would expect no less of the honourable members.

We'll go to the right honourable Prime Minister. You have 16 seconds.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau (Prime Minister): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

As I pointed out this morning in my press conference, we cannot move forward on a transformation of our energy sector without supporting the workers in that energy sector. We need their innovation and we need their hard work if we are going to lower our emissions, if we are going to reach our—

The Chair: We'll go to Ms. Falk again.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Mr. Chair, it has been 43 days since the finance minister promised Canada's energy sector liquidity through the Business Development Bank of Canada. For 43 days the finance minister has failed to deliver on that promise. These delays cost jobs and they are costing us Canadian businesses. If the government doesn't step up to support our energy sector, they are in effect doubling down on their support for foreign, unethically sourced oil.

Mr. Chair, when will the credit options be available to Canada's small and medium energy firms?

The Chair: I want to remind honourable members that we do have interpreters who are listening and translating. In consideration to them, please speak at a reasonable pace so that they can understand and then translate.

The right honourable Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, from the very beginning, our priority through this pandemic and this crisis has been to support workers across the country. We have sent billions of dollars to workers right across the country, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, B.C., and Newfoundland and Labrador in the energy sector for them to be able to support their families through this difficult time.

We are also working on sectoral supports right across the country. Those will be announced in due course. Our focus from the get-go has been—

The Chair: We'll move to Ms. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Mr. Chair, another group that has been ignored by the Liberals is our farmers. The announcements to date fall well short of what is needed to maintain a steady supply of affordable and healthy food. The Canadian Federation of Agriculture has asked the government for a \$2.6-billion emergency fund. Instead of responding to specific COVID-19 challenges, our farmers are facing the Liberals' reannounced \$125 million that was already budgeted in the AgriRecovery program.

Will the Prime Minister finally step up and take our food supply chain seriously, or is agriculture just an afterthought for him?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: On the contrary, Mr. Chair, we take agriculture and our agricultural sector extremely seriously, which is why we announced hundreds of millions of dollars a couple of days ago to respond to pressing needs. We will continue to make investments to ensure both the safety of workers in our agricultural sector and the safety of our communities, as well as the continued flow of high-quality Canadian food onto our tables right across the country.

Supporting the people who produce our food is a priority for this government and will continue to be.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Well, Mr. Chair, recycled program announcements do not respond to the immediate needs facing our farmers. This is absolutely unacceptable.

Our farmers are faced with rising operational costs, a disrupted service industry, labour shortages and a reduced capacity at processing plants. The government has a responsibility to take domestic food security seriously. When will the Prime Minister deliver adequate support to address the critical changes facing our ag industry?

• (1220)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, I would suggest respectfully that the honourable member take a look once again at the announcement we made, which actually highlights significant new investments to support our agricultural industry.

I certainly agree that there is more to do. Every step of the way in this unprecedented situation, we've been moving forward on doing more, on adjusting and on investing more. We need to support our agricultural sector and the people who work so hard to put food on Canadians' tables right across the country and we will continue to.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Mr. Chair, Canadians expect to find healthy and affordable food at their grocery stores, but if the government does not take action now, that's not a given.

Our farmers are trying to keep Canadians fed while keeping their heads above water. The Liberal government's own failed federal carbon tax is weighing them down. It is an enormous hit to their bottom line, and the recent carbon tax hike is taking even more money out of the pockets of farmers at a time when they can afford it the least.

Will the Prime Minister exempt all farm operations from the carbon tax and reimburse the money that they have already taken from them?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, it's a shame to hear the member opposite accidentally—unintentionally, I'm certain—mislead the House and Canadians. The price on pollution actually puts more money into Canadians' pockets, and that includes farm families.

People who pay the cost of the price on pollution on average receive more money back. This is the way of creating a better future for our kids and grandkids, which I know people in communities right across the country, including our farm communities, want to see happen. We are moving forward in a responsible way to put a price on pollution and put more money in average Canadians' pockets.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We now continue with Mrs. Gill.

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you know, all sectors of the economy are fragile at the moment, specifically the fisheries. I am thinking about the lobster fishery in the Magdalen Islands, the crab fishery on the Côte-Nord or those fishing for herring in the south of the Gaspé.

Because imports have ceased, because the domestic market is weak and in decline because of the interruption of the tourism and restaurant industries, the fishing industry and its fishers must be supported.

I would like to know what the government has done to support our fishers since the crisis began.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Our fishers do exceptional work that is extremely important in feeding Canadians and in contributing to our economic success through their exports around the

world. This crisis has struck them very hard. That is why we have established measures in the tens of millions of dollars to support our processors.

We have also announced help for the fishers. We know that these are difficult and unprecedented times, and we are going to—

Mrs. Marilène Gill: My thanks to the Prime Minister.

I am actually talking about help for the fishers. I know about the processing industry and the \$62.5 million to be used essentially for freezing products, but I am talking about the fishers themselves.

Given the economic situation, most of our fishers are getting ready to leave. First, there are health risks. We know very well that it is impossible for them to observe all the social distancing measures. They have to incur additional expenses in order to conduct their normal fishing activities. In addition, they feel that they will be losing money, because of the drop in the price of their resource.

They are just as essential as farmers, but they are going to have to work at a loss and they are not going to have workers to assist them. Workers in the seasonal industry do not know what tomorrow will bring. They do not even know whether they will be able to put food on the table next year.

Are you going to do anything else, in addition to the assistance of \$62.5 million? Time is of the essence. Our fishers have lacked certainty for weeks and they are very concerned.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Yes, indeed, we are going to do other things. Other investments will be made in various sectors in order to support Canadians.

We recognize the challenges that fishers must face in terms of social distancing and of work that is often seasonal. We are going to continue working with the industry, with the fishers, and with the coastal communities in order to ensure that people have confidence in their abilities and in their future.

In times of crisis, it is important for the government to be there to support people, and that is exactly what we are going to continue to do. This is an unprecedented crisis, but we can see once more that Canadians are there for each other. Our government will continue to be there for the fishers and the fishing industry.

• (1225)

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I would have preferred us to be there from the start. Clearly, this is a difficult crisis. But, given the cyclical nature of the industry, some sectors have had to postpone for several weeks the preparations they need for fishing activities.

The current program could be modified in a number of ways, to accommodate the cycle, the dates, and the size of the companies. They would really like to take advantage of the \$40,000 loan, but they cannot because of their payroll. Given the dates, they are also ineligible for the 75% salary subsidy.

I can already suggest a number of solutions to the government and to the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, that would bring help to those businesses very quickly. The fishers carry on, because it is a duty for them, because they want to help us and to be part of the effort at this time of crisis. At the same time, they have no guarantee that they will be supported.

I would really like to hear a guarantee that they will be supported, that they will be able to put food on the table this year, and that they will be able to support the communities that often depend on the fishing industry, a major industry in those communities.

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Minister Jordan has been working with the fishers, the fishing industry and the communities affected by the crisis since the crisis began. We are assessing a number of solutions. We have proposed various solutions to support the communities, the workers and the families. This is an unprecedented situation.

From the outset, our priority has been to support the millions of Canadians from coast to coast who have lost their jobs. We have been able to do so, but we are going to continue to work for those who must now face difficulties. We are going to be there for each other. That is what people are expecting from our government and from other Canadians.

The Chair: Before we move to the next question, I would like to remind members of the committee to speak slowly, and to address their remarks to the chair and not directly to each other.

Thank you very much.

[English]

We will now go to Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Chair, municipalities across Canada are facing a financial crisis. They've seen revenues plummet, and at the same time the cost of delivering municipal services has risen. As the Prime Minister knows, municipalities are unable to run deficits and so they are facing the reality of cutbacks and serious cuts to the services that Canadians depend on.

We know that municipalities are vital during this time to provide services to Canadians. They're going to be even more important during the recovery, especially when it comes to delivering on the infrastructure programs before us. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and mayors across Canada have called for emergency financial relief for the municipal sector.

My question for the Prime Minister is, when can they expect federal financial support to arrive?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, no government in Canada's history has done more to work with our municipalities, with our cities, with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to respond to the challenges they're facing and to partner with them. Things from infrastructure to investments have made a huge difference right across the country in the quality of life of Canadians in towns, large and small, from coast to coast to coast.

As I'm sure the member well knows, our Constitution requires that most of the funding for municipalities flow through the provinces. We are working with the provinces, as we continue to

work with the cities, to ensure that we're able to support this order of government that delivers the vast majority of services to Canadians with very little financial means. We know how difficult it is for our cities. We will continue—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, it would seem that the federal government has the fiscal capacity and the responsibility to help municipalities weather this crisis. Transit systems have been hit particularly hard and have seen the bulk of the layoffs in the municipal sector. These transit services carry essential workers to work, whether they are health care workers, grocery store workers, janitors or others. The risk is that we will see higher fares to deal with this financial crisis. We will see service cutbacks precisely at a time when we want to be expanding transit and improving transit in our communities.

Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that the federal government needs to step in to safeguard and protect Canada's transit services?

• (1230)

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, this federal government recognizes how important it is to support all Canadians, which is why we put forward unprecedented measures to help millions upon millions of Canadians with the CERB and with the wage subsidy.

We will continue to work with the provinces, which have jurisdiction over the municipalities. I'll be having a conversation with all other first ministers tonight to talk about a broad range of issues. I can highlight that the issue of transit funding has come up.

We have continued to engage with them, but again, it is important to respect the Constitution and understand that funding for municipalities and cities does go through the provinces. The federal government is happy to be there to support, but it must be—

The Chair: We will go to Mr. Bachrach again.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, I am wondering how the Prime Minister could explain to a bus driver in Vancouver who has been laid off that as a public sector worker, she can't access the federal wage subsidy, while an equivalent worker in the airline industry gets to keep her job with the federal help of that program.

Could the Prime Minister explain how that is fair?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to explain to the member and to all Canadians that our Constitution creates federal areas of jurisdiction and provincial areas of jurisdiction. The airline industry, like banking, like telecommunications, is a federal area of jurisdiction that we have been able to move forward on.

More than that, we brought the Canada emergency response benefit and the wage subsidy to all industries across this country, because we knew that as the federal government, it was something that we needed to step up on—

The Chair: We will go back to Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, I'd like to shift gears a little bit. Faced with minimal health care capacity, remote indigenous communities in my riding are taking matters into their own hands. The Nuxalk have put up a checkpoint on Highway 20 to protect community members and prevent non-essential travel. In particular, it is to protect the three remaining fluent speakers of the Nuxalk language, these cherished elders in their community. The Haida on Haida Gwaii have set up a similar checkpoint, as have communities throughout British Columbia, yet federal support for indigenous communities amounts to only \$39 million for all of the indigenous communities in B.C.

Does the Prime Minister not agree that more support is warranted to help indigenous communities in my riding and across the country?

Right Hon. Justin Trudeau: Mr. Chair, from the very beginning, we made funds available to Canadians right across the country, particularly people in indigenous remote or northern communities who we knew would be facing more difficult challenges because of the existing vulnerabilities in their health care system and socio-economic circumstances. We have made unprecedented investments and we will continue to make the necessary investments, because we need to make sure that indigenous Canadians, and indeed all Canadians, have the supports they need to make it through this crisis.

[Translation]

The Chair: We will continue with Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Berthold, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am going to keep talking about the area of jurisdiction that the Prime Minister likes to talk about, except that I want to point out the incompetence of the Liberals in keeping their commitments on infrastructure projects.

My question is very simple. As the provinces gradually restart their economies, can the Prime Minister tell us how many projects that the provinces have submitted are waiting for approval from his government?

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, I hope that the length of the pause will not be taken out of my time.

The Chair: No, I stopped the clock for your time.

Ms. McKenna, you have the floor.

Hon. Catherine McKenna (Minister of Infrastructure and Communities): I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, I was on mute.

I'm very pleased with how we are working with the provinces and territories. I have spoken with all of my provincial and territorial counterparts over the last couple of weeks. Work on our historic infrastructure program is progressing well. My department has worked very hard to approve projects, and we will continue to do so.

It is very important to build projects that will create good jobs—

• (1235)

The Chair: We are returning to Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Luc Berthold: We still haven't had a response.

How many projects are currently awaiting government approval?

I know that the minister has been meeting virtually with the provinces over the last few days. However, there are still hundreds of projects waiting for approval from the Liberal government.

Rather than wait for the right political opportunity to approve these files, will the minister commit today to respecting the provinces and approving by next week all the projects that are sitting on her desk?

Hon. Catherine McKenna: Mr. Chair, I'm pleased with how we are working with the provinces and territories. We are approving projects. If the hon. member speaks to the provinces and territories, he will see how well we are working together. We will announce the approval of projects because it's very important for our economy, our communities and creating good jobs.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Does the minister understand that she hasn't told us how many projects are still pending?

The construction season is very short. Approval of a project in July means that work can't begin until next year, which won't help revive our economy.

Hon. Catherine McKenna: I want to make it clear that we have approved hundreds of projects in the last few weeks. We will work with the provinces, territories, municipalities and indigenous communities to implement these projects. These projects are important for the economy and the environment, as well as for jobs—

The Chair: We return now to Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, while the minister is calling for a green recovery of the country's economy, public transit is at risk. Physical distancing measures will cause public transit use to drop for several months. The Union des municipalités du Québec estimates that the monthly losses are between \$75 million and \$100 million. Other countries have included public transit in pandemic relief programs.

Why isn't Canada?

Hon. Catherine McKenna: Mr. Chair, we recognize the importance of public transit for our economy, since some essential workers use public transit. We are working very closely with our counterparts and are listening to the municipalities. As the Prime Minister said, it's the provinces that must help because the money—

The Chair: We return now to Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, once again, what we're hearing is that the government is passing the buck to the provinces. Unfortunately, the minister was unable to answer a single question about the number of infrastructure projects still on the federal government's desk, which is very important. Several large municipalities are waiting for the approval of projects.

Moreover, public transit systems are facing an extremely serious financial crisis. Ridership in most systems is down 85% to 90%. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities is asking for help for small communities, as well as large municipalities.

Why is the federal government ignoring the municipalities in the Canadian Federation of Municipalities at this time?

Hon. Catherine McKenna: Mr. Chair, I can reassure the hon. member that we are working very closely with the municipalities. We are listening to the municipalities to find out what their issues are and how we can support them. Of course, we need the help of the provinces and territories.

In terms of the number of projects that we've approved, I would be happy to inform the hon. member of the exact number of all the approved projects that my department has been working very hard on over the past few months to approve projects to go forward.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

The Chair: No, your time is up.

[English]

We'll now go on to Mr. Fast.

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This question is directed to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

On March 28, the minister personally tweeted out a thank you to the People's Republic of China for donating PPE to Canada. This tweet happened within three hours of China's announcement of that gift. As it turned out, much of the PPE was defective and could not be used. More recently, Taiwan donated half a million surgical masks to Canada, yet here we are, two weeks later, and the minister has yet to personally thank Taiwan for its generosity.

Will the minister now thank this free and democratic country for its generous gift to Canadians?

• (1240)

Hon. François-Philippe Champagne (Minister of Foreign Affairs): Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank my colleague for the question.

Indeed, we are very grateful to every nation for helping Canada. This is a global pandemic that knows no borders. We have been expressing our thanks to many nations that have contributed. We will continue to do so.

It is important in a time of pandemic, Mr. Chair, that we not play politics and that humanity comes together. I can say, after my COVID foreign ministers call, that the world community has come together to make sure that supply chains will remain intact and that we will have transit hubs and air bridges.

We will continue to work with every nation when it comes to health. This is a public good. We want to work together with everyone.

The Chair: We will go back to Mr. Fast now.

Hon. Ed Fast: Well, Mr. Chair, I didn't hear a "thank you" there, so I'm going to try again.

On May 4, the Government of Taiwan delivered 25,000 surgical masks to the Government of British Columbia. On hand were B.C.

Minister of Citizens' Services Anne Kang and Minister of State for Child Care Katrina Chen, who, as ministers, officially thanked the Government of Taiwan for its donation.

Again, will the minister now do the right thing and, on behalf of Canadians, recognize the generosity of Taiwan and thank its government for that timely donation?

Hon. François-Philippe Champagne: Mr. Chair, as I said to you before, Canada is grateful to all who have given supplies to Canada. This is a common endeavour. We are thankful. We are grateful to every nation and we will continue to be.

As I said, when it comes to global health, when it comes to helping each other, I think it is a duty for all to come together. We are grateful and thankful for all those who have agreed to help Canada and Canadians from coast to coast to coast in times of need.

I've repeated that and have said many times in many forums that we are grateful and thankful to all of those who are helping Canada.

Hon. Ed Fast: Well, Mr. Chair, again there was no specific "thank you" to Taiwan.

The Government of Taiwan has been the world leader in successfully fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. We have a lot to learn from them and their response. Sadly, the People's Republic of China continues to oppose Taiwan's membership in the World Health Organization.

Will the minister now do the right thing and assure Canadians that he will fully support efforts to grant Taiwan membership in the World Health Organization?

Hon. François-Philippe Champagne: Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank the member. As a former trade minister, he's very well aware of Canada's one China policy.

That said, we support Taiwan to continue meaningful participation in international multilateral forums, particularly when it comes to health. This is a global good, and we want to support every nation. We recognize that Taiwan and others have been doing very well in fighting this pandemic.

We also believe that Taiwan's role as an observer in the World Health Assembly meeting is of interest to the international health community and we have been supportive of that.

Hon. Ed Fast: Mr. Chair, I'm going to pivot to repatriation flights.

The minister has publicly said that over 20,000 stranded Canadians have been repatriated from abroad. Can he tell us exactly how many Canadians remain abroad who have expressed a desire to be repatriated?

Hon. François-Philippe Champagne: Yes, Mr. Chair, I am very happy to update members.

As of today, we have repatriated more than 20,000 Canadians on 232 flights from 87 countries. I would say that this is team Canada, and it knows no parties. Many members have written to me to make sure that we take care.

It's not an exact science. We have, as I said, repatriated thousands and thousands. We continue, because we know there are still pockets of Canadian travellers who are stranded abroad. As the Prime Minister and I have said from the beginning, we will make our best effort to repatriate everyone who wants to come back home during the crisis.

The Chair: We'll go on to Mr. Moore now.

Hon. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Mr. Chair, Canadians need to have faith in their justice system, even in a time of crisis. My office has received correspondence from Canadians concerned that trial delays due to COVID-19 may result in criminals walking free.

As this government has been working overtime to criminalize law-abiding citizens with new and useless gun laws, will the Minister of Justice ensure that real criminals will not walk free as a result of delays in the justice system?

Hon. David Lametti (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada): Mr. Chair, I thank the honourable member for his question.

We have been working with my provincial counterparts across Canada, as well as with the various federal courts and also, through my provincial counterparts, with the superior courts and courts of appeal across Canada. Each particular jurisdiction has taken measures to ensure that basic essential services within the court system are maintained, through a variety of means, and we believe that we will be able to solve these various challenges.

• (1245)

Hon. Rob Moore: Mr. Chair, the regional relief and recovery fund was announced weeks ago as a way to help small and medium-sized businesses in rural communities, like those in my riding. In Atlantic Canada, these funds were to be distributed to the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. This is yet another announcement with no details from this Liberal government.

Can the minister clarify whether we are days away or weeks away from this support flowing to the businesses that need it so desperately?

Hon. Mélanie Joly (Minister of Economic Development and Official Languages): Mr. Chair, I had the chance to talk with many of the chambers of commerce and business owners throughout Atlantic Canada, and we hear their anxiety. That's why ACOA's doing great work on the ground to make sure we can help them through this very difficult period.

The member is right. We have increased the budget of ACOA—good news—and I'll be coming up with the details very soon. It will be a pleasure to collaborate with him to make sure that we can help many businesses and business owners across the Atlantic region.

Hon. Rob Moore: Mr. Chair, my office has heard from many small business owners who have reached out to me. I know many have reached out to many of my colleagues and probably to all of us here today. They are frustrated by the eligibility requirements for some of the federal programs. In particular, they are unable to access the emergency business account, because they do not have a payroll. This could be the hair salon in my riding that subcontracts out its chairs. There are hundreds and thousands of small businesses in this very situation, vital small businesses in our communities, but they do not meet this requirement.

These businesses, many of them, are weeks away from shutting down permanently. What does the Minister of Finance have to say to these small businesses that are suffering right now?

Hon. Mary Ng (Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade): Mr. Chair, I want to thank my honourable colleague for that really important question. I want all the businesses that he is talking about and all of them throughout the country to know that we continue to work very hard to make sure they're supported through this difficult period. More work needs to be done, and we will continue to do that work.

We know that businesses are being supported through getting access to the wage subsidy to keep their employees together, and they're getting help, whether it's with rent or to defray costs by deferring GST and HST or customs duty payments. We're going to continue to work with all our businesses across the country.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Moore for a brief question. You have less than 20 seconds, please.

Hon. Rob Moore: Mr. Chair, it's a very specific issue. There are small businesses, thousands of them, that do not have a payroll. Some have a personal account that they've dealt with over the years rather than a business account, and that makes them ineligible. These businesses need help right now.

Hon. Mary Ng: I agree with the honourable member. Those businesses absolutely need support from us. We are going to keep working to ensure they are supported.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Cumming next.

Mr. James Cumming (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Chair, small businesses are concerned about their ability to survive, and no amount of deferrals, loans or subsidies can substitute for their need to be open and servicing their customers.

Can the government confirm that a sectoral risk analysis has taken place to assist the provinces in reopening the economy?

Hon. Navdeep Bains (Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry): Mr. Chair, I can assure the member that we've been very clear in terms of our strategy around reopening the economy. We need to make sure that we follow the advice of the experts and the health authorities to do so in a manner that does not compromise the health and well-being of Canadians. We of course will have a sectoral lens, and as you can see by some of the initiatives and the support packages we've put forward—

• (1250)

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Cumming now.

Mr. James Cumming: Mr. Chair, thousands of business owners make a living and utilize dividends as their salary. They also use independent contractors.

Can the government confirm that the programs currently in place will be expanded to these hard-working Canadians?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, I want to assure the honourable member that we continue to work with all of our small businesses and I want to thank him for raising this very important issue. I want to assure our Canadian small businesses that we are going to continue to do this work to make sure they are supported.

Mr. James Cumming: Can the minister give me a date when she will be able to announce to these businesses that they will be eligible?

Hon. Mary Ng: I want to assure our Canadian small businesses of their importance and of the importance of their contributions to all of our communities. I want them to know that we continue to listen and that we will ensure that they are supported and continue to be supported during this difficult time.

Mr. James Cumming: Minister, they need more than assurance. Can you give me a date when I can tell these thousands of businesses they will be supported if they pay dividends or if they use contractors within their businesses?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, these businesses are absolutely important and are getting support through a range of means. We will continue to work with these businesses to make sure they are supported through this difficult period.

Mr. James Cumming: Mr. Chair, I spoke to a Second Cup owner whose landlord is not offering any kind of rent relief. The landlord says that he doesn't have the 25% needed to be eligible for the program because he's already paying for common area costs and deferrals on utilities, which he will have to pay on his mortgage.

Will the government reform the rent relief program to focus on tenants and not just the landlords?

Hon. Bill Morneau (Minister of Finance): Mr. Chair, I want to let the member know that we are working to make sure that the details of the emergency program for rent are out there so that both tenants and landlords can understand the situation.

We're seeing a significant number of both landlords and tenants coming forward to register for this program, and we are convinced that it will be in the best interests of landlords to move forward and give tenants this relief.

Mr. James Cumming: Mr. Chair, we've been hearing, however, from small business owners that their landlords don't find the government's rent relief program appealing enough.

Can the government confirm, given the program's low eligibility rate, that the program will be expanded and be more efficient in helping tenants?

Hon. Bill Morneau: Mr. Chair, we recognize that it's critically important that all of the details of this program be out there for landlords and tenants to understand. Those details are being worked on right now. This is a program that we've put out within the last week, and we are confident that it's in the best interests of tenants and landlords.

Mr. James Cumming: Mr. Chair, during these trying times for small businesses, small businesses need all the help they can get. One easy way to do that would be to expand the Canada summer jobs program to businesses with over 50 employees.

Will the government consider doing so to allow students to gain that very valuable work experience over the coming months?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): Mr. Chair, we are very excited about the uptake of the Canada summer jobs program this year. The second uptake provided employers across the country with the ability to add their needs for students to the mix. I'm looking forward to announcing a possible expansion of this program in the coming days.

The Chair: The next question session will go to Mr. Dowdall.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

During this pandemic, the government has consistently called for a team Canada, non-partisan approach, and I was glad to hear that said a little earlier today. In fact, the public has called for that approach as well. However, at the same time, the current government has used a parliamentary back door to launch a poorly thought out gun ban.

We have a government that didn't win the popular vote, and I'm just wondering how I explain to my residents, because I'm getting so many calls, that this is not a bloated response because, quite frankly, it is.

• (1255)

Hon. Bill Blair (Scarborough Southwest, Lib.): First of all, Mr. Chair, I think the honourable member can explain to his constituents that the forming of regulations through order in council is actually the process prescribed in law in Canada under section 117.15 of the Criminal Code.

I would also invite the member to advise his constituents that way back in 1991, when there were some Conservatives who called themselves “Progressive”, the Mulroney government brought forward, in Bill C-17, the authority under that section for an order in council to prescribe specific makes, models and variants of military firearms as prohibited or restricted.

The Harper government used the same tool—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Dowdall.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: I'm not sure, but I'm hoping, that I'll get an honest answer on this question from the minister, who has everything from rocket launchers to basically toy guns on the ban list.

When will we get the cost of this buyback program?

The Chair: I want to remind the honourable members to please be careful in their language when they are referring to others. I won't comment on this one particularly, but I want all of you to be very, very careful when referring to other members.

The honourable minister.

Hon. Bill Blair: It's a good opportunity, Mr. Chair, to respond to some of the obfuscations and deceptions that have been put out there. We're not banning any toys and we're not banning shotguns. That's all misinformation that's being put out.

I think it's very clear, and I invite the member to look at the list of weapons that are—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Dowdall.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Thank you.

What will be the cost of the buyback program, please?

Hon. Bill Blair: Actually, I'm very much looking forward to bringing forward legislation as soon as the House resumes. We will have a vigorous debate in Parliament about the form a buyback will take and we will bring forward a budget at that time.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Will those with illegal weapons be eligible for the buyback program?

Hon. Bill Blair: If people are illegally in possession of the weapons and they're committing a crime, they will be dealt with for the crimes they commit.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Okay. I'm going to switch it over.

Canadians in my riding who suffer from cystic fibrosis are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 infection. While these Canadians with existing lung conditions are incredibly worried about a virus that attacks the ability to breathe, the good news is that there are life-saving medicines for those with CF. The problem is with the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board and its restrictive guidelines.

I am wondering if and when the government will correct these guidelines and give access to life-saving medicines for our most vulnerable.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Health): Mr. Chair, as you know, the government has been very committed to improving access and affordability for prescription medications for all Canadians. The PMPRB regulatory amendments will help Canadians be

able to afford their prescriptions, and Canada will continue to be an important market for new medicines.

In fact, many countries with much lower medicine prices gained access to new medicines in the same time frame as Canada frame, or even faster, so we are excited to do this work.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Mr. Chair, our seniors are being particularly hard hit right now during this pandemic, yet seniors have not been given any direct support. It's one of the number one calls I'm getting in my office. Funding to charities like the United Way is being labelled as support for seniors, but most won't see any of this support. Seniors in my riding have asked for an increase in their CPP and OAS, and to be able to make untaxed bulk withdrawals from their RRSPs while they still have some value.

Can the minister confirm when these real and direct supports for seniors will be forthcoming?

Hon. Deb Schulte (Minister of Seniors): I want to assure the honourable member and Canadians that our government has been working extremely hard on how best to support and serve seniors during this pandemic. He mentioned [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

I'm not quite sure what's happening with my machine. I apologize.

The Chair: You might want to try your space bar and keep it down while you're speaking. That might solve the problem.

Hon. Deb Schulte: Okay, I'll try that. Thank you very much.

I want to assure the honourable member and Canadians that our government has been working extremely hard on how best to support and serve seniors during this pandemic. We have introduced a supplementary GST payment for low- and modest-income seniors. We've reduced the minimum RRIF withdrawal by 25%, and we've made the CERB available to working seniors who have lost their jobs due to the COVID pandemic.

We know there's more work to do, and we'll have more to say in the future.

• (1300)

The Chair: I want to remind honourable members that if there are issues, we are taking note of them, and we'll hopefully resolve them by the next meeting. We are getting much better, and we're all new at this. Thank you for your patience.

[*Translation*]

We'll now go to Ms. Gaudreau.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for the Prime Minister.

We've heard a lot about contact tracing apps. Several provinces have already made announcements on this, and others want to follow suit. Today, I'd like to know where the government stands on this. We've been talking about a national strategy for some time.

Where are we now?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Obviously, contact tracing is an important part of managing any outbreak. In fact, we have been looking at a number of ways to support increased contact tracing across the country, including working with provinces and territories to boost their capacity through human resources and volunteer organizations. We are working very closely with them to make sure we have the capacity.

The member is right that many other countries have used digital contact tracing apps. Anything we put forward as a digital tool to assist with contact tracing would be thoroughly considerate of Canadians' privacy rights.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Let me clarify my question a little. Yes, we are talking about public health, and we are currently experiencing a crisis. But you know as well as I do that the Privacy Commissioner has been calling us to task for a very long time now, because there is also a crisis of confidence. You know as well as I do that for 90% of Canadians, the misuse of their personal data is a cause for concern, whether it be for profiling or business development purposes. This is an issue that concerns all Canadians. The commissioner is indeed calling for a focus on reform of the Privacy Act.

I'd like to know whether this commitment will be implemented quickly so that legislation can be passed on this issue, in this case the Privacy Act.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Particular attention must be paid to transparency, privacy and ethical concerns. Naturally, Canadians are concerned about how their data is used. New technologies are subject to the Privacy Act.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: We're talking about public health. The provinces are currently in the process of legislating. We're talking about what is going on in Quebec, among other places, and I would like to make sure that the federal government commits to respecting the proposals regarding geolocation and contact tracing possibilities, with full respect for the right to privacy.

Can we commit to respecting the provinces?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have worked very closely with provinces and territories for a long time before the outbreak, but certainly ever since the outbreak. We respect the rights of jurisdictional authorities to use tools that have been properly vetted through their own provincial and territorial legislation. Nothing we would ever do at the federal level would put Canadians' privacy in jeopardy.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Concerning privacy, there are 30 million Quebecers and Canadians who have had their personal data leaked. Why is it that our laws don't allow us to apply financial penalties so that we can then go further? The very basis is to be

concerned about our fundamental rights. The commissioner has been making this request for several years now.

As the critic for access to information and privacy, I'd like a commitment that the federal government will deal not with what the provinces are doing, but with the Privacy Act.

• (1305)

The Chair: Your time is up, but I'll give the floor to the minister for 30 seconds.

Hon. Navdeep Bains: Thank you for the question.

Our government will ensure the privacy of Canadians is respected, support responsible innovation and take reasonable steps to strengthen enforcement powers. That's why we created a digital charter. We are strengthening Canada's privacy laws in response to the digital age.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Baker.

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll be sharing my time with the member for Malpeque.

Mr. Chair, my question is for the Minister of Seniors.

Minister, in my riding of Etobicoke Centre, we are mourning the loss of 40 residents to COVID-19 at the Eatonville long-term care centre. Over 143 residents and 88 staff members have now tested positive for the virus.

This tragedy is not only taking place in Etobicoke Centre but across Canada. Of all Canadians who have died from COVID-19, 79% were living in long-term care homes. That's over 2,000 seniors. This is a catastrophe, and it's frankly unacceptable. Our seniors and their families deserve better.

I understand that long-term care homes fall within the jurisdiction of provincial governments in Canada, but this is a crisis. What is the federal government doing right now to help protect our seniors who are living in long-term care homes from COVID-19? What will we do to reform our long-term care homes in the future to ensure that our seniors in Etobicoke Centre and across Canada get the care they deserve?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to my colleague from Etobicoke Centre for his very thoughtful question.

We are deeply concerned by the outbreaks of COVID-19 in long-term care facilities, and our thoughts are with those who have lost a loved one. It's a very difficult time.

As my colleague mentioned, while these facilities are regulated by provinces and territories, we have been focused on protecting the health and safety of long-term care residents and staff while working with our partners in a team Canada approach. We've released guidelines to prevent and control COVID-19 infections. We're working with the provinces and territories to cost-share a temporary salary top-up for long-term care workers. We are working through investing \$2 billion to secure personal protective equipment for the health of workers, including those in the long-term care homes, and we've deployed the Canadian Armed Forces to assist 25 long-term care homes in Quebec and Ontario.

We all have a role to play to stop the spread of COVID-19 and to protect our seniors and caregivers.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Easter.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At the finance committee, we've heard a lot of concerns from all sectors of the economy as a result of COVID-19 and we've been presented with quite a number of possible solutions as well, several of which the government has acted upon.

My question is on the support offered to the agri-food sector announced on Tuesday. It is very welcome support, but I sincerely believe the farm sector will be taking the Prime Minister up on the suggestion that \$250 million should be seen as an initial investment. Potatoes are the number one commodity in Prince Edward Island. However, as a result of reduced processor contracts for next year, plus cancelled seed contracts, millions of dollars of seed and process potatoes have no home. To make matters worse, farmers have high fixed costs that they now have to spread over fewer acres. How does the minister see Tuesday's announcement addressing potato farmers' concerns?

Second, in 2013, long-term financial safety nets were gutted by the Harper government. Will the minister be coming forward with improved business risk management programs as a result?

• (1310)

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Mr. Chair, I want to thank Mr. Easter, the member for the riding of Malpeque on Prince Edward Island. It's a beautiful rural riding with lots of agricultural production.

I want to recognize the hard work of farmers throughout the crisis. On Tuesday, I was proud to announce one more step for supporting our producers and processors. We know the importance of our potato farmers, and that's why we are launching a first-ever surplus food purchase program, a \$50-million fund designed to help redistribute existing inventories, such as potatoes, to local food organizations.

On the financial safety net that we have in place for our farmers, called the business risk management program, we announced up to \$125 million in funding through AgriRecovery and made changes to AgriStability that will help producers quickly.

I will continue to discuss with my provincial counterparts to enhance and improve the BRM programs. In the meantime, I want to reiterate that BRM programs, including AgriInvest, are there to help farmers in difficult times.

The Chair: We'll go on to Mr. Johns now.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, small businesses across Canada closed their doors to stop the spread and for public health. Now they're currently hanging off the edge of a cliff waiting for financial help.

Robyn, who has owned Arbutus Health in Tofino for over 13 years, can't apply for the Canada emergency business account loan, simply because she doesn't have a payroll of over \$20,000. All of her practitioners are paid contractors, so she is ineligible. With no business income and without emergency financing, it is virtually impossible for her to pay her bills or come up with the 25% needed for the Canada emergency commercial rent assistance program.

The government promised to be flexible and willing to adjust its COVID response rollout so that nobody falls through the cracks, but Robyn, like tens of thousands of proprietors who are the economic job creators of our communities, urgently needs the government's help now. Will the government amend its programs to help more business owners so that people like Robyn don't lose their businesses?

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the honourable member for his really good question. I know he and I have talked about this, and I appreciate the input and the feedback that he is providing from business directly.

I want to assure Robyn and her businesses, and many businesses across the country, that we are absolutely listening, and we will continue to make sure we are supporting those businesses during this period. We know that many businesses are being helped through the Canada emergency business account. There are well over 550,000 businesses that are getting support through this emergency business account.

We also know that more has to be done, and we will continue to work with you and businesses across the country so that we can indeed give them that necessary support to weather this difficult period of COVID-19.

Mr. Gord Johns: Mr. Chair, that's not going to help Robyn feel comfort.

I was talking to Heather last night, who also owns a business in Tofino, Basic Goodness Pizzeria, with her partner Marco. Like many proprietors of family businesses who aren't on payroll, they don't qualify for the business loans. They don't qualify for the wage subsidy because they're a seasonal business. Now with the new roll-out of the rent support, they're not sure if their landlord is willing to play ball and even apply. That's three separate programs that leave them out. Heather was in tears last night as she told me that they have done nothing wrong to deserve being excluded from these emergency programs. I agree.

Will the government fix the rent support program so that tenants can apply, instead of leaving it up to landlords, and so businesses can get the help they desperately need?

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Mr. Chair, we've been working on this program since the beginning. We've been working on offering a response for small businesses and charities and non-profit organizations, and we are continuing to listen on the ground to how we can better assist the businesses that fall through the cracks. We will continue to do that as we go along in this emergency situation.

Thank you very much to the honourable member for sharing the realities of his constituents.

Mr. Gord Johns: Mr. Chair, when the government rolled out its commercial rent support program, why didn't it negotiate an eviction moratorium with the provinces, as Australia and other countries did, to protect business owners?

• (1315)

Hon. Mona Fortier: Mr. Chair, as we know, Canadians are taking action and fighting against COVID-19. We know that many small businesses are worried about being able to pay rent. We've recognized it and we've been working with the provinces and territories to implement the Canada emergency commercial rent—

The Chair: We'll go back to Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: To qualify for the Canada emergency wage subsidy, a 30% drop in revenue has to be shown. Anyone who's owned a business knows that even with this program, it's going to be hard to survive. Why is the government using a 70% measurement drop to qualify for the rent support program, but a 30% drop for the wage subsidy?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Again, Mr. Chair, thank you to the honourable member for sharing his views on this program.

We've been working with provinces and territories to provide forgivable loans to commercial property owners, who in turn lower the rents for their tenants by 75%. We're hoping that tenants and landlords will be working together so we can support businesses during this very difficult crisis.

[Translation]

The Chair: Before we move on to the next question, Mr. Berthold, did you have a question or a point of order?

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. I checked the clock from the first round of five minutes, and as you may recall, it took a very long time for me to get an answer from the government. I went back and forth with Minister McKenna for four minutes and 14 seconds.

The Chair: Just a moment. The interpretation isn't coming through.

It's working now. Go ahead, Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Luc Berthold: I'll start over.

During my first turn, it took 50 seconds before a government minister deigned to answer my questions. After checking my time, I realized that the discussion between Ms. McKenna and I went on for four minutes and 14 seconds, so I wasn't able to ask the minister one final question, a very important one. I would ask you to take that into account and allow me to ask Minister McKenna one last question, please.

The Chair: The person chairing the meeting uses their judgment and does their best to keep an eye on what's going on. They try to be as fair as possible. I'll try to do a better job. I think it's more or less equal for all the members, but I apologize if the honourable member feels that he was denied a few seconds.

[English]

Our next question goes to Mr. Doherty.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Mr. Chair, the Canada-U.S. border agreement is set to expire on May 20. Will the two governments renew the current agreement, or will it be modified?

Hon. Bill Blair: The decision to close the border was made in Canada by Canadians in the best interest of Canadians. We're continuing to monitor the situation carefully.

Mr. Todd Doherty: When will the government be in a position to inform Canadians of any changes to the agreement?

Hon. Bill Blair: I'm pleased to advise the member that we're continuing to monitor the situation, but I'm strongly of the opinion that the circumstances on both sides of our border do not indicate that this is the right time to make a change in the restrictions.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can the government confirm whether there are any discussions about reopening the border to certain modes of transportation and restricting others?

The Chair: Before I go to the minister, I want to remind the honourable members that we do have translators, and they are trying to translate. With respect to them, I know we're trying to get as many questions in as possible, but they do have to translate them, so please be considerate of our interpreters.

The honourable minister has the floor.

Hon. Chrystia Freeland (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs): Let me please inform the honourable member that we are, of course, aware that the current agreement expires. I had a long conversation yesterday with the Prime Minister—

Mr. Todd Doherty: When will the government announce a relief package for Canada's aviation industry?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: We are engaged with the industry, and we are working with them on a solution, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, will this relief package include funding for airline ticket refunds similar to what other countries around the world have done? Yes or no?

Hon. Navdeep Bains: It's early to say anything at this moment. We're taking a sectoral approach. This is about making sure that we restart the economy and have a strong recovery.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can the Minister of Transport confirm that temperature screening is taking place at Canadian airports. Yes or no?

• (1320)

Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Transport): Mr. Chair, I can confirm that Air Canada has now adopted a policy of checking temperatures for passengers boarding Air Canada flights.

Mr. Todd Doherty: At which airports is that, and when did this practice start?

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, the announcement was made recently by Air Canada. It will start shortly and will apply to all places and destinations where Air Canada flies.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, this is for the Minister of Transport.

Last week I asked the Minister of Labour if they were aware of a letter written on April 6 by CUPE to the Minister of Transport and the Minister of Labour.

Minister, were you aware of that letter?

The Chair: I want to remind the honourable members to place their questions through the Chair and not directly.

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, I didn't understand the reference to a letter from CUPE. Could my colleague please clarify?

Mr. Todd Doherty: On April 6, CUPE wrote a letter to the Minister of Transport and the Minister of Labour.

Is the minister aware of that letter?

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, could my colleague clarify what CUPE is referring to?

Mr. Todd Doherty: CUPE is the labour organization that represents thousands of flight attendants across our country.

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, I do understand. Yes, I will confirm that CUPE, which represents the flight attendants, did write to us. Before that I had conversations with CUPE with respect to flight attendants and the use of personal protective equipment.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Can the minister confirm whether or not they have provided PPE to the flight attendants and/or training for front-line staff for airlines and airports?

Hon. Marc Garneau: Mr. Chair, the airlines are providing PPE to flight attendants and flight crews. This has become a policy to ensure the safety not only of passengers on board but also of the flight attendants and flight crew.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, a business owner from Quesnel wrote to my office recently. He stated that he couldn't give his small business tenants a break on rent because the government is penalizing him for paying off his mortgage.

When will the government change the CECRA rules to help more businesses?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Mr. Chair, as you know, we laid out the CECRA program just last week, and we are encouraging landlords to take that opportunity to support the renters. We will continue to look at how we can provide some relief to small businesses with rents.

Mr. Todd Doherty: With all due respect, Mr. Chair, any landlord who does not have a mortgage on their business is ineligible for CECRA.

Is the minister aware of this, and are they trying to revise the CECRA program?

Hon. Mona Fortier: As you know, we've been working with provinces and territories to present that program. Of course, we will continue to monitor how this program works for landlords and tenants.

We are asking, actually encouraging, landlords to do their part and help tenants, like the one you mentioned, go through this.

The Chair: We'll go to the next questioner. Go ahead, Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Small businesses in Manitoba employ 73% of Manitobans. That's over 286,000 Manitobans. I've been speaking with many small business owners in my riding. It's been heartbreaking, frankly, to hear that everything they've built and sacrificed for is in serious jeopardy, and through no fault of their own. Your government has created programs that are supposed to help them, but many legitimate businesses aren't able to apply. That could mean bankruptcy and cost thousands of Manitobans jobs. This is wrong. I'm hoping to hear specifics, not just nice words, on what you're going to do to help them.

There are three issues regarding access to the \$40,000 CEBA loan. First, businesses that recently incorporated—for example, in late 2019—are unable to apply their entire 2019 payroll. As a result, many are falling short of the \$20,000 payroll threshold required to qualify for this loan. Second, many businesses contract their employees rather than have them on payroll. They also are unable to qualify for this loan. Third, many businesses use personal rather than business banking accounts. They aren't able to qualify for this loan either.

What is your government going to do about these three scenarios?

The Chair: I just want to remind honourable members to place their questions through the Chair and not directly to the minister.

As well, please take into consideration the interpreters, who have to listen and translate, so that we can have this conversation.

Hon. Mary Ng: Mr. Chair, I want to thank the honourable member for that question. Right from the very beginning, we've always said that we will listen and that we will work to make sure that measures go out to help our Canadian small businesses. She's absolutely right: 98% of all our businesses in this country are small businesses, so they absolutely contribute enormously to our communities and are job creators.

That is why we have put out significant measures. For the Canada emergency business account, over 550,000 small businesses have been approved and are getting that support.

I absolutely acknowledge that there is more work to do. I can assure the honourable member that we will continue to do this work so that businesses, all businesses, are supported, whether it is helping keep your employees together, helping with rent support, helping to keep your business's expenses low, or of course helping with the capital that is needed so that you can pay your operating expenses and your bills through this difficult time.

• (1325)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Mr. Chair, I didn't hear any answers from the minister's remarks, unfortunately.

Moving on, there are two issues regarding the 50% commercial rent assistance subsidy, where landlords pay 25%, the government pays 50%, and the tenant is responsible for 25%. First, many of the small landlords aren't able to take a 25% hit to their income, and are unable to provide the subsidy to their tenants. Second, with the 70% decline in revenue threshold for small businesses to even be eligible for the rent assist, many restaurants are at 65% or 67% decline. They desperately need this subsidy but aren't able to qualify.

This is not about problems with the program details. What is the government planning to do to streamline this program for small businesses that can't access but desperately need the rent subsidy?

Hon. Mélanie Joly: Mr. Chair, as the Minister of Official Languages, I just want to raise the fact that interpretation is very complicated right now. In order to make sure that we can continue to uphold bilingualism within the House, I would love it if my colleagues could take down the pace a bit.

[*Translation*]

That would help the interpreters a whole lot. They are working very hard and trying to keep up.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's a reasonable request.

I just want to remind everyone again that when you're asking a question, make sure you are doing it at a pace at which you're considering the people who are interpreting—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Mr. Chair, this is how fast I speak when we're in the House of Commons. It's just how I talk.

The Chair: I understand. I have a lot of friends who speak very quickly.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Right. I understand.

Perhaps we could get back to my question about the rent subsidy.

The Chair: We stopped the time. You're not losing any time on this one.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay. I will try to speak more slowly.

The Chair: I appreciate it. Thank you. The interpreters appreciate it.

Now we'll go to the minister, please.

Hon. Mona Fortier: As you know, we've been working with the provinces and territories to provide this forgivable loan to commercial property owners, who in turn lower the rent of their tenants by 75%. We will continue to monitor how this program is delivered, as we announced it last week. It will be offered pretty soon. It will be very important that we understand what happens across the country, and we will monitor and adapt the program as we—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Mr. Chair, it has been in the media quite a bit that this rent subsidy is not helping many, many, many small business owners. It's falling short of everything that was announced, so I think it needs to be taken a bit more seriously than that.

There are two issues regarding the 75% wage subsidy. First, employers who pay themselves and their employees dividends rather than wages are unable to qualify. Second, there is also a 30% threshold revenue decline needed in order to apply. Many of the businesses in my riding are at 27% or 29%. They desperately need these funds but are unable to qualify.

What is the government planning to do for these small businesses?

Hon. Mona Fortier: Again, thank you to the hon. member for sharing the realities she's hearing from small business owners. We are providing help and support for businesses through these very difficult times. The wage subsidy has been taken up and is working for many businesses. We know that some still fall through the cracks and we will look at how we can continue to support businesses across the country.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès (Brossard—Saint-Lambert, Lib.)): We are now going to Mr. Kevin Waugh.

Mr. Kevin Waugh (Saskatoon—Grasswood, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Three weeks ago, on April 17, the Minister of Canadian Heritage announced funding of \$500 million to assist Canada's arts, sports and cultural sectors. We are still waiting to hear who is eligible and when they can expect to receive this funding.

• (1330)

Hon. Steven Guilbeault (Minister of Canadian Heritage): Madam Chair, we will be releasing the details of that announcement, and how the money is going to be spent, in the coming days.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: We all know that many media organizations, large and small, in Canada are struggling right now. Allegations have arisen that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, CBC, is currently engaging in predatory behaviour and taking advantage of the current situation to harm its competitors using rate cuts. We've seen this from the province of Quebec. Many journalists have talked about this.

What is the government going to do to address these allegations against the CBC?

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Madam Chair, we have not been informed of these allegations. We will look into this, and we will get back to the hon. colleague if we do find any valuable information.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Local community and ethnic media outlets and papers have strong ties to their communities that often go much deeper than the major media outlets. Is the government currently using any local or ethnic media outlets to provide crucial coronavirus information through advertising?

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Madam Chair, I totally agree with my colleague. We need to get the information to Canadians on COVID-19, which is why we have started an ad-buy campaign of \$30 million, which is being distributed in more than 900 local, regional and national newspapers across the country and 500 radio and TV stations in 12 different languages, including Farsi, Mandarin, Spanish, Italian and many more.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Mr. Minister, I talked to the Winnipeg Free Press yesterday. It has received two ads from an ad agency in connection with the \$30 million the government is doling out to help media outlets. They had one ad on March 27. The second ad was on April 11. That is two ads in the Winnipeg Free Press in the last eight weeks. Is this the kind of money you're attempting to dole out to help media: two ads in eight weeks?

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: Madam Chair, we have been doing a number of things for our media in Canada over the last few months and will continue to do so. On top of that \$30 million ad-buy campaign, we have been investing \$50 million in local journalism. Just this year, it means that 200 journalists will be hired in areas across the country where journalism is more poorly defined. The federal government has paid part I licence fees of our broadcasters to the CRTC. That means \$30 million is staying in the pockets of our broadcasters.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Madam Chair, last week, as the minister would know, 15 community newspapers, including eight in Manito-

ba and seven in the province of Ontario, closed their doors for good. Is the government currently planning any further measures aimed at assisting community or ethnic media organizations? We understand that many more will close their doors within the next 30 to 60 days.

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: We are planning a number of other measures, some of which will be included in the \$500 million. I will be announcing the details of that in the coming days. Of the \$595 million that the media will receive, we have a tax credit that has now entered into force, and the cheques should be in the mail by the end of the summer. So there are a number of things we've done and a number of things we will be doing in the coming months as well.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Mr. Waugh, you may have a short question.

Mr. Kevin Waugh: Well, finally, you have the five members associated with that committee to dole out the \$595 million. They haven't even met yet. When will they meet?

Hon. Steven Guilbeault: I would like to remind my hon. colleague that in order for us to provide tax breaks for the 2019 period, media outlets had to file their tax returns so we could go ahead.

This will now be able to proceed, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): We now move on to Mr. Godin.

Mr. Godin, you may go ahead.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

This being the first time I've had the floor during a virtual sitting of Parliament, I'd like to take this opportunity to greet my fellow members, all 259 participants. I hope they are taking care of themselves.

I'd like to talk about the Prime Minister's appearance on the show *Tout le monde en parle*. This is what he had to say about his economic recovery plan:

We are going to remain focused on the economy as a whole...innovation...research and science, the green economy and a fairer economy...There are things we are all reflecting on right now... that reflection is going to continue.

That was a weak answer. It didn't inspire much confidence.

Can the government assure Canadians that it is being proactive and working on a plan to get the economy moving again? It must act now. Things are starting to reopen gradually. Is the government going to take concrete action to revive the economy?

• (1335)

Hon. Chrystia Freeland: Yes, absolutely. Our government is wholly committed to restarting the economy, and we are working closely with the provinces to do just that.

Last week, our government, together with the provincial and territorial premiers, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] released the principles that will guide efforts to restore economic activity across the country. That is key. The discussion between the Prime Minister and the premiers is continuing today.

Mr. Joël Godin: Madam Chair, before we go any further, since it took a while for the minister, or the government, to answer the question, can I have that time back to ask questions?

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I stopped the clock, Mr. Godin.

Mr. Joël Godin: Thank you.

The Prime Minister's answer during his appearance on *Tout le monde en parle* didn't inspire much confidence and doesn't line up with the Deputy Prime Minister's comments.

How can the government be proud of announcing \$252 million in assistance for the agri-food sector, when that is less than 1% of all the program funding the government has committed to help Canadians get through the COVID-19 crisis?

Clearly, the government doesn't see the food supply chain as a priority and has no regard for farmers and pork and beef producers. Does the government realize that eating is vital to Canadians? When is the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food going to adjust the program and show respect for Canadian farmers?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: I have the utmost respect for farmers.

We are going step by step. We've already confirmed various supports for the agricultural sector. This week, we focused on beef and pork producers and processors, as well as sectors with product surpluses that can be redirected to food banks.

I can assure my fellow member that this is an additional step and that more supports are on the way in the weeks ahead. Bear in mind that a number of programs are already available to farmers.

Mr. Joël Godin: I'd like to switch topics now.

Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier is home to a company that is already licensed by Health Canada and that, for 20 years, has been manufacturing medical equipment including masks, face shields and thermometers. This is equipment our health workers need.

The company has a licence from the federal government. In mid-March, Health Canada reached out to the company to find out how much equipment it could manufacture to help fight COVID-19. The company confirmed that it could immediately start producing 200,000 masks a week, ramping up to a million masks over the next few weeks. Forty-five days later, it is still waiting on its first order from the Canadian government.

We are managing a crisis with a limited supply of medical equipment. Can the health minister tell us why, 45 days later, this company licensed by Health Canada hasn't received an order?

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of Public Services and Procurement): Thank you for the question.

Industry and suppliers have enthusiastically answered our call to equip Canada with products and goods during the crisis. Many of

those suppliers have already received contracts. We have reached out to all the others and will negotiate contracts as needed.

● (1340)

[English]

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): I would now like to invite hon. member Jenica Atwin to speak.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, GP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Seniors living alone are most at risk of economic insecurity, particularly single senior women, as gender inequality in the job market has translated all too often into inadequate retirement income.

Madam Chair, can the minister commit to implementing a poverty reduction plan that addresses the unique challenges faced by older women?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Madam Chair, I want to assure the member that we are quite aware that this pandemic has typically affected single seniors, and many of those, given that they live longer, are single senior women.

I want to assure her that we are working on this issue, and we have provided some supports already through measures such as the GST supplementary payment. That is on average almost \$400 for single seniors. There's more work to do. We know that, so stay tuned.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Madam Chair, older women represent a high proportion of residents in long-term care facilities. Having spent their lives caring for parents, children and often their partners, they find themselves needing care in nursing homes. Multiple outbreaks of COVID-19 in long-term care homes in Canada have highlighted systemic gaps that senior and elderly women may face in such facilities, as well as the working conditions of the female-dominated ranks of nurses and personal support workers.

Madam Chair, can the minister commit to implementing a federal strategy for long-term care homes that recognizes quality of life for residents and working conditions for the employees, ideally one that goes hand in hand with a poverty reduction plan and enhanced home and community care investments across the country?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Madam Chair, I do want to thank the hon. member for her question. It's an important one. We are obviously deeply saddened by the outbreaks that have been going on in long-term care facilities and those who have lost their lives.

We do recognize that the administration of long-term care and palliative care is the responsibility of provinces and territories; however, we have been taking a team Canada approach, and as you already know, we've been doing tremendous work with them to try to ensure that those who live in those facilities can be well cared for and safe. We are doing that with guidelines—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Ms. Atwin has the floor.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Madam Chair, from May 4 to May 10, we are observing Mental Health Week. We know that our essential workers right now are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety, on top of putting their own physical safety and health on the line. Most of these workers work in precarious jobs with no access to paid sick leave or vacation, and without any benefits to access mental health services.

Apart from the very welcome investments in online resources, can the minister explain how the government will support these workers now and once the crisis is behind us?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Madam Chair, thank you very much to the member for the question. I'm so glad that she's raising the issue of mental health and in particular how poor mental health is often-times connected to our socio-economic status. I appreciate the nuance in that question.

She's right. We do have new resources that are available to all Canadians free of charge through the Wellness Together portal, but there is more to do. I think the announcement of top-up wages, for example, which the Prime Minister spoke about today, is another example of how we're taking the health and wellness of all low-income Canadians very seriously.

We know that mental health is not divorced from socio-economic status, and I look forward to working with her more on other measures that we can take together.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Madam Chair, we're all very aware of the importance of temporary foreign workers and their role in ensuring our food sovereignty across this country. The pandemic has highlighted how we depend on their work. How are we protecting them?

Madam Chair, will the government take action to strengthen legislation and ensure Canadians have access to the food they need while the workers who help bring it to our tables have safe working conditions, regardless of where they are working in this country?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We are very concerned, as are countries around the world, that we support and create the environment for the health and safety of our temporary foreign workers and we value their contribution to our food supply chain here in Canada.

We have issued guidelines to employers and are working very closely with local public health authorities in the provinces and territories to make sure workers are protected, that physical distancing and other recommendations are adhered to and that there are severe consequences if employers don't take care of their workers.

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): We are now going to Mr. MacGregor.

• (1345)

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question is this: Will the Liberal government prevent federal bailout funds from going to companies that use tax havens and avoid paying their fair share here in Canada, yes or no?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier (Minister of National Revenue): We are working to make sure that anyone who tries to circumvent the rules faces serious consequences.

We are asking businesses to designate a representative to attest their claims. Any employer receiving the subsidy who is deemed ineligible will have to repay the full amount. Anyone who abuses the program could face fines of up to 225% of the subsidy amount as well as five years in prison.

[*English*]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Madam Chair, I didn't really hear a "yes" to that question, so I'll repeat it. Does the government really think it's appropriate for tax-avoiding corporations to receive funding provided for by taxpayers?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Diane Lebouthillier: We will keep going after companies that engage in tax evasion.

I want to be clear. We will target those who are responsible, not innocent workers. An employee is an employee, regardless of who they work for.

The wage subsidy program does not hand a blank cheque over to employers. It is meant to help Canadians pay their bills, keep their jobs and get through the crisis.

[*English*]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Madam Chair, the agriculture funding announced by the government earlier this week amounts to less than 10% of what the Canadian Federation of Agriculture estimates will be required to help farmers weather this crisis. Why has the Minister of Agriculture shortchanged our farmers?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Madam Chair, this is one more step.

This was one more step. We have already committed significant support to our farmers through different programs, and we will do more.

I have to remind my colleague that we have put in \$5 billion through FCC, \$50 million for the temporary foreign workers, two times \$50 million for pork and beef producers this week, and \$77 million for food processing. This is only the beginning, and we should not forget that the business risk management programs are still there to offer support.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Yes, Madam Chair, but we're nearly two months into this pandemic and this announcement only came this week.

Farmers need certainty. When can farmers expect further updates on funding, and how much will the government be providing?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Madam Chair, we are working closely with the farmers and their representatives to identify where the gaps are, but once again, we have made improvements to the AgriStability program. They can get, depending on the province, either 50% or 75% in advance payments, and they can also, right now, access their AgriInvest program. There is more than \$2 billion ready to access today, if they have—

The Acting Chair (Mrs. Alexandra Mendès): Mr. MacGregor.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Madam Chair, federal disability recipients and seniors on fixed incomes have been hardest hit by cost of living increases from COVID-19. If we acknowledge that \$2,000 per month is the minimum needed to get through this time, why are they being asked to survive on far less? When can they expect assistance, and how much will they receive?

Hon. Deb Schulte: Madam Chair, I want to make sure people realize that we have provided some assistance through the GST supplementary benefit. We are also providing support to those who are still working, and we have done that by allowing them to access the CERB. There is more work to be done, so you'll be hearing more in the near future.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Madam Chair, as I think we've heard through today's question period, there are countless example of this government designing programs to exclude many small businesses that desperately need help. Whether it's the payroll requirements or other eligibility, we still, to this day, almost two months into the pandemic, have too many small businesses falling through the cracks.

Madam Chair, why has the government taken this approach and when can we finally expect fixes to the whole system?

• (1350)

Hon. Mary Ng: Madam Chair, right from the get-go, we have been committed to making sure that Canadians are helped through this crisis, and that small businesses get the support that they need, so that we are saving businesses and jobs in this country. That is what we have done with many of our programs. You're seeing that we are also listening, so that we can modify them as we need.

I want to assure the member that the work is not done. We continue to do this.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

It is now over to Mr. Perron.

Mr. Perron, you may go ahead.

Mr. Yves Perron (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question will come as no surprise, since it has to do with agriculture. I hear the questions my fellow members are asking, and to be frank, I don't find the answers satisfactory. It is well and good to talk about existing programs, but they aren't working, so enough with that refrain. That's what people are telling us. It's not just members of the opposition saying it.

This morning, both farmers and processors came together for a press conference at the Union des producteurs agricoles's head office in Longueuil. Six stakeholders from different sectors sounded the alarm.

Can the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food therefore tell us when she will announce significant supports for the industry?

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We have already announced significant amounts of support, and more is on the way.

I'd like to correct my fellow member. It's not that the programs aren't working; it's that they aren't generous enough in farmers' eyes. That's why I'm working with my provincial counterparts to make improvements to programming, including AgriStability.

Here's an example. After using the online AgriStability benefit estimator, a pork producer found out that he would get \$11 per head, as they say in the industry. Pork producers are calling for \$20 per head, so it's a good start, even though it's not enough and it isn't what they are asking for. We want to keep working together, but farmers have to access the money available to them through AgriStability.

Mr. Yves Perron: Now it's my turn to correct the minister. Even before the crisis, we were hearing from people in the industry that the programs were neither suitable nor sufficient. We are in a crisis, and this is an exceptional situation. In the case of mad cow disease, farmers received direct assistance. That's the kind of assistance we are calling for. We don't want to hear about growing levels of debt. Of course, this is a first step, but farms are already deep in debt.

A few days ago, the government announced \$50 million in funding for pork producers, even though they are asking for \$20 per hog for 27 million hogs. The government's support covers just 2.5 million hogs. When I call the measure insufficient, I mean it is grossly insufficient. It's high time the government put forth more support. It has to stop saying that it's working hard and examining the situation. The government has to listen to the people in the industry. Again, this morning, they had some interesting proposals.

When is the government going to announce a whole lot more in funding support? What's been announced so far is only 10% of what farmers are asking for.

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: We are going step by step. The programs are already in place. We are trying to make them better, and we are committed to doing that. These programs are cost-shared with the provinces.

However, I would point out to the member that, when it comes to AgriRecovery, we made an exception to the rule. We are moving forward in every province to help pork and beef producers. That's two funding envelopes of \$50 million each to help cover the additional costs from the decrease in plant processing capacity. That's new money that was not yet available, money we introduced this week. As the Prime Minister said, we are going to do more, and we are moving forward step by step.

Mr. Yves Perron: What we concluded in committee this week is that the \$125 million is not new money. It was already earmarked for the programs. The government can't say that programs already exist and, at the same time, claim that they are new programs. Something doesn't add up there.

What's more, there are different ways to make money available. I'd like to talk compensation. Everyone knows that the Canada-U.S.-Mexico Agreement came into force a month earlier than planned, despite the promises that had been made. That resulted in additional losses, once again. An easy way to make money available without committing new spending is to provide compensation and announce programs for supply-managed sectors that got nothing. It seems to me that a time of crisis is a time for the government to practise some judo and announce measures. I am reaching out to the government, as I always do, but it has to come forward with announcements.

Can we expect the government to announce measures in the coming days?

• (1355)

Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau: Our commitment to farmers in supply-managed sectors—meaning, egg, poultry and dairy farmers—is as strong as it always was. I repeat, our commitment is clear.

Dairy producers received their first payment at the end of last year or the beginning of this year. Support for poultry and egg farmers is in the form of investment programs, which aligns well with the recovery.

At this time, we are focusing on emergency programs to help farmers hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When it comes to the dairy sector, I hope I can count on your support. As you know, legislative changes are needed to grant the Canadian Dairy Commission's request and increase its borrowing limit by \$200 million so it can buy more butter and cheese.

[English]

The Chair: Our next question will go to Mr. Lake.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, we're all inundated, as we've heard during this entire question period, with Canadians' concerns about the economic restrictions and the social restrictions that they're under. Over the last

couple of months, the WHO has given one very consistent message in terms of coming out of those economic and social restrictions. On March 16, Dr. Tedros said in his briefing, "We have a simple message for all countries: test, test, test." On March 25, 44 days ago, he said, "Aggressive measures to find, isolate, test, treat and trace are not only the best and fastest way out of extreme social and economic restrictions—they're also the best way to prevent them."

Does the minister agree with the WHO that relentless testing and tracing are critical to a successful economic and social relaunch strategy in Canada?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thanks to the member for the very astute observation and question.

Absolutely, we agree that testing and contact tracing will form an important part of our response to living with COVID. We've been investing heavily in ensuring that we have the lab capacity, the collaboration across provinces and territories, and the variety of testing options to help us increase our capacity to test. We are aiming right now for a high volume of tests, but I will also say that in Canada we have one of the highest testing rates in the world.

Although we're doing well, I can assure him that I am with him and I believe we need to do more.

Hon. Mike Lake: I have some really quick questions for follow-up.

First, what is Canada's current testing capability?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, as I mentioned to his colleagues yesterday, we have currently the capacity to do approximately 60,000 tests per day across the country.

Hon. Mike Lake: How many tests were conducted each day on average in Canada last week?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, it's hard for me to get that exact number, but I will get back to him with the exact number.

Hon. Mike Lake: I'll save you the time. The exact number was 28,851, on average, every day last week. That's a gap of 30,000 from what your stated testing capability is.

I'll give another quote from Dr. Tam, back on April 22, 15 days ago. She said, "As a first tranche, roughly close to 60,000 is where the provinces can potentially expand to as a target already."

Does the minister happen to know, ballpark, what the average number of daily tests in Canada has been since that statement?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Your estimate was slightly higher than what my estimate was going to be, so that's a great piece of news.

Listen, I will just say that I think if the premise here is that we could be doing more testing. I would agree, but I will also say that the provinces and territories are working incredibly hard on testing strategies that meet their own specific needs. I'm happy to have a conversation with the member later about that testing strategy.

Dr. Tam works with all the chief public health officers across the country to ensure that their testing strategy is going to be applicable and appropriate for their particular jurisdictions. We, as the federal government, provide the capacity for them to conduct those tests.

Hon. Mike Lake: Following up on that, is there a jurisdiction in Canada where relentless testing is not the appropriate strategy as provinces consider relaunching?

• (1400)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Each province and territory has its own outbreak and its own epidemic. For example, in British Columbia, where there are relatively fewer cases in general and less disease activity, they may have a different testing strategy than a province like Ontario, which is currently struggling with more outbreaks.

Hon. Mike Lake: Given your comment that our current testing capability is 60,000, and acknowledging that only at one point in

the entire history of our COVID response, over several months, has our weekly average been over 30,000—it was about 31,000 for one day on a rolling basis—Minister, are you satisfied with our current testing amounts right now, given that we're testing 50% of what the public health officer advises would be best?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm so amazed by the work the provinces and territories have done in a very short time to increase their capacity. We are supporting them with the tools that they need to get more testing done, but also to have other components in place that will allow them to do the rapid tracing of positive cases. I think it's very important to remember that testing strategies will be different across the provinces, based on the outbreak disease epidemiology. Having said that, I know that we can all do better, and I'm certain that my counterparts feel the same.

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut the minister off at that one.

I want to thank everyone for the session today, I think it went rather well. I'm very proud of you and proud of ourselves for what we managed to accomplish.

The committee stands adjourned until Tuesday, May 12, at noon.

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