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Chair: Mr. Sean Casey

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

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 20 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, October 28, 2020, the committee will resume its study of the review of the employment insurance program.

I would like to welcome our witnesses to begin our discussion, with five minutes of opening remarks followed by questions. From the Associated Designers of Canada, we have Kenneth MacKenzie, president, and from the Canadian Labour Congress, we have Hassan Yussuff, president, and Chris Roberts, director, social and economic policy.

For the benefit of our witnesses, I would like to make a few additional comments. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of “floor”, “English” or “French”.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

We're going to start with Mr. MacKenzie.

Welcome to the committee. You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie (President, Associated Designers of Canada): Hello. Thank you so much for having me here today. Thank you also for the ongoing commitment from all of the parties in providing support for so many individuals through the course of this challenging past year.

My name is Ken MacKenzie. I'm the president of the Associated Designers of Canada and of IATSE local ADC659.

We represent live performance designers in the field of set, costume, lighting, sound and video design across Canada outside of Quebec. We've also been a part of the Creative Industries Coalition alongside our colleagues at Canadian Actors' Equity Association, the Canadian Federation of Musicians and IATSE, the International

Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. This coalition represents upwards of 50,000 arts workers from coast to coast. We've worked shoulder to shoulder with members of this Parliament to mitigate some of the short-term financial devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic on arts sector workers.

As we look to the future and consider how we rebuild into a more resilient sector and how, as gig workers and self-employed artists, we might be able to make ourselves less vulnerable in situations of economic and social disruption, one of the suggestions we offer is a re-examination of the employment insurance program in Canada. As it stands, the overwhelming majority of live performance designers are self-employed contractors and currently employment insurance offers self-employed workers the ability to opt in only to a partial system. Participants can contribute to EI special benefits, maternity, parental, sickness, compassionate care, but are unable to contribute to and therefore are ineligible for EI regular benefits.

Not allowing self-employed workers to participate fully in the EI program puts gig workers at a disadvantage. As gig and self-employed workers become a larger part of the workforce, the EI program must evolve to accommodate them so that they can contribute to and receive the full benefits available to traditional employees through EI regular benefits.

Live performance designers, like many other gig workers, are contracted in unique ways that may not align with the existing EI structure, but which will have to be accommodated for. The existing fisher benefits provide a useful model that could be adapted and expanded to suit the sector. Many gig workers are not contracted on an hourly or weekly basis, but are paid a flat fee per contract, regardless of the length of the contract. These contracts include defined residency periods when the worker is obligated to the employer, so the calculation of EI eligibility should be established based on contract residency duration. The rate of EI benefits should be established based on eligible earnings within a prescribed period or cumulative contract periods.

Designers, like many contract workers, are often contracted months or even years in advance. This does not mean that they begin work immediately and may still encounter significant gaps in employment between contracts. A revised EI system must allow for workers to be eligible for benefits during these gaps in employment, even if they have future work. Equally, workers should not be penalized for small gaps in between contract residencies but which are not sufficient to be unemployment. Arts workers, like fishers, should be eligible to receive up to 26 weeks of EI benefits per period of unemployment.

All self-employed workers are currently responsible to pay both employee and employer CPP contributions and if a revised EI program requires workers to make both the full employee and employer EI contributions, it will be financially debilitating, especially for arts workers who already live so close to the bone and are centred in the more expensive major urban areas across the country. EI premiums must be equitable and affordable. EI reforms should consider contributions from the contractor and the contractee that run parallel to the employee and employer contributions that are standard.

More than ever, the pandemic has underscored the importance of the arts in people's lives. Movies, television series, music are where people have turned to for comfort and laughter and escape. Canadians need the arts and we've been there for Canadians.

I thank all of you for responding so quickly to keep our sector and others alive through the support of the wage subsidy, the CERB and now the CRB. I urge the Canadian government to continue to support arts workers now and to help us to create the resilience that our all-too-vulnerable self-employed arts sector needs in the future.

Merci. Thank you very much for your time.

• (1535)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. MacKenzie.

Next we're going to hear from—

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Are we able to discuss the committee business following the first panel, as you and I discussed earlier today?

The Chair: It's in the hands of the committee. I guess we can deal with this now.

Colleagues, we have a request basically to alter the agenda to deal with committee business up front as opposed to at the end of the witness testimony. If people want to use the "raise hand" function, we can deal with this now.

I recognize Madam Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be brief.

I object to this change to our work. We have invited four panels of witnesses for the study. Out of respect for those panels, I feel we need to maintain what was established and continue our committee work at the scheduled time of 5:30 p.m.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Ms. Gazan, please.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Chair, I as well oppose the change in schedule. It certainly doesn't respect people who are appearing today as witnesses. I have other things to do at the end. I have a colleague coming in for the third hour today, which I've arranged with the clerk, for the committee business.

That doesn't work for me at all. I do not support that.

• (1540)

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan (Spadina—Fort York, Lib.): I agree with my two colleagues. I think we have a schedule, and we have guests here who have made time in their day. They didn't appear here to watch us debate committee timetables. They've come here to ask us to act on some critical issues affecting the people they represent. Out of respect to the witnesses and out of respect to Ms. Chabot, who has been waiting patiently to get this study going, I think we have a responsibility to follow the process we have already agreed to.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Mr. Chair, after our subcommittee meeting, I reflected on Ms. Gazan's comments that she was worried about three-hour meetings taking a toll on the staff and that having a three-hour meeting today and Thursday may go against what she, Mr. Vaughan and the Bloc member agreed to at the subcommittee meeting. I will point out as well that the subcommittee report does not, in fact, reflect the schedule that we've been presented with.

To conclude, the Conservative members are supportive of this schedule. My aim in this is to say we're on board with this schedule. Let's not spend an entire hour after committee. That was the aim.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Point of order.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: I want to be clear. Aren't in camera meetings confidential? I think the member is talking about what happened at an in camera meeting. I don't think that's allowed, is it?

The Chair: You're right. The subcommittee was in camera, and it isn't appropriate to discuss that in public. When we get to that stage of the agenda, the report will be made public, but at this point, it's still in camera. That's a fair point.

Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: I had the same point of order.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: If committee members want two three-hour meetings this week, if that's the will of the committee, it seems to stand in stark contrast to what we discussed, but I guess I can't talk about that.

All right. We'll continue.

The Chair: Very well.

Thank you for your patience, Mr. Yussuff.

Welcome to the committee. It's good to see you again. You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Hassan Yussuff (President, Canadian Labour Congress): Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to present on behalf of the Canadian Labour Congress.

First, I want to start by thanking the government for providing emergency income support to workers in need during the pandemic. Nearly three million jobs were lost in March and April 2020.

The unprecedented scale of job loss has simply overwhelmed the EI system, but it wasn't just in its administrative capacity. The EI program has been so eroded that a great number of low-paid, female, racialized and non-standard workers would have been left behind. These are the workers hardest hit by the economic shock of the pandemic.

These workers will also benefit from Bill C-24 and the extension of EI and recovery benefits proposed by the government. The CLC fully supports rapid passage of this legislation that is before the House.

Going forward, we must address the long-standing weakness in the EI system.

The most important task is to expand access and increase benefit levels. In the late 1980s, 85% of the unemployed qualified for unemployment insurance benefits. After regressive policy change in the 1990s, about 40% of unemployed workers are eligible for EI. Eligibility restrictions especially hurt workers in part-time and non-standard work arrangements, such as women, youth and racialized workers.

In such places as Vancouver and the GTA, just one in five unemployed receives benefits at any given time. Going forward, we must construct an EI program that includes rather than excludes the unemployed workers. This is why the CLC is calling for a single, national entrance requirement, equal to the lesser of 360 hours or 12 weeks.

EI's low benefit rates and low ceiling on insurable earnings also excludes workers. For workers earning above the average, the ef-

fective replacement rate is far lower than 55%. Applying for EI benefits may seem hardly worth the trouble. For low-paid workers, the EI replacement rate is simply too low. Fifty-five per cent of very low earnings is just not enough to live on.

The CLC is calling for a livable maximum individual benefit and an increase in the benefit rate and ceiling on insurable earnings.

The government can make other immediate changes to improve EI.

First, the government should extend the maximum duration of EI sickness benefits, and the government is committed to doing this.

Second, it should also end the allocation of separation money. Suspending this practice during the pandemic has led to administrative efficiency and fewer appeals and was the right thing to do. The government should also make this change permanent.

Third, it should also address the unfairness of having migrant workers pay EI contributions without a realistic chance of receiving benefits. This could take the form of restoring the ability of migrant workers to access parental benefits, for example. This would not be too costly a reform.

Fourth, the government should reinstate regional EI liaison agents, as this committee recommended in 2016. During the pandemic, auto plants and meat-packing facilities have temporarily shut down in response to the outbreak. EI liaison officers would have made establishing new claims far more efficient.

Fifth, the skills boost initiative, which lets unemployed workers use their EI benefit while getting training, should be opened up and expanded. In an unemployment crisis such as the present one, more jobless workers should be able to enrol full time in an educational program without losing their benefits.

Sixth, the government should allow fully for a commitment to bring back the tripartite appeal system and make it accountable to the EI commissioner, as it once was.

I want to conclude with some final comments.

The current government has committed to combatting precariousness and improving job quality. An important step towards reducing inequality and job market precarity is to expand access to EI benefits and make them more adequate.

Extending the maximum duration of benefits will improve the quality of job matches. Improving access to EI and increasing benefit levels will also encourage employers to improve job quality.

• (1545)

Starting in 1993, jobless workers who voluntarily left employment without just cause or who were dismissed for misconduct were totally disqualified from EI benefits. This penalty is unfair, counterproductive and unnecessarily harsh. It should be reversed.

I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to present. I'll take any questions from the committee members.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yussuff.

We're going to begin now with rounds of questions, starting with the Conservatives.

We'll start with Ms. Dancho, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Yussuff, for your comments. I just want to confirm that you do support the extension of EI from 26 weeks to 50 weeks.

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Yes, I do.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: When was your organization first aware that 26 weeks would not be sufficient time for members receiving EI?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: We've been saying this for quite some time, but when the government brought in all the emergency measures to support workers during this pandemic, we recognized at that time that we would have to extend benefits. I think the government approves of that and is doing that with the support of other parties in the House. We encourage you to continue that support for workers because we do believe the pandemic will be some time yet.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Did you support the legislation that was passed in the House in September to create that extended EI for 26 weeks?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Yes, we did.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: When did you expect that 26 weeks wouldn't be sufficient?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: We recognized that this pandemic is a moving target. We don't know how long the unemployed will be unemployed. We said that should that be the case, the government will have to extend benefits again to ensure workers are not going to fall through the cracks because the duration of their benefits will be exhausted.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, and we know there was a second wave of quite severe lockdowns. Some of them are still in place in the Peel and Toronto regions and elsewhere in Canada. That was really coming to the forefront in mid-November in the country. That was when those second waves of very strict lockdowns were coming and there were associated layoffs as a result.

Did you expect that 26 weeks wouldn't be sufficient in November or December? You must have had an idea that the second wave of lockdowns was going to set workers back.

• (1550)

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I think in early January we started musing with the government that there was a real possibility the government would have to extend benefits. Workers were still unemployed.

More importantly, we're going to have to go out and support them before their benefits are exhausted. I think the bill before you right now is going to do just that.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I completely understand that.

If you began talking to the government in early January, were you surprised that they didn't bring forward an extension for that until the end of February?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I was not necessarily surprised. I've been around the federal scene for quite some time. I know that a desire, a want, doesn't necessarily act on my schedule. I leave it to the government and the political parties in Parliament to determine when they can get legislation through the system.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, I understood that as well. You have been around the federal system for quite some time, so you know that Parliament is not efficient. You would likely have seen that over the last number of years in your career.

If you started talking to them at the beginning of January, do you believe it would have been preferable for them to have brought forward this legislation earlier? My understanding and the understanding of members of this committee is that those EI benefits are running out at the end of March, on March 28. That's two weeks away.

Do you have any concerns that perhaps this should have been brought forward sooner? Do you not think that legislation should have been brought forward sooner? Are you happy with it being brought forward as late as it was?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: It's not for me to decide the appropriate time. I do know there's enough time within the legislative calendar to get the bill passed and get benefits to workers before they exhaust their present benefits.

I would encourage all of you on the committee to have the desire to do so and to collaborate however you can to make sure that the legislation is passed in a timely manner.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Unfortunately, opposition members don't control the legislative agenda. That's up to the House leader of the government who has really, in our view, severely mishandled the legislative agenda for quite some time. They've prioritized strange bills. They've just brought this one forward, yet we're incredibly under the wire to ensure that people don't get cut off on March 28.

As you know, opposition members have a duty to ensure that they review legislation to a large extent to prevent errors such as we saw in September in legislation that allowed vacationers to claim benefits. Had there been a more normal legislative time for that and other pieces of legislation.... There have been several errors. We know that pregnant women were left out of the original supports early on in the pandemic. We see these errors happening when legislation is passed quickly without official opposition oversight that we would see in normal times.

I'm greatly concerned that you told the Liberal government at the beginning of January that the 26 weeks was not going to be sufficient, yet they failed to bring forward legislation to address that issue until the end of February. That's a month and a half after you raised the alarm bell.

I'll further note that when you released your press release, you were very concerned about this. Only two days later, they mentioned to Canadians that they were going to fix this problem, but they had known about it from you since the beginning of January. I find that all very odd. I'll continue to pursue why the Liberal government waited so long to bring forward this legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's all for me today on this.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho.

Next we'll go to the Liberals.

Ms. Young, please, you have six minutes.

Ms. Kate Young (London West, Lib.): I'm sorry, Mr. Chair, I think we were going to go to Mr. Long.

The Chair: Very well.

Mr. Long, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair, and sorry about that confusion.

Good afternoon to our witnesses. Thank you for your presentations.

Mr. Yussuff, it's certainly great to see you again. I think we first met here in Saint John, New Brunswick. You came down for the Day of Mourning and laid a wreath on behalf of the CLC at the Frank & Ella Hatheway monument here in Saint John.

I've been on HUMA going on six years. I remember the first questions I asked you were about the Conservative union-busting bills C-377 and C-525. It seems like a long time ago.

Anyway, I want to focus on the EI benefits and the expanded benefits. I would certainly concur that the opposition is there to challenge and oppose, but when it comes to impeding the progress of a bill that would affect thousands and thousands of Canadians, I think we all should be very concerned.

We're certainly aware that in late February, Minister Qualtrough came forth with an extension of the CRB and the caregiving benefit, and the additional 24 weeks of EI. We all know how critical those programs are. Certainly, I will say that we have seen firsthand how critical a strong EI system and EI programs are to support workers, especially during what I would call, obviously, a historic crisis, a historic pandemic.

Mr. Yussuff, on February 25, as we know, the government tabled Bill C-24, which would extend EI regular benefits for Canadians who are unable to work due to the pandemic. Yesterday the bill was read a second time, and the Conservatives refused to allow this bill to be sent to committee.

Just to make the committee aware, if these EI benefits are not extended, in the first week alone, 23,000 Canadians will lose access to their only source of income support. Every week that they delay, tens of thousands of Canadians will exhaust their EI benefits.

Mr. Yussuff, with the Conservatives delaying the implementation of this bill, what impact do you believe this will have on Canadians?

• (1555)

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: First, I would hope that the Conservative Party and their leaders would find it necessary to support this legislation before the benefits of these workers expire. Should the bill not be passed in a timely manner, it's going to have devastating consequences. If they get no benefits, the only option these workers will have is to go on social assistance.

There's a significant difference in what workers are going to have to support their families versus what they are getting with their benefits right now. The differences are starkly like night and day.

I would simply plead with the members of this committee today to take the message back to their respective leaders to prioritize this and recognize the importance of this. There's no reason to deny working families the support that is promised in the legislation; otherwise, it's going to have a devastating impact on working families.

One of the things we have to be concerned about is that people need certainty. As terrible as the pandemic has been for working people, one of the things that has been very good is that people have not had to fend for themselves. To a large extent, the government has provided benefits to take care of all of those who, through no fault of their own, have lost their jobs.

More importantly, these workers still need that support. There are thousands and thousands of workers who don't have a job to go back to. These benefits are going to be critical in providing the support they need to continue to pay their rent, buy food and support their families.

It's critical, I think, for committee members to find the goodwill to support the legislation and pass it in a timely manner before the end of March.

Mr. Wayne Long: I certainly would concur. Saint John has a rich union history. There are a lot of great union members here in the city. Certainly, we had calls to the constituency office today to that very effect. People are concerned about their EI benefits, where that extension is going and how it was delayed by the Conservatives.

Mr. Yussuff, of all the urgent COVID priorities, where does the extension of benefits fit on your list?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: It fits as a top priority.

We would very much like for the economy to return and be even better than it was pre-pandemic. Ultimately, there's nothing better than a worker having a job to go back to, and a job, of course, that can pay them a decent wage to take care of their families. However, the priority right now and our number one issue is to extend these benefits as the committee is considering what changes we can look forward to in regard to reforming the EI system.

Our top priority is obviously to get the legislation passed in a timely manner, and also for the committee to keep doing its work to recommend to the government proposed changes that could happen to the EI system going forward.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

How much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds for the question and the answer.

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay. Thanks for that.

Just to close off, if you had a message for the Conservative MPs in this committee regarding their refusal to support Bill C-24, what would it be?

• (1600)

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: It is that the people who are going to be impacted are people who need these benefits. These are people who live in their constituency, as they live across the country. These are Canadians, and fundamentally we should not hold them hostage.

I know you need to have a debate in Parliament. It's not for me to tell you how to do your job, but I would kindly ask members to consider the passage of this bill in a timely manner so workers have some certainty that they are going to continue to get their benefit so they can support their families and are able to do the things necessary to ensure that they can pay their bills and buy groceries at the end of the day.

Mr. Wayne Long: Mr. Yussuff, thank you very much.

Chair, thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to greet the witnesses and tell them it's a great pleasure to have them here.

My question is for the president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

Mr. Yussuff, thank you for accepting our invitation to testify.

Your organization represents 3.3 million workers. That's quite impressive. You have come to meet with us as part of a review of the employment insurance program. I will do my best to avoid talking about Bill C-24. The Bloc Québécois is going to support the bill because it's a temporary measure that will end on September 21, 2021. We are here to determine what kind of permanent measures to implement.

Am I wrong in thinking that your call for increasing to 50 the number of weeks of benefits for which people are eligible existed long before this whole emergency measures debate and that it's part of your vision for reform?

[*English*]

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I don't think it's too late.

Obviously, the bill contains an extension of benefits for 50 weeks. This is a recognition, of course, of the hardship that workers are going through, through no fault of their own, because of the duration of this pandemic. More importantly, I think we need to have a very thorough examination of the duration of benefits that should be permanently enacted in regard to the reform that the members of the committee will recommend and consider.

We certainly are recommending that. We recognize that, more often than not, through no fault of their own, workers lose their jobs through a variety of different things happening in the economy, but equally, we need to ensure that workers are going to have income. More importantly, as we are going to retrain a lot of workers who might not be going back to their job, we need to ensure that we can provide the support for them so they can get training at the same time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: People often say that the employment insurance program discriminates against women.

What changes do you believe we should undertake to make it fairer?

[*English*]

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Thank you very much for that question.

What the pandemic certainly has revealed to a large extent is that women are bearing the larger burden of this. One, of course, is the responsibility of family. Despite all of their efforts, women still bear the majority of that responsibility.

More importantly, of course, what we're seeing in how the pandemic is evolving is that women still remain unemployed. As we look to reform, we need to recognize that we should really look through a gender lens at how we are going to deal with issues that specifically affect women.

One of the recommendations we have made, and I think there's a commitment of the government to do this, is to extend the EI sick benefit far more often. Women are needing that benefit, and we know that the duration of it is far too short. A critical part of the reform is to ensure that we can extend that benefit especially when they're struggling with surgeries or cancer treatment. We need to ensure that they're going to continue to have support and not lose that while they're still struggling with their recovery when they're going through a sickness. That will be one of the issues.

Women traditionally work in what we would call the service sector. Quite often they're likely to have a shorter duration of work, shorter hours. Raising the maximum will be critical to ensure that they're going to get a benefit at the end of the year. It's also a way to ensure that the employer can look at the job market to make sure they can regain the women back into the workforce and improve the conditions in which they're working.

• (1605)

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: As I understand it, first we need a single 360-hour or 13-week entrance requirement. It would account for the fact that women have increasingly non-standard jobs. So, considering the number of hours they work per week is important.

Do you have any recommendations on governance related to the employment insurance program?

[English]

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: We certainly have been working to restore the EI appeal system. There's generally an agreement that workers should have a mechanism in which they can have an appeal system where they can present their stories before a tripartite structure. I think there's a commitment of the government to do that. The pandemic, obviously, interrupted that, but I think we need to bring that system back in.

Equally, we need to give the commissioners a role to oversee that system because they are there to help the government, to support the government in the governance structure. I think that will make the system far more democratic for workers, should they have their benefit denied, to have a process in which they can have that appeal within their community, and have a way to get those decisions either overturned or at least heard by a tripartite panel in the context of that benefit being denied.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yussuff.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next we have Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Mr. Yussuff.

Thank you so much for being on the panel today. One thing the NDP has been proposing is to extend sickness benefits. With COVID, we know that even with individuals who have contracted

the virus we don't know the long-term health impacts that result from it, as an example.

You indicated that you support increasing the sickness benefit to 50 days. Why is this critical?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: There are two different ways. First of all, right now the sick benefit for COVID is two weeks. Some workers might have already taken advantage of that. I think in Bill C-24 the government extended that again for additional time, should workers need that benefit.

I think we have two problems in this country overall, and I want to speak to that so at least there is an appreciation. In terms of the provinces, I think there are only two—or well, three—jurisdictions in the country that have some form of what are called sick days under employment standards legislation. In the federal system, we have sick days, a small number, three days, and we can make an argument for why it should be extended beyond that in the federal code.

The Province of Quebec has sick days in its employment standards legislation. P.E.I., to its credit, has one sick day for workers should they need it.

More jurisdictions in the country need to bring in sick days as a permanent requirement for workers in the provincial jurisdiction so that when workers get sick, they can actually take sick days off from their work and not lose pay. That's something that I think should happen at a provincial level.

However, for the protection of workers right now in the federal jurisdiction, there are COVID-related benefits that extend that benefit, and should they require it, they are going to have that. We're also making an argument that under the EI sick leave provision, the current 16 weeks should be extended to a longer period to ensure that if workers have symptoms that will keep them off work for a longer period, they are able to access EI, but should be able to access EI for a much longer period.

I think there is generally an understanding that the government was talking about doing this, but again, I'm hoping that in this reform we can see that happen sooner rather than later.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My next question relates to Canadians living with episodic disability. We know that they account for half of Canadians of working age living with a disability. You recommended that ESDC undertake a review into how episodic disabilities fit into the EI sickness benefit framework, to identify mechanisms to increase access.

We know that effective disability support is a prerequisite for meaningful income support that enables Canadians living with disabilities to meet their most basic needs, yet this still doesn't occur in Canada. When we talk about people being left behind, I think we can all agree that disabled persons are one of the groups that were left behind before, but were just horribly left behind during the pandemic.

Your proposal addresses episodic disability and the potential to include this in the EI sickness benefit. Can you explain the benefit of taking your proposed approach and what happens to Canadians living with chronic disability?

• (1610)

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Maybe I could turn to my colleague, Chris Roberts. The two of us have been working on this file.

Chris, if you don't mind, could you please answer that question?

Mr. Chris Roberts (Director, Social and Economic Policy, Canadian Labour Congress): Yes, sure.

It's a very timely issue, given what we're learning about the experience of individuals who've contracted COVID, that many of them are so-called "long-haulers". They have a long and episodic set of symptoms that return and recur periodically over time.

For individuals with episodic disabilities, the EI sickness benefit, and really the EI system itself, isn't very well set up to deal with people who are sick for a few days, then are well enough to work for the next few days, and then are sick again.

I think there has to be a real searching evaluation of how the EI system deals with those individuals with episodic disabilities. There is not a simple answer to that, but I think there is growing appreciation that the weeks-based system of EI isn't really well set up to deal with those individuals.

I think a whole lot of other changes could be made to the EI sickness benefit that could help. Certainly with respect to EI benefits generally, if we drop the hours requirement, more individuals working with disabilities are going to have access to EI regular benefits and other benefits as well.

Also, I think we can examine the premium reduction program that incentivizes employers to offer short-term disability, and private insurance as well, to ensure that there's a good fit with an expanded EI sickness benefit.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have one follow-up question.

One of the motions that the NDP put forward, certainly for persons with disabilities, is a guaranteed livable basic income. This is something that has been widely supported by the disability community across the country, in addition to current and future government programs and supports. Do you think this is something that would benefit the disabled community?

I ask that because we know that, for example, although not EI in terms of people falling through the cracks, 70% of adults with cognitive disabilities live in poverty and might not even be able to work. Do you think expanding our social safety net, building on our EI benefits, would be helpful?

The Chair: Give a very short answer, please. We're out of time.

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: This requires a longer answer, but I'm going to attempt to be very brief.

The debate on guaranteed income is one that we should all welcome. There's a need for us to have that debate, and more importantly, recognize how workers and people with disabilities are treated in the system.

Under the reformed system, I'm not sure whether that fits into this, but I do believe we need to have a broad debate. We would welcome our ability to be engaged in that process, to figure out how we can allow these people to do better than what they are doing right now in regard to the income we're giving them and how we're supporting them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Yussuff and Ms. Gazan.

Next is Ms. Falk, please, for five minutes.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank both of our witnesses for the testimony they have shared today and for the contributions they're making to this study.

I think we can all say it's important to our employment insurance program that it's not only viable but also responsive to the labour market and the needs of Canadians.

My first question is for Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie.

Given that much of your membership is self-employed, I am interested in your comments on how your membership fits into the existing employment insurance framework.

• (1615)

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: Currently, it's not an ideal fit, unless they opt in. That's the only scenario under which they can get any of the benefits, and those are just the special benefits.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Yes, for sure.

Do you have any insight in terms of how many of your self-employed members opt in to the EI program?

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: It's a very small number, because I think the numbers don't add up.

First of all, they usually have partners that help them deal with things like parental care. I don't know of any colleagues who have actually taken time off from work.

Just taking that money, the contributions that are required to be made for those special benefits is too much of a toll. It's hard to access for people who are, as I said, working so close to the bottom.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Is it fair to make the assumption that this would be their rationale for their hesitancy for not opting in, just taking that money, possibly not using the benefit, if needed?

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: Yes. If it were mandatory and if there were some guarantee around it, then I think there would be more people who'd feel confident in opting in to it. Obviously, if it's mandatory, they don't have to opt in, but if there was more guarantee around it....

This is like insurance in case any of these things happen. When they're signing up, nobody knows whether they're going to need that health insurance, and there are other avenues to get that kind of insurance.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I would be interested in knowing, too, if there's a difference among your membership between women and men opting in, with women being child-bearers, having children, and that type of thing.

I know we're into this stage. I'm an example of it. My husband has actually taken parental leave a couple of times, so he's kind of the odd guy out, but it's starting to change. A lot more men are accessing that.

I'd be interested in knowing whether you notice a difference between men and women paying into that, or is it just, again, the risks they take of—

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: I don't actually have those numbers. I could get those numbers, but I can tell you anecdotally that I do notice the same shift that you're talking about. There are more fathers who are engaging in child care than there used to be.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Since you're in the community, would you say that people would want to be involved in the EI program if there were a type of guarantee or something that they would have?

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: Yes, and I think it would also be contingent. There is a lot of hesitancy around the idea. People are afraid, and it would be the same thing with the CPP, that they would be required to make both the employer and the employee contributions. For a lot of my colleagues, that would be a deal breaker in supporting it, because that would just be too much of a toll.

If it were just the employee contributions, I think there would be support.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I have time for one quick question here.

From your perspective, has the COVID pandemic changed the level of interest in the EI program for self-employed members going forward? Have their senses been heightened to say, "Oh, I should be putting money into this," or they want to put money into this?

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: I definitely think there's been a huge amount of recognition of the support they've received from the government over the past year. I would say, within the first two weeks to a month after the pandemic began, most of our membership was in an emergency situation. They recognize that actually this conversation moving forward really does involve them and that, in spite of the fact that they haven't been engaged with it, they should really start to prick up their ears.

We've certainly been pushing the idea that this is something we should look to reform and try to gain greater access to. I know for sure that people are paying more attention. Whether or not their in-

terest is maintained will depend on whether or not they feel that those changes are moving in a direction that is welcoming to them.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Wonderful. Thank you, Mr. MacKenzie.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Falk.

Next we're going to Ms. Young, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to both of our witnesses today.

Mr. MacKenzie, I wanted to give you an opportunity to comment on something that my colleague, Mr. Long, brought up with Mr. Yussuff earlier on about Bill C-24, realizing that EI doesn't cover all of your workers. It is a very important discussion that we're having today.

Back on February 25, the government tabled Bill C-24, which would extend EI benefits for Canadians who are unable to work due to the pandemic. Yesterday, the bill was read a second time, and the Conservatives refused to allow this bill to be sent to the committee, even though my colleague on the opposite side of the House said that it was a straightforward bill, and she felt that she would recommend it to her party. However, for some reason, they've decided to draw this out, and now tens of thousands of Canadians are at risk of losing income support in the middle of a pandemic.

Mr. MacKenzie, what does this delay in the extension of the benefits mean for your members?

• (1620)

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: I know that our members are not able to go back to work. There is no live performance happening right now. It's all shut down, so a lot of them are eager to get back to work but just can't. It's not a possibility for them to go back to work in the fields they've trained in. That certainly would raise their anxiety a great deal. The idea that their benefits might end is something that would cause them a great deal of concern.

I also think they recognize how quickly this government has been able to act over the past year, and how quickly they've been able to come together to provide the kinds of supports that have sustained our members. I think any kind of delay would cause our members to hold out hope that everybody would work together to make sure that it wasn't putting Canadians in a really dire and unfortunate position.

Like Mr. Yussuff, I believe there is time to pass that bill, but I'm certainly not in a position to tell you guys how you should best do your job.

Ms. Kate Young: I think you might have a comment on what message you would have for Conservative members on this committee to pass on to their leader about making sure that this bill does get to committee stage so that we can continue to discuss this and move it forward, so that the tens of thousands of Canadians will be able to continue to be paid.

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: I would certainly urge all parties to take that message to their leaders. This is something that is important to a lot of our membership, to a lot of arts workers across Canada. They are really dependent on the actions that are taken over the next couple of weeks by the Canadian government. That would be the message.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you, Mr. MacKenzie.

What we have noticed in the last year as far as live performances are concerned is that a lot of this is going online, virtual. How will this change live performance designers' job stability in the long term, now that we have a lot of virtual events?

Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie: It's certainly changing the language of how we create the work that we create. In fact, over the past year, our organization became a local of IATSE in no small part because a lot of the work that we do is actually moving closer to film. All of this work that's happening now online brings us a little bit closer to what film looks like.

I think that this is a part of the resiliency of our community, in finding new ways and forging forward in spite of the obstacles and limitations. I'm really proud of my colleagues for finding new ways to do the job that they love and are so passionate about. I don't see this going away. I hope that this provides more stability. I hope it provides another form of entertainment for everybody to take in.

Ms. Kate Young: Thank you very much, Mr. MacKenzie.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Young.

[Translation]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I truly regret that we are debating Bill C-24. The bill needs to pass. It's going to come back to the committee, and witnesses are going to appear before us. The sooner that happens, the better it will be for workers.

I will now return to the focus of our study, which is EI reform, and ask a question of Mr. Yussuff, president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

When our EI system was set up, the government was contributing to it. You said the system had regressed rather than progressed financially.

In terms of funding the program, do you believe that the government should restore some funding as part of reforms?

• (1625)

[English]

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I think it was initially seen as a tripartite system, where we as workers weren't the only ones paying. Government was also contributing. I think that's part of the discussion we should have about whether the government should be playing a role, because EI is not just about getting benefits to the unemployed. It's about training. It's about other programs that are tied to the EI program, which is exclusively now financed by workers' and employers' contributions. That's a necessary discussion we should have if we're going to use this program as the social safety net to

look after workers in this country because of a variety of issues—not just unemployment—when they need support in this country.

You just heard from my colleague, Mr. MacKenzie, regarding workers in the film industry who were classified as self-employed. How do we best ensure that these workers can access the system but also reform it in a way to bring them into the system so that they are truly legitimately self-employed, versus those who are misclassified, who are not self-employed?

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

My question is for Mr. Yussuff.

One of the recommendations is to raise the benefit level to a minimum of 60% and set a floor of \$500 a week.

I've often argued that EI benefits are no longer livable. Why do you think this is necessary? I know you said 60%. In fact, Carl Pursey, who is the P.E.I. Federation of Labour president, even argued for 70%. Why is it critical that we raise these EI rates?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I think it's been far too low. I think this pandemic has revealed the inadequacy of the benefit level. We've been paying people the minimum. Far too many people have been struggling just to maintain any sense of ability to pay their bills and meet their obligations.

I think that earlier, the government set the benefit level at \$500 per week for the CERB, recognizing that if you want workers not to fall further behind, you have to pay them a decent benefit.

I think we have to start from someplace. We believe that the maximum has to increase and the minimum has to increase because this has been frozen for far too long. There's a real need to examine what the levels should be. Equally, I think it has to go up.

It also disadvantaged women equally, who are highly dependent on their benefit. The last thing we want to do is to pay them such a low benefit that people don't think it's worth collecting it at the end of the day. It's critical that we recognize in this reform that the benefit level needs to go up, and we need to make sure we set it at the appropriate level to ensure that people in this country can meet their basic needs.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I know you mentioned women, but what other groups are more likely to be excluded from claiming EI benefits and what kinds of barriers do they face? Are there any other specific groups that are falling through the cracks?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Well, workers of colour and young people are the two other groups we should be very concerned about.

Prior to the pandemic, we finally got youth unemployment into the single digits. Now it's back up in the double digits, and we don't want this to be another lost generation that doesn't come back. Equally, I think in many urban centres, workers of colour who have been on the front line providing services to Canadians during this pandemic—and I think we have seen this in the statistics that StatsCan has been providing every month—are not doing so well in the recovery and are not doing so well in the unemployment levels of this country. We're going to have to take that into consideration if we want to lift those communities out of poverty and equally ensure that people aren't falling further behind because they end up being on employment insurance because they've lost their job.

• (1630)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan and Mr. Yussuff.

We're going back to the Conservatives now for five minutes. Do we have a volunteer for the Conservatives?

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): I can go.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

I wonder if the witnesses would agree with the following statement: The employment insurance program is an important source of support for Canadian workers, providing temporary income to benefit people who have lost their job or have been absent from work for an extended period of time.

Please just give me a yes-or-no answer.

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I can't say yes and I can't say no, because you're going to trap me into any answer I make, so I refuse to answer your question.

Mr. Brad Vis: Well, Mr. Yussuff, did you agree with the 2018 changes to expand the EI parental sharing benefit or to put that into place?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Yes, we did.

Mr. Brad Vis: Do you know what document those changes were a part of?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I do not offhand. My colleague Chris Roberts might remember.

Do you, Chris?

Mr. Brad Vis: I can tell you. It was the 2018 budget. Don't you think it's a little disingenuous for Wayne Long and Kate Young to say that we need this legislation passed when the government could, in fact, have tabled a budget last year and made changes to the employment insurance system?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Well, listen. Far be it from me to do a retrospective. If I knew I was going to live this long, I probably would have lived my life much healthier, so I don't know if that tells you anything.

The reality is we're in a crisis, and in a crisis, I think what we as Canadians have to do is figure out how we can work better together to ensure we're actually addressing the needs of the people who are in a crisis right now, and those are workers, millions of them, who have lost their jobs. We want to figure out how to get them back to work, and the EI benefits are going to be equally important in getting them back to work.

Mr. Brad Vis: I agree, and that's why I think we need a federal budget today.

Mostafa Askari, Sahir Khan and Kevin Page at the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy recently opined in a letter in the Globe and Mail about the need for transparency and for a plan to get Canadians back to work, which would be included in the budget.

Do you think it would be appropriate for our next budget to have provisions that expanded our current employment insurance system to address the needs of Canadians who are at risk of losing their jobs?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I think the budget could do many things in addition to all of what you have suggested. Yes, I'm hoping that when the budget comes out, it will include a lot of things that the government has noted that it needs to address with regard to ensuring that the weaknesses that we have seen in this pandemic, the cracks that we have seen in our social system, are going to be addressed in a major way that actually gives Canadians confidence that we have heard them and that we're addressing those concerns.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Yussuff. That was very helpful.

I'm going to use the rest of my time to call out the hypocrisy that I heard in this committee.

Wayne Long and Kate Young both voted for the 2018 budget, which included substantive changes to the EI system. The longer this government goes without bringing forward a budget, the longer it will take to complete a fiscal plan to help chart a new course for our country to secure the future for Canadian workers and those who need our support. The comments earlier today—and this is not directed at the witnesses; I'm just using my time—are disingenuous and, frankly, inappropriate, given that they both knew and voted on a budget that included massive changes to our employment insurance system. For the Liberal members to even insinuate that the Conservatives are holding up benefits to Canadians.... I turn it back on them, that they are holding back our country and our economy.

Thank you very—

Mr. Wayne Long: Chair, point of order.

Mr. Brad Vis: The point of order is the comment you made earlier, Mr. Long. I'm not doing anything inappropriate.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, I need to entertain this point of order.

Go ahead, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: I think my colleague is basically grandstanding here. I think he's off topic, and I question the relevancy.

Mr. Brad Vis: The relevancy, Mr. Chair, is that budgets can include changes to employment insurance benefits, so for the government members of the committee to insinuate that our party is holding up the legislative process—

Mr. Wayne Long: Point of order, Chair.

Mr. Brad Vis: —is completely inappropriate.

The Chair: Mr. Vis, are you finished?

Mr. Brad Vis: Sure. I'm finished.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: I'm finished too. Thank you, Chair.

• (1635)

The Chair: In terms of ruling on the point of order, it's Mr. Vis's time, and he can use his time as he sees fit.

Anyway, I think everyone has retreated to their corners. We can move on.

Mr. Vaughan, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Thank you.

I was going to ask Mr. Yussuff if he liked yes-or-no questions, but that in itself is a yes-or-no question, so I'll move on from that.

We had a witness who effectively said that we're in the process of trying to build a system for the next decade based on economic models from the last century. If you look at the testimony around the strength of the EI computer system, it may be even older than that.

I guess the question is this. What advice do you have for us on how we pivot to the next 10 years, instead of the last 10 minutes, last 10 years or last century, in terms of making sure EI works for a modern work environment where, quite clearly, nine to five from Monday to Friday and two weeks off in the summer is no longer the regular pattern for virtually every Canadian worker?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I think the EI system, if it's properly designed, can serve the needs of Canadians in a variety of ways. I think the reality is that today we need to also seriously examine how the system operates and, more importantly, how fair it is to the people who it has been designed to serve in the first place, that is, workers who lose their jobs and, more often, workers who may require re-skilling because their job is also changing at the same time.

It also recognizes that there are many different groups of workers within the economy. How do we ensure that it's fair for all those workers at the same time? There's some complexity in it, but at the same time, it is not beyond our capacity to take all of that and of course design a system that's going to serve us for the next century.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: You recognize that there are regional differences in terms of cost of living, in terms of cost of transportation for people in the resources sector, say, but at the same time, there's the cost of housing in large urban centres. Do you still support a regional approach and a breakdown of regional approaches to the way in which payments are made to workers? Should that be mod-

elled around their cost of living or should it be one size fits all for all Canadians?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Well, I think one thing we would differentiate is to say that we need to have a common entrance requirement that allows us some fairness across the system. Yes, we recognize there are some sectors of this country where we're always going to have a part of the economy that is very different from the mainstream, but at the same time, I think what we have seen in this pandemic is that had the government not taken the steps to treat Canadians in a fair and equitable way, we would have had a very disproportionate number of people who would be struggling right now.

I think that in that regard we need to have a common entrance requirement. More importantly, we need to try to put some floor under the EI system so all Canadians can be assured that if they're paying into the system, they know going to be treated fairly, recognizing, of course, that we're hoping we can build an economy that's resilient for all Canadians, regardless of where you may work, but equally, we can improve your skills over time to ensure you're always going to be part of the economy.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'm interested in the skills piece. Miles Corak is a professor originally from Ottawa, but now teaching in the States, who talked about the concept of having an EI account as opposed to a wage supplement. In other words, you could draw from it when you need it, and you could replenish it as part of your contribution. Do you support that kind of an approach as a reform or do you think the existing system simply needs to be tinkered with?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Well, I think workers should be given the opportunity to get training, and on a continuous basis, because—

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Through EI.

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Through EI, yes, not just because I lose my job, but because at the end of the day, the more equipped with skills I am, the better off I am in the job market. We always want workers to have skills that are adaptable to a changing economy. It's critical for us to recognize that the skills piece is an integral and important part of it, but equally, we need to find ways for how we can make sure workers can access it.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Do we need to move away from why you choose to access EI into how you access EI? On top of that, do we also need to build a system that...? I mean, we had a previous government that every time you talked about a CPP supplement from either the employer or the wage earner...that it was a tax, when in fact it's an insurance premium.

Do we need to move away from this notion that this kind of support is a tax and instead look at it as an account you pay into and an account you pull out of when you need the support that you in fact provided for yourself by working?

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: I think all Canadians would recognize right now, especially all who have benefited from all of the programs the government brought in to make sure they had income, that we need the social safety net and we need it to be strong. Ultimately, we have to pay for it. Workers and employers have been the ones basically funding the system. We need to ensure there's an equitable balance in regard to how those two match.

Of course the federal government can play an important role. Equally, though, on the other side, it is a program that's there to support workers with income when they lose their job. It's also a program that's there to support workers with income when they're going back to get training at the same time.

• (1640)

Mr. Adam Vaughan: That improves workplace performance.

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: It also improves the economy. The more equipped I am in my skills, the more the economy will have workers who are here to support the industries and the jobs in this country.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Yussuff, Mr. Roberts and Mr. MacKenzie, thank you so much for being with us. Thank you for helping us with this study, and thanks for your patience. As you can tell, we're in a highly charged environment here. Certainly, the measured way in which you handled yourselves was greatly appreciated.

Again, thank you. We appreciated your being with us.

Mr. Hassan Yussuff: Thank you kindly.

The Chair: We will suspend the meeting while we bring in our next panel of witnesses.

• (1640)

(Pause)

• (1640)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

[*Translation*]

Today, the committee is meeting as part of its study on the review of the employment insurance program.

I'd like to make a few comments for the new witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself.

• (1645)

[*English*]

Interpretation in this video conference is provided. At the bottom of your screen, you have the choice of “floor”, “English” or “French”.

[*Translation*]

Please speak slowly and clearly. When you are done speaking, please put your mic on mute.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses as we continue our discussion. They will have five minutes for opening remarks, which will be followed by questions.

Please welcome Mr. Denis Bolduc, secretary general of the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec.

[*English*]

From the Prince Edward Island Federation of Labour, we have Carl Pursey, president.

[*Translation*]

We will start with Mr. Bolduc.

Welcome to the committee, Mr. Bolduc. You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Denis Bolduc (General Secretary, Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for welcoming me today to talk about employment insurance.

From the outset, I must tell you that the FTQ is counting heavily on the current government to carry out a complete and comprehensive reform of employment insurance. For several years now, we have been calling for an in-depth review of the program. I can also tell you that the Quebec labour movement is on the same page. The four central labour bodies in Quebec, the FTQ, the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, or CSN, the Centrale des syndicats du Québec, or CSQ, and the Centrale des syndicats démocratiques, or CSD, are all singing from the same songbook, and are all singing in harmony. I don't want to speak for them, but I can tell you that we are in complete agreement on the changes that should be made to the current program.

Essentially, we are looking to safeguard human dignity. In that sense, the program should be seen and treated as a social good.

Yesterday was International Women's Day. I would be remiss if I did not bring that up. Women took part in demonstrations and activities across the country. It was all over the media.

Yet the Institut de la statistique du Québec has reminded us of the significant gap that still exists between the average salaries of a woman and a man. For positions that require a university education, we're talking about a gap of \$3 per hour. I know that you are sensitive to the status of women, ladies and gentlemen of the committee. We are too. It is one of the factors that has guided our thinking on the changes we want to see made to employment insurance.

In addition to being paid less, women are underrepresented in non-standard jobs. I'm thinking in particular of seasonal jobs in tourism, hotels, restaurants and so on. Those who work in non-standard jobs, including women, should not be penalized for doing so. They should be able to qualify for an adequate length of time and an adequate level of income replacement. For that, we need non-discriminatory access to EI benefits.

The health crisis has clearly demonstrated the importance of income support programs. They are essential in the event of bad luck or job loss. The pandemic has also underscored the inconsistency of the employment insurance program in its current form. It has highlighted the urgent need to accelerate the process that will lead to real reform.

In the past year, the government has had to put in place emergency income support programs. Access to emergency measures was streamlined because, overnight, a lot of people found themselves in a precarious situation. It was not perfect, that's true. However, help was made available on an urgent basis, and that was very necessary. It also showed us that the pathways to the program need to be simplified. Someone who is unfamiliar with the employment insurance program, or has never used it, must be able to apply easily. Processing times must be faster and shorter.

Since 1990, so for 30 years, the government has not contributed to the employment insurance fund. The program is financed by the contributions from workers and from employers. We tend to forget this, but it is the reality. That is the main reason why you must pay close attention to what the workers we represent want and are asking for. We need a comprehensive program reform for the workers. They need to know that the program in place meets their needs and properly covers everyone who pays into it.

As I appear before you today, I want to take the opportunity to mention that, in the eyes of the FTQ, it's essential that the current emergency support programs be extended, particularly for the unemployed. That is our message today.

The proposed changes would increase the maximum number of weeks of benefits that eligible workers would be entitled to from 26 to 50.

I know that, in order to take effect, the program must receive unanimous support from all parties in Parliament. The pandemic hurt. I know men and women who have yet to get their jobs back. They wonder if and when their employer will call them back to work. They need this support.

• (1650)

They need a clear message from Ottawa that parliamentarians understand their situation and are taking action to ensure their well-being, their self-worth and their dignity.

Thank you very much for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bolduc.

[English]

Mr. Pursey, welcome to the committee. You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Carl Pursey (President, Prince Edward Island Federation of Labour): Thank you.

I'm Carl Pursey, president of the P.E.I. Federation of Labour. I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chair, and committee members, for the opportunity to appear today on this important issue.

I think EI reform and a guaranteed livable income need to be studied separately as EI reform is long overdue, while the guaranteed livable income needs to be prepared properly for a long-lasting, successful implementation. In order to do this, we need to look at a rapid return to full employment for those who want to work, with no one being forced to work. These jobs should look like full-time positions, with benefits available and created by government and employers.

The barriers to employment will need to be addressed beforehand too, such as affordable child care programs, national pharmacare, and transportation systems to meet the needs of workers. These things must be addressed prior to the full program rollout. If we don't address these needs first, the program will not succeed.

Moving on to EI, a complete review of all aspects of the system is well overdue and must be completed immediately. EI needs to consider all workers who are currently not eligible, such as independent contractors, gig and migrant workers, and so on, with short-term and long-term plans to provide comprehensive and permanent reforms.

The zone issue needs to be fixed here in P.E.I., as well as in other areas of the country that have seasonal work. Small communities of 50 people are divided by the centre of the road, with one side in one zone and the other side in another. P.E.I. should only have one zone because of its size. As workers from different zones often commute to the same place to work, one worker is able to draw more money for a longer period of time while the other has to work more hours and qualify for less EI benefits and draws for a much shorter period of time.

There are other things we need to fix in EI. We need to ensure that all workers have access, with one qualifying rule of 360 hours or 12 weeks for all EI benefits, with a floor of a minimum of \$500 per week or 70% of their wages, whichever is greater.

Workers should also be able to draw for up to 50 weeks with the combined benefits, to a maximum of 104 weeks. In this way, workers can qualify for unemployment benefits based on the same hours of work used to qualify for special benefits. EI sickness and quarantine benefit weeks must also be increased to 50 weeks.

We must also ensure justice and have a fair appeals process for all benefits. Working while on claim needs to be changed and not deducted dollar for dollar as this discourages workers wanting to work for short periods, causing employers problems and making it difficult for them to get employees to work a day or two at a time.

Workers who aren't happy with their employment situation and wish to better themselves by furthering their education should be able to do so and still qualify to receive benefits. This will also open up the position that they left for someone else to fulfill.

The clawback of separation moneys must end, as this is a benefit that workers have been paying into over many years of their employment. It should not be deducted from their unemployment. EI access during a labour dispute is also something we need look at. Workers need to have this access as it would level the playing field and they would not be looking at no pay during a lockout, which currently gives the employer the upper hand.

Training money spent also needs to be reviewed because some employers have been using it as a revolving door to terminate employees who have reached their Red Seal and hire new ones to receive more training funds. These firms are only accessing the funds to train apprentices. They have no intention of retaining fully trained or certified employees.

We also need to ensure labour is involved in meaningful social dialogue on LMDA spending at the provincial level. We need to establish multi-year core funding for unemployed work centres in the provinces.

• (1655)

We need to return to a fully tripartite board of referees model for first-level appeals. We should also ensure the protection of francophone rights for those living outside Quebec to receive services from the government in French. The EI commission must be given a mandate to proceed with a comprehensive review of the EI program, with a timeline to present the changes to government.

The federal government must extend COVID-19 income support until the end of the year or the official end of this pandemic.

Thank you for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pursey.

We'll begin our round of questions with Mr. Vis.

You have six minutes, please.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'd like to give my time to Mr. Tochor, please.

The Chair: Mr. Tochor, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mr. Corey Tochor (Saskatoon—University, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing today.

I just want to unpack some of your thoughts, Mr. Pursey, on what Canada would be like or what this new reality would be like. You wouldn't, in your words, be forced to work. So in your mind, people would be given the choice: either you work or you don't.

Mr. Carl Pursey: Well, no, there are lots of people who can't work. There are people with mental problems who can't work, who

have issues that way, but there would be jobs there for anyone who's capable and wants to work them.

Mr. Corey Tochor: So if they're healthy-minded people, they should be working. They shouldn't be on payments—

Mr. Carl Pursey: Yes. There should be employment made for them.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Where would the UBI fit in that reality? Would people just decide to take the UBI instead of working, then?

Mr. Carl Pursey: We're talking about a guaranteed income. The majority of people do want to work. You would see nearly everybody working if they had meaningful work to work at. We have to create jobs and get people back to work. Most people want to work. This is why the two systems, livable income and EI, need to be separated and not tie the two of them together.

Mr. Corey Tochor: You're talking about this different reality where people would not pay into EI, then, or the deductible. They wouldn't be forced, I believe you said.

Mr. Carl Pursey: Yes, because we're talking about livable income and putting a type of living—

Mr. Corey Tochor: No, in employment insurance.

Mr. Carl Pursey: In employment insurance, yes. It would all come under employment insurance in the end. Just for the study purpose, I think the two things should be separated.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Okay.

Getting back to the deductible side of the EI, I didn't hear you right, then, that workers shouldn't pay the employment insurance deductible. That's not what you're proposing.

Mr. Carl Pursey: No. Workers pay into employment insurance and employers pay in. Really, because of the programs that are being delivered, I think the government should be paying a portion into this too.

Mr. Corey Tochor: The government would get those dollars from where?

• (1700)

Mr. Carl Pursey: They used to get—

Mr. Corey Tochor: It would be from taxes from the employees. We'd have a tripling effect on things. Maybe the leadership in P.E.I. of your movement is all for this, but do your members not mind paying more deducted union fees, if they increase?

Mr. Carl Pursey: No, that wouldn't come out of union fees. Most of the ones who have problems with this—

Mr. Corey Tochor: Do they complain, though? Do they have issues when union fees go up? Do you get complaints?

Mr. Carl Pursey: We haven't raised union fees here for years.

Mr. Corey Tochor: That's partially because people don't like additional fees coming off their paycheques, I would assume. Right?

Mr. Carl Pursey: Yes, but this would come out of general revenue, where money for everything else comes. On the part the government pays in, they could realign some of the spending on other issues and put it into the unemployment fund.

Mr. Corey Tochor: So they would take more income tax or take that income tax off that cheque and then back-end it over. I do have concerns that with any enhancements, we have to keep EI sustainable, and we're talking about stretching this out to almost a year that you could be on EI, made up from.... Keeping it whole would be deductible. You don't think there would be some push-back with your members that the EI premiums would go up.

Mr. Carl Pursey: No, if the government was to pay some, the EI premiums would not go up. If some of the businesses that pay no money now in taxes, with their offshore accounts, were to pay taxes the way the rest of us do, the way the workers pay taxes, we wouldn't have this problem.

Mr. Corey Tochor: You believe that if we changed the tax collection system, somehow we would be able to expand these benefits to a point where what's been highlighted is up to 50 weeks; additional dollars would not come off an individual's paycheque; if you had an inability to work, you would be on a guaranteed income system of some sort and the government would pay for this by collecting taxes that they aren't collecting right now.

Mr. Carl Pursey: Yes. I think this program would pay for itself in the long run of about 10 years. There would be zero cost for the government on this, because people would be all working then and they'd be paying more taxes on what they're earning. Everything would be great. Everybody would have a higher standard of living.

Mr. Corey Tochor: Utopia. The problem is that even under this government, they have attempted to raise rates and have received fewer dollars. That means more Canadians have to use their paycheque to make up a portion of the shortfall. I would be very cautious on what the impact on individuals would be with the changes being proposed. Their deductions would go up. We'd ultimately have families with less money to take care of their families if we went down this path.

Mr. Carl Pursey: No. There would be—

Mr. Corey Tochor: That's all the questions for today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tochor.

Mr. Housefather, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Anthony Housefather (Mount Royal, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Pursey, for your work for the workers of P.E.I.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Bolduc, for what you and the FTQ members are doing for workers in my constituency and across Quebec.

I would like to pick up where you left off. Yesterday, the FTQ issued a news release with the headline "FTQ calls for solidarity among federal opposition parties to endorse the extension of unemployment assistance programs". Of course, I fully agree with that. The committee should study the bill.

Can you explain what would happen to unemployed men and women if they were denied benefits in the event that we are unable to pass the bill before the assistance measures expire?

Mr. Denis Bolduc: It's an issue we are very concerned about. In fact, I mentioned it in my opening remarks.

We are very concerned about the plight of workers, many workers, who have lost their jobs and still do not see when they will be able to get them back. In the aviation sector, for example, all flight attendants in Quebec who are members of the FTQ have lost their jobs, whether at Air Canada, Air Transat or another airline.

The same is true in the tourism sector, which has been greatly affected by the pandemic. Currently, the hotel occupancy rate is about 5% in Quebec. We need to be concerned about these workers.

Every day, workers share their fears with me. They see their employment insurance benefits ending in March, and they wonder what will happen to them. These workers' concerns need to be addressed in the program.

We support extending employment insurance benefits to 50 weeks. In fact, we hope that provision will become permanent. It is one of our requests. We have proposed up to a maximum of 52 weeks, but we would still be happy with 50 weeks.

● (1705)

Mr. Anthony Housefather: It makes me happy to think that, if we are able to study the bill as soon as possible, that is, this week, we could ensure that benefits are not disrupted. It would help a lot of people. My colleague, Ms. Chabot, proposed this study, and I think it's a great idea.

What you mean by adequate income replacement? What threshold should we be aiming for, 55%, 60% or 65%?

Can you give me an idea of what you would like to see in the reform? What percentage do you feel should be used?

Mr. Denis Bolduc: First, it is very important that the program's eligibility criteria be changed. Thirty years ago, the employment insurance program covered eight out of 10 people. Now it's four out of 10. So half as many people are covered. When it switched to eligibility criteria based on the number of hours worked, entire categories of people were excluded. I am thinking of women, immigrants and young people. I would even say that the program has an unfavourable bias against them.

Under the current program, before the pandemic, for example, a woman who worked 20 hours a week—they often work at part-time jobs—had to accumulate 35 weeks of work before qualifying for the program, while a man who worked 40 hours a week needed only 17.5 weeks of work. Yet both had paid about the same amount into the program.

In our view, a hybrid eligibility standard should be adopted that will take into account both the number of hours worked and the number of weeks employed. We suggest that the requirement be set at 420 hours worked or 12 weeks of insurable employment. We suggest that the income replacement rate be set at 60%, but the maximum insurable income must also be increased. Basically, we are asking that it be aligned with the Quebec parental insurance plan. If I'm not mistaken, it is currently around \$83,500.

Under the current program, some people end up having to deal with 20%, 25% or 30% in income replacement, because the maximum is not high enough and the replacement rate is too low. I mentioned aviation, but it's also the case in the oil industry. When a person has a certain lifestyle, is used to spending their money in certain ways, and then overnight, because of bad luck or misfortune, they find themselves with 20% of their income, they are in trouble.

Mr. Anthony Housefather: Mr. Bolduc—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Housefather.

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My thanks also to the witnesses. It is very interesting to hear the solutions they are proposing for a reform in the future. I hope that the reform will happen sooner rather than later.

You are right to say that the program has not been completely overhauled for at least 15 years. The eligibility criteria were already problematic well before the pandemic.

Let me assure you right away, that I will be bringing the debate on Bill C-24 to a close. The Bloc Québécois will do nothing to slow down the implementation of this project. Otherwise, workers' benefits will be interrupted. We could have done things differently, but life being the way it is, we agree to moving forward diligently.

Mr. Bolduc, I heard both what you were saying and the criteria you mentioned. I want to make sure that I fully understand your comment about the eligibility criteria. Let me give you an example. In Montreal, you must accumulate between 420 and 700 hours of work, depending on the unemployment rate in the region. That applies to employment insurance in each of the 62 economic regions. In addition, unemployment rates even differ on the same island, Prince Edward Island, that is.

Your proposal is to establish a basic criterion of 420 hours of work, plus a hybrid eligibility standard. In your opinion, would that address the issue whereby some people are deemed ineligible for employment insurance benefits because of the unemployment rate?

• (1710)

Mr. Denis Bolduc: Yes, that's more or less it, I feel.

By establishing a hybrid eligibility standard of 420 hours worked, or 12 weeks of insurable employment, as well as basing it on which of the two is best for the recipients, I feel that we can indeed solve most of the problems.

In recent years, we have expended a huge amount of energy looking for a solution to the famous employment insurance black hole in the regions, particularly by establishing pilot projects.

The proposal would perhaps not solve everything, but I feel that it could be applied across the country and would solve many of the problems. It would probably mean that the need to have extension programs for workers would disappear. There would be many fewer of them and it would make things simpler and much easier.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

The Bloc Québécois has introduced a bill to increase special sickness benefits in the employment insurance program. It is another of our battles.

What is your position on the subject?

Mr. Denis Bolduc: To be consistent with regular benefits, which we set at a maximum duration of 51 weeks, we would ask that sickness benefits be also set at 51 weeks instead of 15 weeks. The 15-week criterion has been in place for years.

Ms. Louise Chabot: It has been like that since the start.

Mr. Denis Bolduc: It doesn't meet the needs of the increasing number of people who have to undergo lengthy treatments.

There is also additional concern about the healthcare system becoming unbalanced during the pandemic. Care that people need is being delayed. We hear specialists say that their health status will be affected and it will probably deteriorate. Logically, this will mean that some people will be away from work longer. It would be good to increase that component substantially.

Ms. Louise Chabot: I had another question for you on the benefit rates, but you have answered it.

Currently, the rate is fixed at 55%. Previously, it was 66% but then it went down to 55%.

In your opinion, the minimum should be 60%. Is that correct?

Mr. Denis Bolduc: Yes. Clearly, we would not object if we went back to the standard in the 1970s, which was 66%, two-thirds of the salary.

Ms. Louise Chabot: My last question is about the governance.

Would you have any proposals for us?

Mr. Denis Bolduc: First, we are in favour of maintaining the current division between employee and employer contributions. It would be good to re-establish a government contribution to the financing of the program, for example, to cover the costs of support measures or to actively fund measures.

In the light of the Supreme Court ruling, we feel that the fund should be managed separately from the general fund so that it is protected and so that we do not again go through what we experienced in the past. It would also be possible to look at a mechanism that would set an objective for the contributions to the fund in order to provide a stabilizing reserve. We feel that it would be reasonable to set that between \$10 billion and \$15 billion.

• (1715)

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bolduc and Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Next is Ms. Gazan, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Monsieur Bolduc.

In response to the throne speech, your union described the gap between the unemployed and the benefit recipients as a scandal. I appreciated that because I have been criticizing the government for how it has allowed so many to fall through the cracks during the pandemic.

You also supported, for example, a national pharmacare program, and we know that Quebec already has a subsidized child care program. What reforms would you like to see to improve workers' access to EI benefits?

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Bolduc: We want people to feel secure when they are working. They are participating in a mutual insurance fund. So we want the number of insurable weeks and the benefits to be increased, and we want things to be easy.

The health crisis has shown that the employment insurance program needs to be very flexible and easy to access. As I said earlier in my presentation, someone who has never used the employment insurance program may find it quite complex. In addition, there are long processing delays. As I said previously, even the measures that were put into place were not perfect, they were quick and they were done urgently. We could perhaps draw inspiration from them. Of course, there would be a little more of a firewall. However, we could use them as a model so that access to employment insurance is quicker and more flexible.

I think that those are basically the important factors, as well as increasing the benefits, the number of weeks of benefits, and the insurable payments.

[English]

Ms. Leah Gazan: I have a very quick follow-up question.

Would you recommend that in addition to improvements to the EI reforms there also be included a provision for social programs such as child care, for example, and pharmacare, to ensure full employment and income security?

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Bolduc: Yes, the establishment of daycare services in Quebec was a way to improve, to facilitate, women's access to the labour market. I have often discussed it with colleagues from other provinces of Canada and it is clearly the envy of many outside Quebec. I encourage the federal government to establish a national daycare program similar to the one in Quebec.

In Quebec, we have a pharmacare program, but it is a hybrid one. So it's not optimal. We feel that a national, universal formula would be better than the current one in Quebec. That is something else we in the FTQ are fighting for.

• (1720)

[English]

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much. Especially as someone who started her career as an early childhood educator, I also support a national child care plan.

My next question is for Mr. Pursey.

Like you, I've been a big supporter of a guaranteed livable basic income. One reason I support that is that I am from Manitoba where we had the Mincome study under the direction of well-known economist Evelyn Forget, and we know that the sky didn't fall.

You talked about restructuring the tax system and, for example, going after offshore tax havens and the ultra-wealthy to pay for it. I want to commend you for that. I certainly agree with you. I think it's time to stop propping up corporations that don't need assistance at all.

With the CERB being rolled out we saw almost a makeshift guaranteed livable basic income. We know that even during the pandemic, many groups were still left behind, and that when CERB was replaced by EI, only 40% qualified.

How would instituting a guaranteed livable basic income program in Canada help eradicate poverty?

Mr. Carl Pursey: I believe this is a great step that needs to be taken. It needs to be taken with a lot of care and a lot of study. First we have to get full employment and jobs for people. We don't have enough jobs for everybody out there now. We also have to see that people are paid enough for the jobs they are doing, and that they're meaningful jobs and this type of thing. When we get meaningful work out there, it will lift everybody up. They'll be paying taxes and paying back into the system as well. It's long overdue.

In order to make it work, as I said, we first have to remove the barriers. The barriers are a national pharmacare assistance plan and a national child care plan, so that people can go out to work and have money left over. I think this is why some of the other projects that have been tried haven't worked. The barriers were still there. If a woman going out to work has to pay a lot of money for child care, and then her basic income is taken back from her and she still has to pay a large amount, she won't have the money to do it. If you remove the barriers—

Ms. Leah Gazan: Can I follow up on that?

The Chair: No, you can't. You're almost a minute past time.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Oh, shoot. Okay. I'll follow up later.

The Chair: You will get another turn.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan and Mr. Pursey.

Next I believe it will Mr. Vis for the Conservatives.

You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Brad Vis: I believe it will be Raquel or Bob Zimmer.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Dancho, are you ready to go?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Yes, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

Mr. Pursey, when I went to university in Montreal, I met a number of student peers from P.E.I. They were all just the most wonderful and friendly people. They shared with me a lot of cultural entertainment and that tourism is very important to P.E.I. and the P.E.I. economy.

I'm wondering if you could update the committee on how folks are doing in P.E.I. What is the employment situation there as we come into the second summer of COVID?

Mr. Carl Pursey: As far as tourism goes, it's way down. There was a little bit last summer, but nowhere near what it should be. There are a lot of places suffering that need help.

As far as workers go, most workers are still working. We haven't been hit as hard as other provinces, so most things are open. That's with the exception of our theatre workers and that type of thing. They're not working. A lot of everything else is going. I think we're better off here than in any other province, but the tourism industry is being hit hard.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: What do you think is needed to support the tourism industry in P.E.I.? I know you covered this already, but perhaps you could just reiterate your thoughts.

• (1725)

Mr. Carl Pursey: The season is so short, so we need to get rid of COVID and we need to help out the workers who can't work. As long as COVID is here, tourists won't be able to come from the rest of the country. Last summer a few were sneaking in. I don't know how they were getting here. They were coming up from the States, renting a car in Halifax, and then under the Atlantic bubble they were able to travel to P.E.I. and stay in a place. Business was way down, though. It was not even a fraction of what it was other years.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I know that youth employment, particularly in the tourism sector in summer, is pretty big. How are the youth doing in P.E.I.?

Mr. Carl Pursey: Not too bad, with all these programs; it's great that the federal government has been there with the money and has handed it out to people as quickly as they have. I know that some of the other people in Ottawa figure there's too much money being handed out and we've got to cut everybody back. That is not the way to go. I think we have to help people out through these hard times. I think that's why these other programs and changes to EI would help people out in hard times.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that.

If we could build the EI system from the ground up to best suit the needs of P.E.I., in regular times but also in pandemic times, what would that system look like?

Mr. Carl Pursey: We have to get rid of these zones. The zones down here are real killers for the area. A whole bunch of negative changes were brought in by a previous government. They were brought in overnight, all at once, with no thought. These changes could all be reversed now. We could put things back to the way they were before, when the fund was working good. We've been trying hard, but we just can't get any of these changes made. They don't want to revert back to the system we had before.

This zone issue is really killing workers here. Workers can work at the same place...and even the workers who are working at these places are saying the system is not fair: Why can I draw EI longer than my co-worker, who I work next to, and my co-worker has to drive further to come to work?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I appreciate that.

How do you feel the rest of the small business benefits are doing for small businesses there? Have the small business loans been utilized?

Mr. Carl Pursey: I don't know to what extent the business loans are being utilized. That information would have to come through the province. The province would know which businesses are getting what amounts of money. We run a tourism business as well, and we made it through all right last year without any government help, so....

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That's good news. You're resilient people.

If you have any other comments, Mr. Pursey, I'd love to hear your further thoughts, just to conclude my session.

Mr. Carl Pursey: I think we need to do an in-depth study into the whole EI system to see that it's going to work right. We need input from a lot of people. I don't think it's a system that can be rushed through in a week or two and combined with a livable income and the whole works. I think they're two separate issues, and we need to do the proper study on both to make sure that they are done right.

I know as labour we've been calling for a study into the whole EI system, and the employers have been calling for the same study, but we still haven't been able to get it done. We need to do an in-depth study into the whole EI system to see that it's done right.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dancho and Mr. Pursey.

Next we're going to Mr. Dong.

Go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you very much, Chair. I want to thank both witnesses for coming to the committee and sharing their perspectives on this very important study.

Before I begin, I want to recognize the chair for being a very effective member for the people of Charlottetown and a very solid advocate for the workers in P.E.I. I want to put that on record.

The Chair: Sixty extra seconds for Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you very much for doing that.

My question is for Mr. Pursey.

You're actually waiting for the change to create two economic zones. I know that was a decision back in October 2014 that the previous Conservative government brought in, surprising a lot of people. To date, I still hear there is a lot of controversy around it. Can you describe to the committee the consultation process that took place by the government when it was first brought in? Was organized labour consulted, for example? Can you shed some light on it?

• (1730)

Mr. Carl Pursey: No, the previous government did not talk to labour here on the island about anything. They were told not to talk to labour. We tried to meet with them at different times. They would not meet with us. They didn't want any input from labour, and that was just the way they worked. The only one who did was the chair there. We managed to meet with him and express the concerns we had. I'd like to again thank him for the great work he's been doing representing us in Ottawa on the EI issue along with many others.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you.

It's been in place for six years. In those six years, have you heard anybody or any group speak in favour of this division?

Mr. Carl Pursey: No, there have been no groups in favour of it.

Mr. Han Dong: Has the system or the zones been reviewed? If so, what is the process? Does that include public input?

Mr. Carl Pursey: I don't know what the process is. It would be up to the government what it is doing to review them. There are problems here for employers and workers and everything else.

With the zones, some employers are having problems employing people, because they'll ask which zone someone lives in. If someone lives in one zone and the employer needs them for seasonal work, they know that person is going to require more weeks of work than they can offer. It's a whole mess, and they can't get the same workers back each year and this type of thing. Everybody's complaining about the system.

Mr. Han Dong: In the last six years, has organized labour been invited to help in the review of this set-up?

Mr. Carl Pursey: No, but we've lobbied in Ottawa and here locally to have a review of this. We're trying to get something done on it, but it's a fairly complex issue. We've tried to get all the negative changes by the previous government reversed, but we're not able to get everything done.

Mr. Han Dong: I see.

Someone would argue that there are 62 economic zones in Canada, including three in New Brunswick. What is it about P.E.I. that makes having more than one zone particularly unfair?

Mr. Carl Pursey: To start with, it's the way the zones are drawn up. There are four ridings in P.E.I. and one of them was never touched. That affects all of the other three. The riding that wasn't affected was held by a member of the previous government. Her riding was left intact as rural, and the way they drew the straight lines impacted every other riding on the island.

Mr. Han Dong: It sounds like there's a problem.

In response to COVID, the government has deemed the unemployment rate to be at 13.1% in several EI zones, including both zones in P.E.I., and set the amount of hours required to qualify for benefits at 120 hours.

How has that been received in P.E.I. by your members?

Mr. Carl Pursey: With the COVID money coming in, and a lot of people still working, I haven't heard too many effects on anything, other than it's right that the money's coming from Ottawa and everybody seems to be doing great on it.

Mr. Han Dong: Does this mean that the impact of the two zone decision back in 2014 has been somewhat negated?

Mr. Carl Pursey: Yes, but it will go back to the same thing again once the COVID money stops. That's why we're saying there should be a minimum base to the amount you draw from EI, and for the amount of weeks, so that everybody here cannot draw less than \$500 a week, and that they can draw it for longer if they need it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Pursey, as much as I would love for you to go on, that is your time.

Now we're going to Madam Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We certainly responded to the crisis by putting certain measures in place. It was important to do so, but we now have to focus on things ahead. That is the goal of this study.

Nine million workers found themselves out of a job because of the health crisis. The opposition parties rallied behind the government to provide assistance. However, although all those measures have been extended, they are temporary. If we want a long-term vision, we have to act now in order to propose something constructive, if I may use the word, for the workers.

I would first like to talk about seasonal work and the famous black hole. In seasonal industries like tourism, fishing and forestry, for example, the black hole represents the weeks during which workers have no income. In addition, the number of weeks of eligibility for employment insurance varies by region.

In order to achieve some reform, do we have to put an end to that problem once and for all?

My question goes to both witnesses, who can add comments if they wish.

• (1735)

Mr. Denis Bolduc: If I may, I will make a quick comment.

We are currently trying to reform the employment insurance program. We have been asking for that for a long time and it has been needed for a long time. Certainly, let's take advantage of this program review to also focus on the black hole problem. We have to find solutions.

People must not be penalized because they have a seasonal job. In that type of job, there's a short period during which they can contribute to the employment insurance program and longer periods during which they are unemployed. This is typical of certain regions, not only in Quebec, but also all over Canada. We have to get on board and solve these issues, especially the black hole. We must not miss this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bolduc and Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

The last questioner for this panel is Ms. Gazan, please, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you, Chair, and I will follow up with you, Mr. Pursey.

You spoke about how we need to ensure that we also remove other barriers. You mentioned specifically pharmacare and child care, for example.

I say that because a Liberal member of Parliament just introduced Bill C-273, which calls for a study. What my main concern with this bill is, in opposition to the guaranteed livable basic income motion 46 I put forward.... I was very clear in that motion that a guaranteed livable basic income must be in addition to current and future government programs and support. Subparagraph 3(3)(d)(i) in the bill is very concerning to me because it opens the door to, for example, replacing existing social programs. We know through studies that this could actually leave people further in poverty.

You mentioned that, especially in regard to women trying to get back to work. Could you expand on that?

Mr. Carl Pursey: Yes. That's why we need to take time and not try to rush something through in a few weeks. We have to see that everything is done so the program is going to work, that it's not going to be a false lead we give people and it will last forever.

All these areas have to be studied. We can refer to many experts in these areas to get information from.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Expanding on that, I'm a recovering academic. I'm all for research and study. However we do know there has already been a lot of study of the guaranteed livable basic income, particularly in Manitoba. Ontario was also undergoing a guaranteed livable basic income program that saw great results. It was unfortunately killed by the Conservative Ford government.

Going back to my concern about a guaranteed livable basic income, I support the notion, again, of it having to be in addition to current and future government supports and programs.

What specific aspect do you still feel needs to be studied in regard to the extensive research that has already been done?

Mr. Carl Pursey: The studies I referred to call for removing the barriers, because if the barriers are left in place, no matter what you put in for a guaranteed basic income will not work.

We saw it work partly in Quebec when they put in affordable child care. Then in Quebec they had the highest family income in the country, surpassing that of Alberta.

These are steps in the right direction. These are not steps that cost taxpayers dollars and we have to raise more money for. In the end they pay off, and they pay off well, and they have more workers working and spending money locally and paying taxes.

● (1740)

Ms. Leah Gazan: That has certainly been demonstrated in research.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

That concludes our questions for this panel.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pursey and Mr. Bolduc, thank you very much for your testimony as representatives of your respective organizations. You also have our congratulations for the excellent work you are doing.

[*English*]

We're going to let you go, bid you adieu, and thanks.

Mr. Carl Pursey: Thank you.

The Chair: Members of the committee, please stand by. We have a bit of committee business to deal with.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, can we take a break?

The Chair: Yes. That is a good idea.

[*English*]

We'll suspend for five minutes and then we will come back for committee business.

● (1740)

(Pause)

● (1745)

The Chair: We are in committee business. I'll remind you that we are in public, not in camera.

The first item of committee business we need to deal with, or one of the items we need to deal with is the report of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure. You have been provided with a report of the committee's deliberations for your consideration. I would like to point out a couple of things.

Since the committee met, some events have overtaken it, namely the availability of ministers. As you can see, the subcommittee report called for the ministers to appear on the mains today. That didn't happen, but two of them have indicated their availability for Thursday.

I think the rest of it does line up with our expectations. The only other piece of information I can provide to you is that the Minister of Seniors has agreed to appear on the 23rd.

The report is before you. I would ask you to use the raise hand function if someone wishes to move acceptance of the report with the changes I just set forward that would probably be in order.

The floor is open for discussion.

Ms. Dancho, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As you point out, the subcommittee report isn't accurate now. I would say that I was under the clear impression that Mr. Vaughan was going to be reaching out to committee members last week, and that did not happen. I just wanted to express my disappointment on that. It sort of makes it difficult to collaborate and to trust that what's being said is going to be done.

I would like to have a collaborative nature on this committee. I've been on two other committees now, and we managed to work together quite well. I would like to see that on this committee, but I did want to express my frustration of having been under the impression that we were going to be reached out to, and then the onus was ultimately on us to do that.

I would just ask that when commitments are made they be followed through on so that we can maintain goodwill, and then perhaps we won't have to deal with having a subcommittee report that's obviously not accurate come out at 5 p.m. the day before. I would just ask that committee members consider that.

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'm sorry. I thought I got the subcommittee report out to all members to sort of look at in translation. If that didn't happen, I truly apologize. It was my understanding that it happened, but I'll take responsibility for that. As I said, you have an expectation for me to follow up, and when I don't follow up, I take responsibility. I take that responsibility seriously and I do apologize.

That being said, events have overtaken that communication anyway, as we find ourselves today in the situation we are. I will move what the chair suggested, which is the schedule with the amendments identified. It is what it is in terms of the parliamentary schedule. I think I'm right. I think I heard.... I'm sorry that I got here a little later than the start of the meeting. I'm prepared to move the motion that the chair described.

● (1750)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Chabot, the floor is yours.

Ms. Louise Chabot: The dates in the subcommittee report do not match, in fact. However, we must remember that those dates for ministers to appear had been determined based on their availability. The subcommittee has made recommendations, but the ministers have to come back to the committee. I would accept the second report as amended.

Ms. Dancho, you said that you sit on other committees and the work is done in harmony. I have been sitting on this committee since I was elected. The committee has to work with four ministers. Our work deals with issues of employment, human resources, persons with disabilities, and social development, which includes everything to do with housing. The committee has to work on a large range of studies, on very important matters.

I would like to emphasize that, since I started participating on the committee, our studies have always been conducted in harmony. I was just saying to some colleagues that, although we have to do a lot of studies, ethical rules are always followed in our work. I can confirm to you that harmony is part of the way in which we conduct ourselves, and I hope that it will continue to be so.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

Seeing no other hands raised, are we ready for the question?

To be clear, the motion before the committee is to adopt the subcommittee report, with changes to reflect the availability of ministers, namely, that the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion and the Minister of Families, Children and Social Development will appear before the committee on Thursday, March 11. That's the motion before the committee and all other respects. The subcommittee report is before you for adoption. For—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I just wanted to be clear. My apologies.

For Minister Schulte, it doesn't say a date, but can we confirm that Minister Schulte would be.... Can we include that and reflect that Minister Schulte would be here next Tuesday?

The Chair: She has accepted an invitation to come before the committee next Tuesday, and we can certainly put that into the motion.

We can amend, then, paragraph two, to indicate that the Minister of Seniors will appear before the committee for one hour on Tuesday, March 23, on supplementary and main estimates.

With those two amendments, do we have consensus to adopt the motion or the report as amended?

• (1755)

Mr. Han Dong: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: Did you say that the Minister of Seniors will appear on Tuesday, March 23?

The Chair: I did.

Mr. Han Dong: Okay.

The Chair: She has accepted that invitation, Mr. Dong.

Do we have consensus to adopt the report as amended?

I believe I see consensus, so there's no need for a standing vote. Thank you.

Is there any further business to come before the meeting?

Mr. Vaughan, is your hand up from last time or do you want the floor now?

Okay.

Is there any further business to come before the meeting?

Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk (Windsor—Tecumseh, Lib.): I'd like to take the opportunity to introduce a motion. I'm not sure if you had your hand up for that. I do apologize.

The Chair: No. You have the floor, Mr. Kusmierczyk. Go ahead.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I'd like to introduce a motion right now.

In terms of this week, obviously, it's been a very dynamic week with Bill C-24 being in front of the House. We heard testimony from a number of witnesses today, and especially in the last number of meetings as well, about how urgent the need is to pass Bill C-24 at the present moment. We have a very short window of time for us to pass Bill C-24 in order to avoid the benefit cliff that is staring us in the face at this moment.

I have a motion that would allow us at this point to basically conduct the prestudy. Right now, Bill C-24 is still in front of the House. It has not been referred to the committee. This allows us the opportunity to start, potentially as early as this Thursday, the prestudy of Bill C-24 in anticipation of the fact that Bill C-24 would pass second reading in the House at some point this week. That is the motion. It would allow the committee to begin its study of Bill C-24 in anticipation of the fact that the House would pass Bill C-24 at second reading.

Here's the math on this. We have about 23,000 folks who will lose their EI support in the first week near the end of March when EI runs out. That is a deadline. We have three sitting days at the moment to make this work before our constituency week next week. At the same time, we know that the Senate is sitting next week, so what I propose is that we begin the prestudy on Thursday, hoping to get Bill C-24 studied. Hopefully, it gets passed in the House so that we can actually send it to the Senate at some point next week so that we can get Bill C-24 passed, get royal assent and prevent any interruption in EI support for those Canadians who are in danger of losing their EI support.

Mr. Chair, I do have a motion here that I'd like to read out, if that's okay.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: The motion is:

That, with respect to Bill C-24, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act (additional regular benefits), the Canada Recovery Benefits Act (restriction on eligibility) and another Act in response to COVID-19,

a) The Committee begin a subject matter study of the Bill on Thursday, March 11, 2021, if the Bill itself has not yet been referred to the Committee;

b) The Committee invite the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion and departmental officials to appear for one hour on Thursday, March 11, 2021, from 3:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., and if needed invite witnesses to appear on Thursday, March 11, 2021, from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.;

c) Members of the Committee submit their prioritized witness lists to the Clerk of the Committee no later than noon on Wednesday, March 10, 2021;

d) If Bill C-24 is referred to the Committee by the House during the subject matter study, all evidence and documentation received in public in relation to its subject matter study of Bill C-24 be deemed received by the Committee in the context of its legislative study of Bill C-24;

e) Members of the Committee as well as Members who are not a member of a caucus represented on the Committee and independent members should submit their proposed amendments to the Clerk of the Committee no later than Wednesday, March 10, 2021 at 5:00 p.m.;

f) Within one sitting day of the House adoption of the Bill at Second Reading, the committee shall proceed with the clause-by-clause consideration of Bill C-24, and must conclude clause-by-clause consideration within three sitting days of the bill being referred to the committee, and that the committee report the bill back to the House within four sitting days of the referral of the bill to the committee;

g) The Chair may limit debate on each clause to a maximum of five minutes per party, per clause;

h) If the Committee has not completed clause-by-clause consideration of Bill C-24 within three sitting days of the bill being referred to the committee, at 5:30 p.m. on the third sitting day, all remaining amendments submitted to the Committee shall be deemed moved, the Chair shall put every question, forthwith and successively, without further debate or amendment on all remaining clauses and proposed amendments, as well as each and every question necessary to dispose of clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill, as well as all questions necessary to report the Bill to the House and to order the Chair to report the Bill to the House no later than the fourth sitting day on which the bill was referred to the committee;

i) the Clerk of the Committee write immediately to each Member who is not a member of a caucus represented on the Committee and any independent members to inform them that the Committee will begin the subject matter study of the Bill and to invite them to prepare and submit any proposed amendments, which they would suggest that the Committee consider during the clause by clause study of the Bill.

The Clerk should also outline all of the parameters and deadlines mentioned in paragraphs a) to i) of this motion.

I am happy to respond to any questions that the committee members might have on any of those points, but—

● (1800)

The Chair: Has your—

Go ahead, Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Chair, the only thing I just want to highlight here once again is that we've heard today the urgency of the matter that's before us. We have a very short period of time to pass Bill C-24, which is going to prevent the interruption of EI benefits for all of those thousands of Canadians who are going to see the end of their benefits at the end of March. We have three sitting days to get this done.

This allows us to begin the study at committee in anticipation that the House is going to refer the bill to the committee at some point in the very near future. Rather than wait, this is an opportunity for us to begin our work, which is going to be necessary to get this moved in a timely fashion.

The Chair: Has the motion been circulated to the committee, or can that be done right away?

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Yes, we can circulate that to the committee right away.

The Chair: Okay.

I recognize Ms. Dancho, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There are a couple of things. I think we now understand where that mysterious third hour was on Thursday. It's disappointing that we just approved the subcommittee report. It's been a number of weeks since we met as a subcommittee and had plenty of time to

discuss this very lengthy motion with committee members that perhaps all members could support.

I note we had a good discussion on one of Madam Chabot's motions about giving ample notice for translation and this all went out the window when there would have been ample time to provide that lengthy motion. I would ask that the motion be immediately emailed to everyone.

What I also found interesting is that not only did you not circulate the motion, Mr. Kusmierczyk, but my office connected with the minister's office today and this did not come at all. This is definitely springing it on the committee without any collaboration whatsoever, and that's very disappointing.

Last, Mr. Kusmierczyk, I will mention that after the bill briefing with the minister, I emailed you immediately with a specific question about this bill and you never got back to me. You said you would and you never did. I find it interesting that there's this urgency from your government, Mr. Kusmierczyk and members of this committee, and yet you didn't even get back to me on a very simple question that I emailed you about.

So which one is it? Is it politics or is it that you do genuinely care about the well-being of Canadians? It seems very unclear to me with the antics that are going on in this committee right now. It's very disappointing, considering Conservatives have said very clearly we support getting supports to Canadians, and yet the Liberal narrative to date has been that we've delayed and yet this bill should have been presented a very long time ago.

As we learned today, your government learned that there would be concerns with the limited 26 weeks of EI in early January, and yet it wasn't until the end of February that you presented this bill to opposition parties. Then our first opportunity to debate it was Monday and here we are it's Tuesday and your government is saying we're delaying it.

I also feel it's jumping the gun a little, but we don't know what our House leaders are going to negotiate and this bill could skip all stages this week. Who knows.

I'm quite disappointed with this non-collaborative nature of Liberal members on this committee today.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1805)

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I'm sure from the opposition's side the timetable looks compressed. I will share that as a parliamentary secretary who has had to pull legislation through a department, through Finance and Treasury Board while respecting parliamentary privileges, that you can't talk about a bill until it's presented on the floor of Parliament. We are up against two timetables as opposed to the opposition, which is on the receiving end of whatever comes out of that process.

I hope the opposition doesn't see this as an antic. I think that was the word used to describe it. We have a significant challenge in front of us in supporting Canadians, and we have a significant responsibility to make sure those benefits aren't interrupted so people's lives are not put in harm's way. It is not easy to always land legislation on a particular day, a particular time and a particular schedule that the committee has set to deal with these issues.

COVID has not made it easier with Zoom calls and meetings. We are all familiar with the bandwidth challenges in staging committees and moving committees around. If we were all in Ottawa, there would have been a much different way of dealing with many of these things, but we would still have run up against not being able to talk about legislation before it's tabled in the House; otherwise, there would be a contempt charge filed against us so fast. You know how those things work, and we have to respect those parameters as best we can.

I assure you we are moving in good faith to move together, but the goal here is to help Canadians and get this legislation started. If the House leaders can come to an agreement on how to fast-track this bill, all the more power to them. But as the government we have to prepare for all eventualities. In good faith, that's exactly what we're doing and that's why the motion has been presented as we presented it.

We have a profound responsibility to address the challenges that are addressed in this bill, but also to deliver it to Canadians. I hope we can recognize that in this circumstance time is not our friend, but the opposition members still are our friends. Hopefully we're working together to get a positive result.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Blaikie, welcome to the committee. You have the floor.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie (Elmwood—Transcona, NDP): Thank you very much for that welcome. I'm glad to be here.

I want to start by saying that we certainly support the principle of trying to get to an early study of this bill, given the time constraints we find ourselves under. There is a little bit of frustration there, because I think these dates are not surprise dates or dates that came up suddenly. These are deadlines that have long been established. I think it's always preferable to get to work sooner on these things. Many of the income support proposals, certainly the legislative side of them, had this kind of eleventh hour aspect to them when they came to Parliament in the fall...and the prorogation that we all know about. I'm looking at Mr. Long. He sat in on some of the procedure and House affairs committee meetings where we discussed that in great detail.

I do think at a certain point it's incumbent on government to get a handle on these deadlines so that we're not always curtailing parliamentary process, but we will have to continue to do that in some way, shape or form in order to provide support to Canadians. It's not a choice that I think we should have to make. I do beseech the government to get its act together and bring things forward in a more timely way.

That said, I want to speak to some of the details of the proposal, because I think getting down to an early study is helpful. That could help expedite the process. I want to note that the bill was in-

troduced, and we're now being asked to set a pretty rigid schedule for how it will proceed at committee before parties have even had an opportunity to meet in their normal Wednesday caucus meeting. I believe the bill was tabled at the last sitting Thursday, and we haven't had a sitting Wednesday yet. The deadline in the motion for proposed amendments is tomorrow at five o'clock. That seems to me to be pretty short.

I notice also that there are members in the House whose parties don't have a seat at this table who will find out, if the committee decides to pass this motion, either very late today or early tomorrow that they have less than a day to contact the legislative counsel and try to prepare any amendments. It seems to me that the amendment deadline given, when we don't know when the bill is going to come to the committee, is a little tight. I would like to try to make some room for a little more time to be able to consider potential amendments. That would be either by striking paragraph (e), which has the deadline, or by having a caveat that would say that people have to submit amendments essentially within a sitting day of the bill passing through the House.

I think there's some flexibility there. I don't want it to get in the way of making progress today in terms of getting the study under way. I think there should be some allowance made for the fact that there are members who may yet know nothing about this plan for the bill and who nevertheless will have an interest in the bill and will need time to prepare any suggestions that they want to make constructively to the committee.

• (1810)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

Madam Chabot.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I agree with all of you, although we have been made aware only verbally of the gist of the motion: that it is a pre-study of Bill C-24. However, for your information, since I was mentioned by name, let me remind you that I had presented the committee with a routine motion that had the same objective, namely that motions should be introduced in writing and translated in both official languages. That motion was defeated. So you must not complain now that you didn't receive a motion in writing in both languages. My proposal was not accepted because you said that it would delay our work.

However, it is quite unusual to work in an ad hoc manner by doing a preliminary study of a bill that we have not yet received. Despite that, in this case, we know that the situation is urgent. I understand that we lost some time because the conditions were not ideal, but we really should have acted with more care and more foresight.

We were in a similar situation after the Speech from the Throne that was delivered when we came back from the prorogation. We should have adopted and extended the temporary measures in all urgency because some of them were going to come to an end. That happened in the House, not at the committee.

However, we could look further ahead this time. It is true that the bill was introduced yesterday, on Monday, March 8, but each party still had the time to make themselves aware of it. Some technical information sessions followed. We were therefore not completely in the dark on Monday morning.

I agree that we must look further ahead, but, at the same time, we have to consider the current situation. If nothing is done and we do not speed things up, thousands of workers will be penalized. Is that what we want? My answer is no, which is why I will be supporting this motion.

• (1815)
[English]

The Chair: Ms. Dancho, please.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm just a bit confused. In paragraph b) the motion is proposing that the minister come from 3:30 to 4:30 on Thursday, which she already is, to discuss supplementary estimates and main estimates, and then witnesses for this would be from 4:30 to 5:30, which was supposed to be Mr. Hussen's time.

Am I understanding this correctly that the minister would be coming just if this motion passes and that what we just voted on is garbage? Am I understanding that correctly?

Then I have a follow-up comment.

The Chair: Yes, I would take this as superseding the motion we just passed. I don't know about the term "garbage", but I think Minister Hussen would be then uninvited and this motion would take precedence.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: By garbage, I meant because it is literally going to go into the garbage, since it is not valid anymore. I'm just unclear on why Liberal members voted for this, but then put this motion forward, knowing that it would supersede what they just voted for, so again, not in good faith, very disappointing....

Again, I agree completely with Mr. Blaikie. Tomorrow is the first opportunity that opposition members get to discuss this with their caucus. For amendments, it is pretty critical that we have consultation with our caucus. It's pretty standard. Again, this just plays back to the fact that this bill was introduced so late, really putting opposition parties in a very tough spot to do their duty. I am just really unsure of why this collaboration is so important....

I would like to hear from Mr. Kusmierczyk, given that he presented this motion. Why is it that he did not respond to my question on why is it so important to him that we throw out what we just agreed to—what he just agreed to—and replace it with this new motion? Why didn't he respond to my question on this bill?

The Chair: We're going to Mr. Blaikie and then to Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Go ahead, Mr. Blaikie.

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much.

Just because I am hoping that we might be able to proceed to a vote after Mr. Kusmierczyk's undoubtedly compelling response to Ms. Dancho's question, I would be remiss if I didn't create the circumstances under which we could vote on my proposal, which is to strike item e) from the motion. I'd like to move formally that this be done.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

The debate now is on the amendment to delete item e).

Mr. Kusmierczyk.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I'm sorry, is the discussion now just on deleting and changing part e)?

The Chair: It is, but if you want to respond to Ms. Dancho, go right ahead.

The first thing we need to do is deal with Mr. Blaikie's amendment and then move on to the main motion.

Go ahead. You have the floor.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I absolutely do recognize some of the concerns that have been raised by the members, and I know that this is an unusual motion, an unusual request, but again, the situation is such that we are facing an urgent situation, and I'd like all of us, if possible, at this time, to really just focus on what is the important matter at hand here, which is proceeding at the committee here with this study.

In no way does it bias deliberations at caucus. In no way does it bias the outcome of deliberations in the House. This is separate. But again, in anticipation that there will be positive movement in the House, this allows us to begin our work and potentially to conclude the work here at committee so that it does not cause any delay in the eventual passing of this important legislation.

I just wanted to highlight that we are in this situation. There are Canadians who are counting on us to really focus in on this and do what we can to get this legislation passed, which is absolutely critical. This in no way biases what's taking place in the House, what's taking place at caucus. Those conversations will take place, but this allows us to anticipate and begin the work here at committee so that we can make sure that we have a timely passage of this bill, hopefully.

• (1820)

The Chair: Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate Mr. Kusmierczyk's words. I still don't feel I got an answer, but I hope he can reach out to me in good faith with a response to my question.

Given how lengthy this motion is—and I know that these discussions are ongoing behind the scenes, as I'm sure all members know—I would ask that we suspend for five minutes just to digest this very lengthy motion. I think that would be fair.

The Chair: We only have 10 minutes before we need to adjourn because of the folks who support us.

Do we have consensus to suspend and then come back?

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I have lost my HUMA feed.

The Chair: Do we have consensus to suspend or do people want to just plow on for the last 10 minutes?

I see thumbs up all around. We'll suspend until 7:25 p.m., and then we'll be back.

Thank you.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: Chair, do you mean 6:25?

The Chair: Sorry, I'm in the Atlantic time zone. That's 6:25 eastern. You're right.

• (1820) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1825)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I recognize Mr. Blaikie, please

Mr. Daniel Blaikie: Thank you very much. I just wanted to say that if we were just to pass this motion unamended, I do think that one of the ways it might prejudice some of the conversations at caucus tomorrow morning is simply that it means the discussion won't be about things we might recommend in terms of the change of approach or a modification to the legislation. It will really be about whether it's just a straight up or down yes or no.

I think we'd be able to have a better conversation and get more good ideas coming out of members' respective caucuses if that weren't the case, so that's why I'm hoping that we might pass the motion as it is, without item e).

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Blaikie.

Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: On Mr. Blaikie's amendment, I do agree with him. I think that would make sense. I don't think you can amend a subamendment, but I would love to strike everything under a).

I'm just wondering if Mr. Kusmierczyk or Mr. Vaughan has heard from their House leader in the last three minutes, because I think there are discussions ongoing, and I'm wondering if they can chime in on that.

The Chair: Mr. Kusmierczyk or Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Irek Kusmierczyk: I don't have any information.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: No, and my audio may have interfered with my cellphone. It just disappeared on me when I was trying to do some other work, so I have no connection to the outside world, except to you folks.

The Chair: Thank you.

On the speakers list is Ms. Dancho.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I would ask Mr. Kusmierczyk to call his House leader.

Again, I'm working to collaborate here, folks.

The Chair: Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: At the risk of sounding as though the decisions we make here are all made through the centre, we have work here that we need to contemplate. I'm sure we can attempt to do that, but if we called the House leader, what would we ask him?

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I guess on our end, Mr. Vaughan, we like to collaborate in committee. I know that may be a foreign concept to you, but we were busy collaborating for that five minutes and we're looking to get to a solution here that works for everyone, to reach the goal of getting supports for Canadians.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I totally understand that. What I'm asking is what you want us to ask our House leader if we call him.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Again, I think the holdup is with the House leaders. Part of that discussion needs to happen with House leaders. I don't know why you guys aren't discussing this with your House leaders. It sounds very odd to me. They're in charge of what happens in the House.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: Have you been in touch with your House leader? What do you have to report to us? I'm trying to collaborate, too, but I need to know what the other half of the collaboration looks like. So what do we—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It sounds as though we might be at a consensus, where we don't need this motion, Mr. Vaughan.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: As I said, my only portal to the outside world is through this Zoom channel, so I didn't hear that and didn't understand that.

As you said, you want us to consult with our House leader. We're also up against a clock, so perhaps the best thing to do here is to just move to adjourn this debate, and then if we need to reconvene, we shall.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I think that sounds like a good idea.

The Chair: Now we have a motion to adjourn debate.

Madam Clerk, I don't know that I've had to deal with one of these before. My understanding is that this is not debatable and that it goes straight to a vote. Can you give me some—

• (1830)

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Danielle Widmer): You are correct, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay. The motion before the committee is to adjourn the debate. Would you like to take a standing vote on this or do we have consensus to adjourn debate? I see consensus to adjourn debate.

I guess if we're adjourning debate, we're adjourning the meeting. Am I right on that? It is 7:30 p.m.

Madam Clerk.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Adam Vaughan: If we adjourn the debate, what does that do to the schedule we just voted on?

The Chair: To my mind, we have passed a motion that indicates how we're going to be conducting business on Thursday, and I

would say that motion stands. There has been no motion to supersede it.

We have consensus to adjourn the meeting.

Thank you, colleagues. Have a wonderful evening.

The meeting is adjourned.

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