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Chair: Mr. Robert Morrissey

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

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• (1610)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 70 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. Members are appearing virtually and in the room.

To ensure an orderly meeting, please direct your questions and comments through the chair.

You also have the option of choosing to speak in the official language of your choice. If there's an issue with interpretation, please get my attention and we'll suspend while it's being corrected. Sound checks have been done.

I must remind members that screenshots of the meeting while it's in proceedings are not allowed.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, March 21, 2023, the committee will begin its study on main estimates 2023-24 and the subject matter of supplementary estimates (C) 2022-23 during the first hour. During the last hour we will resume consideration in camera of the draft report for the study on housing.

I would like to welcome our witnesses.

Today we have the Honourable Karina Gould, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. Welcome back, Minister. It's good to see you again.

We have the Honourable Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Labour, and the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, who has been at the committee numerous times. We have departmental staff who are here to assist the ministers on any particular questions.

Before I open the floor, it's my understanding that the ministers are not doing opening statements. We will be going directly to questions. It is my intention to follow the same speaking routine as the normal meeting, in which the first round is six minutes each, followed with the normal sequence.

With that, committee members, I will open the floor to questions, beginning with Mrs. Falk for six minutes or whatever timeline.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): That's wonderful. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just want to thank each of you, ministers, for making the time to come to our committee. I appreciate it when we have your availability to come here so that we can ask questions.

Our employment insurance program discriminates against adoptive and intended parents by providing them with 15 fewer weeks of leave as they grow their families. We know that the Liberal government has promised to address this discrimination for adoptive parents since 2019. Earlier this year, the minister made the same promise to intended parents. Despite these repeated promises, these families remain at a disadvantage and children continue to miss out on this additional time to attach with their parents.

Minister Qualtrough, on what date will adoptive and intended parents receive equal parental benefits?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough (Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion): I remain committed to introducing an adoptive benefit as part of our parental benefits suite, because we need to make our parental benefits fair for everyone. This will be included as part of our EI modernization package. I look forward to releasing the plan for that and the timeline associated with that as soon as possible.

• (1615)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Can't you do that today?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I cannot today, no.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Parents of adoptive children should not have to continue to wait for parity when it comes to our benefits system. I have put forward a private member's bill, Bill C-318, which will deliver parity.

Minister, will you provide the royal recommendation for this bill to pass and to finally give adoptive and intended parents the time they need and deserve with their child or children, and not do it on your own timeline, because we already have something before the House? Will you do that for adoptive and intended parents by providing that royal recommendation?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm not currently in a position to answer that question, but I can reaffirm our commitment to a 15-week adoption benefit at this point.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Are you advocating at the cabinet for royal recommendation for this private member's bill?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Of course I can't reveal cabinet confidence, but I am a champion for an adoptive parent benefit.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Actions speak louder than words, Minister.

I would like to pass my time to MP Gray.

Mrs. Tracy Gray (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the ministers for being here today.

My questions will be for Minister Qualtrough.

Recently, the Senate returned Bill C-22, the Canada disability benefit act, with several amendments. Canadians want to see this legislation come into force quickly.

Minister, are you accepting all of the Senate amendments?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We are reviewing the Senate amendments, but as all of you know, I am committed to doing what it takes to get the disability benefit legislation through. Thanks to the work of all of us across parties, with the all-party support that led to the Senate amendments, I'm confident that we'll be able to work together and get it done.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, when will you be putting a motion on notice with your intentions, so that Canadians know what amendments you are accepting?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Very soon.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Does that mean you're planning on putting it through this week? What are your intentions with respect to when we should expect to see this?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I don't think I can share that at this point. I apologize.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: We know that we have a few more weeks here before the House rises for the summer. Is it your intention to bring this forward to the House before then?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes, absolutely.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Last year, you told this committee that you expected it to take about 12 months to develop all the regulations for who's applicable and what they would receive for the disability benefit, with the rollout in early 2024. That's in seven months.

Are you still committed to that timeline?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We are still committed to the timeline of the 12-month regulatory process. If we get royal assent by the end of June—again, that is my intention, and hopefully we'll all work together to make that happen—then we should make that timeline, yes.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Minister, just to be clear for everyone, the timeline has now extended from...it was originally going to be early in 2024, and now it is later in 2024.

Is that correct?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Yes.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: The next thing I wanted to ask was... It's come to light that your department, ESDC, had 62 employees whose security clearance was revoked between 2019 and 2023, including one employee whose clearance was revoked due to "spying or otherwise acting on behalf of a foreign government."

When were you first briefed on these security clearances being revoked?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We are updated on human resource situations if there is a security consequence.

I think, J.-F., you're probably the best one to describe it—obviously without the confidentiality piece.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay (Deputy Minister, Department of Employment and Social Development): On the security clearance, as you mentioned, we have something like five or seven per year. That's usually the number.

This is a process that is done internally, inside the public service. It could be for many reasons. It could be just because of some concern. It doesn't mean that all those people are guilty of something. The minister's office will be told only if there's an impact on their work. It's only if there's really a security issue in a context that could be a risk for the minister and her role.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: That's great. Thank you.

To clarify, you mentioned what the average could be, but in 2021 alone there were 37 revocations of clearance for officials in your department.

What happened in 2021 that made security threats in your department increase so dramatically?

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: Do you remember that we came to committee to explain that, during COVID, we hired a lot of people? In the context of the work we did in terms of security and all of this, we revoked and actually terminated employees in the context of the pandemic.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: We have a few more seconds.

One of the things we're looking at is with the security clearance. What are the normal protocols with that? Is this part of the normal briefing when you have such a dramatic increase like this, or, ongoing, is that something that is in a separate type of briefing, or is it just a normal briefing?

What are the next steps after you look at something like this?

• (1620)

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: We're talking about more than 35,000 employees in the department, so those numbers are not a dramatic increase. As we said, there was a lot of hiring during 2021, which explained why the numbers are higher.

It's taken case by case. If their cases are really risky from the national security perspective for the security of ministers, we will of course let them know, for their information. However, if it's not, it's actually standard procedure for us.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gray.

We'll go to Madame Martinez Ferrada for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Gould, thank you for being with us today.

Social economy enterprises and non-profit organizations involved in the social economy are an integral part of the Canadian economy. I know you made a nice announcement about that yesterday. Can you tell us a little more about the challenges the new social finance fund will help overcome across Canada, in terms of food or poverty?

Hon. Karina Gould (Minister of Families, Children and Social Development): Yes, of course. Thank you for the question.

I'd also like to thank the committee for having me here today, once again.

Yesterday, we made a wonderful announcement about the social finance fund. The \$755 million was set aside for the fund in the 2018 budget. At the same time, we announced the three senior fund managers who will administer this fund: CAP Finance in Quebec, as well as Boann Social Impact and Realize Capital Partners in the rest of Canada.

The purpose of the fund is to support social enterprises so that they can expand their influence and activities on the ground. We have a lot of social enterprises across Canada, and they have an incredible influence on food security, affordable housing and the environment. We really want to make sure they have the financial support they need.

The fund's other major purpose is not only to fund initiatives that will actually help communities in Canada, but also restore private investors' confidence and show them they can make good investments. Yesterday, we announced that fund managers will be receiving \$400 million from the government. Since their goal is to attract double that amount, those funds will help attract \$800 million in additional investments to support social enterprises here in Canada.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Madam Minister.

Minister O'Regan, the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec welcomed the government's decision to amend the Canada Labour Code to prohibit the use of scabs. I know you've done a lot of work on this. Could you give us an update on what the government has done so far to meet this commitment?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan (Minister of Labour): Thank you for the question.

We want to ban the use of replacement workers. That was a commitment we made in the last election with the agreement of the NDP. I'd like to thank Senator Hassan Yussuff and my NDP colleague Alexandre Boulerice for their work.

We want to make sure that the collective bargaining process is as open and fair as it can be. I'm committed to developing a fairer collective bargaining process in federally regulated workplaces. We'll be introducing a bill to further limit the use of replacement workers.

Last year, I launched consultations on this commitment. I also asked stakeholders to share their views on the best ways to improve the sustainment process. On November 30, 2022, we extended consultations for six weeks to give stakeholders more time to submit comments. The consultations have now ended. During those six weeks, we held five round tables with employers, unions and our Indigenous partners, and I was pleased to attend several of those sessions. We will take the comments we received into account as we draft the bill, which we want to introduce by the end of the year.

● (1625)

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

Minister Qualtrough, we have people with disabilities in my family who commend the work this government has done for those with disabilities.

I know that you're not only a dedicated minister, but you've also launched many other initiatives. In addition to Bill C-22, you have several other initiatives in your portfolio, such as the opportunities fund for persons with disabilities, the ready, willing and able initiative, financial assistance for the visually impaired and print-disabled, and capacity-building measures.

I'd like you to tell us a little more about Bill C-22, but also about all the other action you're taking to improve the situation for people with disabilities.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you for the question.

There's a lot of work to be done, but we've already done a lot.

We have new laws and policies, including the Accessible Canada Act, which establishes a system to create accessibility standards. We've created the new position of chief accessibility officer within the Government of Canada. We also have Canada's disability inclusion action plan, which has four pillars: financial security, employment, accessible and inclusive communities and a modern approach to disability.

We're now focused on making things happen. The pillar of financial security is reflected in the Canada disability benefit, which will change the lives of hundreds of thousands of people by lifting them out of poverty. Of course, we need to pass Bill C-22 first. That's what we talked about earlier. We'll also have a lot of work to do throughout the regulatory process. We'll continue to work with the disability community and we will get there.

The Chair: Thank you, ladies.

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

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

Ministers, thank you for being here.

Mr. O'Regan, Minister of Labour, I'd like to come back to the anti-scab legislation for federally regulated sectors. You've been commended for the commitment in the budget. You know Quebec has had this in place for 40 years. Earlier, you said that you'd held consultations, and we followed the process, but why wait until December 2023? Why not act now?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: Thank you for the question, Ms. Chabot.

[English]

We heard extensively from unions, from employers and from indigenous partners. I insisted, in some of these consultations, that they actually sit together. They weren't separate consultations, because I wanted them to hear from one another as well. It's complex, because we are also talking about supply chains. When we look at the federal jurisdiction, we're talking about supply chains in rail and in transportation—very sensitive issues for the economy. We're trying to find a way in which we can ensure there is a maintenance of activities or a maintenance of services while partners are at the table.

In other words, we want to minimize work stoppages and make sure supply chains remain whole. We want to take the time to make sure we do that right, but we have committed that we will introduce that legislation by the end of year.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Minister, are you telling me that it's taking a long time to introduce an anti-scab bill because you believe that the right to strike should be denied?

[English]

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: No, I want to make sure we get the legislation right, so I'll take the time. The consultations are finished, and we are taking the time now to make sure we can ensure maintenance of activities and maintenance of the economy and supply chains while also getting rid of replacement workers in our economy.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Mr. Minister. So I understand that this won't be done right away, even though workers want legislation sooner rather than later.

Minister Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, in response to a question from my Conservative colleague, you reiterated your com-

mitment to reform the employment insurance system. Your mandate letter clearly stated that this was to be done around summer 2022. You held two phases of consultations, and a report was tabled by the committee two years ago. Why should we believe you?

• (1630)

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: We want the employment insurance system to be fairer and more accessible for workers and employers. We're taking the time. Honestly, during our consultations, with employers in particular, but also with workers, we were told to be careful about the cost of everything we wanted to do.

[English]

When we started doing this work, we were in a very different time from the one we are in now. We are very mindful at this point of putting additional costs—

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, I really want to know when you are going to reform employment insurance, because you've been saying that you're working on it for a long time. You know, for EI, I feel the best solution is to introduce a bill that we can study in order to move forward. It's been a year now. When will the government reform EI to address the gaps and discriminatory aspects of our current system?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I guess what I'm trying to say, Madame Chabot, is that times have changed, and we're very mindful of the additional costs of major reform. That doesn't mean it isn't needed; it means we have to be mindful of when we do it and how we sequence it, so that the impact on premiums is responsible, and we really need to understand.... It doesn't mean we're not doing things in EI, but it means that I cannot give you a date right now as to when I'm going to drop a massive plan that's going to cost workers and employers. We're looking at how to do this in a way that's fiscally responsible but that also addresses all the challenges you and I both worry about.

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Madam Minister, based on your answers, we can see that EI reform isn't going to happen anytime soon. This feels like a broken promise, and we don't understand why.

I have another question. In the budget, you once again extended—it's already been eight years—the 13 pilot projects for seasonal workers in 13 socio-economic regions. You've extended them by five weeks. Eight years ago, those five weeks of benefits met certain needs, but they remain pilot projects.

When we look at seasonal workers' realities, we can see that you could do some things at no cost whatsoever. You could improve the pilot projects and make them permanent. Some have recommended that they be extended for 15 weeks instead of five. We know that in the fishing industry, for example, the situation has changed a great deal. Some workers are struggling to make ends meet and they end up unemployed and without an income for weeks. Would you be prepared to amend the bill to improve these pilot projects and go further by making them permanent?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'm always open to suggestions for improvement, but, as I said, we have to look at all sectors and all regions. Honestly, it made more sense to make a permanent change to the modernization plan than to continue making changes to pilot projects. So we've given ourselves more time to do that in the modernization plan.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chabot.

[*English*]

Madame Zarrillo, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to start my questions with Minister Gould.

The last time you were here, we were talking about the intersection between your ministry, the agriculture ministry and the food crisis. The hunger crisis in Canada has only increased since the last time you were here. I appreciate the minister's mentioning that we are in a different time than we were in even six months ago in this country.

I note in the main estimates that there was some money set aside for education around SDGs, and we know that numbers one and two are both poverty and no hunger. It's a small amount for the education around SDGs, but I really wanted to understand, what more is your ministry, and the shared ministry, doing to address hunger in this country?

Hon. Karina Gould: With regard to the SDGs, that is part of the ongoing public awareness work that we're doing for the SDGs. One of the things Canada has decided to do this year at the high-level political forum in New York is a voluntary national review of our progress toward the SDGs, and we'll be doing that this July.

When it comes to the intersection of poverty and food insecurity, the last time I was here I talked about the fact that both the national advisory council on poverty and the food policy council would be having a joint meeting. They had their first joint meeting on May 18. I haven't yet received a readout from that. It was kind of an exploratory conversation to see how they could work further together. I anticipate getting that readout soon, and I anticipate that they will be doing further work together.

• (1635)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: It just kind of rolls into the social innovation fund a bit. There are quite a few organizations in my community that work on food recovery and on food security. There are huge logistics involved in that and, really, a lot of skills and a lot of opportunity there.

Do you see a space for that in your social innovation fund? How can folks like NGOs in my community get involved in that work?

Hon. Karina Gould: It's a great question.

As I was mentioning, yesterday we announced the three fund managers who are going to be working through that: CAP Finance for Quebec, and Boann Social Impact and Realize Capital Partners in the rest of Canada. They are just getting set up right now, but they will be launching a web portal as well, where social purpose organizations, whether they be the not-for-profit sector, charitable organizations or social enterprises, can get more information.

We also have the investment readiness program, which is run through about 20 different partners across the country. For example, Community Foundations of Canada is one of them. They have helped support over 1,100 not-for-profit and charitable organizations in getting ready to apply for investments, some of which are food security organizations that are doing really tremendous work when it comes to food recovery and reducing food waste.

Absolutely, there is huge potential here. What I am particularly excited about, with regard to this new social finance fund, is that it's a vote of confidence from the Government of Canada, and it will hopefully attract other private investors to see that they too can make investments that have a social impact and that do a social good in our country.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you. Any information you can share with this committee that we can send out to our community groups would be great.

I want to just revisit with both Minister Qualtrough and Minister O'Regan around the labour shortage study that came out of this committee with a focus on the care economy, which is really where I want to go, because I see some discrimination that happens in the heavily gendered work that is the care economy.

One of the recommendations out of that care economy study was that we needed to collect more data, more market data, on what's happening in the care economy. If I think about post-COVID, if I think about aging, and if I think about the health impacts of climate change, this is timely, and we have an opportunity to get ahead of it.

I know that there is an intersection between labour and employment, so I wonder if you could maybe give us an update on what kinds of conversations are happening around collecting data. What channels are you collecting data on? Are women finally getting priority in the labour force in Canada?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I know that our department has been working very closely with StatsCan to beef up and disaggregate the data we're collecting from the labour market survey to really dig in on the kinds of questions you're talking about. We have all this high-level information, but it doesn't, in some cases, tell us the real story of what's going on in a particular sector. I'd say the care economy is right there with it, so we really need to understand the intersectional aspects of who's working where, their gender and race and whether or not they have a disability.

Cliff, are you our labour market survey guy? I can't remember who...?

Okay, they're not here.

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: It's the labour market survey, but it's not just that. It's also even our work with provinces, for example, through the LMTAs, trying to make sure that we have information that is more targeted and more precise on who benefits from the funding.

Most of our programs now have criteria that make sure that we address gaps in diversity, which means that in situations, for example, with the care economy, there would be groups that are under-represented. How do we make sure they're being addressed?

We see in terms of results that it's very positive.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: One of the things, too, that I wanted to raise is unpaid care. The number of hours that go into this from caregivers is becoming a really heavy burden on them, both physically and emotionally. Even the cost of goods and care.... Is that something that's also part of that study?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'll just add briefly to this to say that in conversations we have with SEIU members, many of us around this table have probably come into contact with members of the care economy, particularly if we have aging parents. You see first-hand the amount of work they do, so it became very clear how underpaid they were, and un-resourced in many instances. It became very clear to us during COVID how they work multiple jobs in multiple locations. For a whole host of reasons, there were other issues there.

We're working with them on a host of issues, but if you ask them, they will tell you that their top priority is ratios. They want to be able to provide better care. After they get paid for value for what they do, they also want to be able to provide better care for their patients.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zarrillo.

I have a clarification before we move to the next round. We began at 4:12, and we have resources to go to 6:00, committee members. It's my intention to schedule the full first hour for the ministerial appearances, so that will bring us to about 5:12. It's my understanding that Minister O'Regan has to leave around 5:00-ish, so...

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I apologize, Chair; I have a flight to catch as well. I have to leave at 5:00 as well.

The Chair: Okay, so it will be three getting the last 12 minutes, then. With that clarification, Madam Ferreri can begin the second round for five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the ministers for being here today to answer some questions.

A new passport design was unveiled on May 10, and we have Minister Gould quoted as saying, "I think a couple of the questions have been suggesting that there's a partisan aspect to this," and, "I think it's important to say that this is not partisan. The design of this passport started 10 years ago and this is really about ensuring the security of the document."

I'm hoping the minister can table for this committee where in the 10-year consultation there was a desire to remove the imagery of Terry Fox, Canadian athlete, humanitarian and cancer-research activist, the Battle of Vimy Ridge, the Fathers of Confederation, the last spike being nailed into the Canadian National Railway and Nellie McClung, a member of the Famous Five. Could you table that with the committee?

Hon. Karina Gould: You will have to ask Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, because it's an IRCC initiative.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you for that.

You were at the launch. Are you not able to table this to the committee at all?

Hon. Karina Gould: I wasn't involved in the design process. It's an IRCC initiative.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Okay.

I'm curious, then, if you would be able to answer how much money was spent on the consultation on the redesign for the passport.

Hon. Karina Gould: I cannot, because it was IRCC that did this.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I guess, then, I would ask you if you're comfortable or happy with the imagery that was removed.

Hon. Karina Gould: Well, I think that every 10 years we have to update the Canadian passport. That's for security purposes. In fact, it's best practice internationally to do so at least every 10 years, if not more often, because we want to ensure that the Canadian travel document remains something that has the highest integrity. That's really important.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I'm sorry, Minister, I know we always get cut off in these things because we're so short of time. I have just a direct question. I understand that you have to redesign it. I understand that portion of it for sure.

Are you happy with what was removed from the passport?

Hon. Karina Gould: I think it's important to note that... Well, I can actually answer the question the way I choose. Every 10 years we have to redesign the passport. It's important that it is completely redesigned, because we don't want to have anything that could be fraudulent. There was an extensive consultation with Canadians. That's my understanding.

If you have further questions on this, I'm sure the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada would be happy to respond to them.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you, Minister.

I think your lack of an answer and how you chose to answer that speaks volumes. A lot of people, like the Royal Canadian Legion, Brad West, who is the mayor of Port Coquitlam, and the Vimy Foundation press release will find your choice of answer interesting. I think it offended a lot of Canadians. I think that's what you've said today.

Moving on to—

Hon. Karina Gould: Actually, I didn't say any of those things. Those are words you've put in my mouth. I think it's important to have that be clear on the record.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I didn't put any words in your mouth. If you're not able to answer any questions on the passport, that's fine.

I guess we could move on to Bill C-35, which is, for many people at home, the child care bill. There's been a lot in the media lately about what are called "child care deserts". For example, 85% of Newfoundland and Labradorians do not have access to child care.

This is not a child care program. This is a marketing campaign for a lot of parents who are left in these deserts.

There was an amendment. The original wording in the amendment was, "the progress being made respecting that system, including information relating to the quality, availability, affordability, accessibility, and inclusiveness of early learning and child care programs and services and to the access to those programs and services".

This is the wording of your bill, Minister. In committee, we saw an amendment put forward that removed the words of the key pillars, "availability" and "accessibility". This is the number one thing we heard from witness testimony.

My question to you is, when did you and your office approve and support the amendment to remove the words "availability" and "accessibility" from the reporting of the progress of the program?

• (1645)

Hon. Karina Gould: My understanding is that it was because that was redundant in the clause that it was put in. It was already implied, and that's why it didn't move forward as such. It was repetitive.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I would definitely challenge you on that. It wasn't redundant at all. These are the pillars. This is ultimately the whole crux of this system. It's that there is no availability and there is no accessibility.

Hon. Karina Gould: That is precisely why we're moving forward with the Canada-wide agreement to create 250,000 additional spaces. This is exactly one of the reasons this is so important.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: You removed those words from your own amendment.

Hon. Karina Gould: Those words remain in the bill in other places. It's a question of having integrity throughout the piece of legislation. It doesn't have to be repeated several times for it to remain within the legislation.

Regardless, that's also why we have committed to creating 250,000 spaces, 50,000 of which have already been created. We recognize that for this program to be a success, parents need to be able to access it.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ferreri.

We go now to Mr. Long for five minutes.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon to my colleagues. Thank you to the ministers for coming this afternoon.

Minister O'Regan, you visited my wonderful riding of Saint John—Rothesay several months back. We went out to the New Brunswick Community College of St. John. We met with many students. In fact, we had a wonderful announcement with respect to interest on student loans and the payback limit on what they have to pay back.

I just wonder if you could elaborate briefly on how important an announcement like that is for our students across the country.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I think it was written on their faces on that day, Mr. Long. This was intended as an investment in our future, and it was something we heard loud and clear from students and student organizations.

It's particularly poignant in the place where we were when we were talking about skilled trades. We are incredibly deficient, unfortunately, in the skilled trades area. We have too many university degrees and not enough Red Seals. We have to change that in a hurry.

I can tell you that nobody is myopic about this sort of stuff. It's not just the three of us here, but our fellow ministers as well. We are all trying to work together to figure out how we get more people in the skilled trades and how we get more people in the workforce to match the trades they have.

One of the ways we can encourage people to take the skilled trades program is to alleviate some of the debt burden for them.

It was such a great day, because everybody there was so excited about the skilled trades.

Mr. Wayne Long: I just want to follow up on that.

Whether it's the doubling of Canada summer jobs that we did over the course of the previous Conservative government, the waiving of interest or the raising of the limit, we've been there for students. I think that's abundantly clear.

There's UTIP: Also at NBCC, we talked about the union training and innovation program and how important that is to train tomorrow's skilled workers to help us get to net zero.

Can you just elaborate on that briefly, please, Minister?

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I think I remember the conversation I had with Minister Qualtrough about this. I am going to give her some of the benefit here, because I worked with Carla on UTIP.

I am personally very committed and very passionate about sustainable jobs, which until we rebranded it, was a concept commonly known as "just transition". We don't say those words anymore. It's like we don't say "Voldemort". Workers don't like "just transition". They hate it. It's become too loaded with negative meaning.

What we're really talking about is increasing opportunity in the energy sector. In fact, the reason I have to leave to catch a flight is that I'm speaking to Energy NL tomorrow, which used to be the Offshore Oil Industries Association for Newfoundland and Labrador, dealing solely with oil. They're now called Energy NL. They deal with renewables, with hydrogen, with wind. They deal with everything.

The opportunity for workers now is huge.

• (1650)

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Minister.

Minister Gould, we see right across the country, from coast to coast to coast, in western and eastern Canada and in the north, wildfires raging.

In fact, the riding beside mine, New Brunswick Southwest, is literally on fire. I know the MP for New Brunswick Southwest describes climate change as "just weather", but we know that's not the case.

The area near Saint Andrews, the Bocabec area, is profoundly impacted. It affects people's lives and livelihoods. Government benefits and entitlements are critically important for those fleeing their homes and subject to evacuation orders.

Could you please share with the committee what ESDC is doing to support people affected by these natural disasters, and how this fits into the Government of Canada's larger emergency response strategy?

Thank you.

Hon. Karina Gould: Of course, Mr. Long.

Also, to those who are affected by wildfires, we just want them to know that the Government of Canada is there to support them.

We have been very deliberate at Service Canada, for example, to ensure that folks who have had to flee because of wildfires have easier access to EI. They are not required to provide an ROE when applying for their EI. We're working very closely with folks to get them onto direct deposit, understanding that a cheque that might be sent might not make it if they have to leave their home.

We are geotargeting with advertising online to make sure that information is available to them.

We've set up additional points of service in nearby communities to make sure they are supported, but we really want to ensure that people get access to the benefits they need.

I know Service Canada has also reached out to employers, temporary foreign workers, and Canada summer jobs to do wellness checks and to make sure they're there to support them through this very difficult time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Long. Your time is up.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Minister Qualtrough, I want to talk about pilot projects for seasonal workers again. These pilot projects affect 13 socio-economic regions. We won't be seeing a reform anytime soon; in fact, we don't know when it will happen. So I understand that you're not going to reform the system. Perhaps a pilot project was carried out without reform because it remains a pilot project. However, you could improve things for many people working in seasonal industries.

Recommendations were made to the Standing Committee on Finance that Bill C-47 be amended to improve the pilot projects and make them permanent. Are you prepared to study this improvement as part of passing Bill C-47?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: As I said, I'm always open to amendments and changes that improve programs, but at the same time we're trying not to make too many minor changes to the system, because that's one of the reasons it's so complicated now. However, this will be part of the broader modernization plan.

Maybe—

Ms. Louise Chabot: No, that's fine, I've got my answer: You have no major improvement plan. So my question is, can we correct the things that can be corrected? I don't want technical details on pilot projects, which I'm familiar with. Plus, the redistribution of socio-economic regions has been on your desk for two years, and you haven't moved forward on that either. We're moving at a snail's pace.

So I have my answer: You're open, but you won't make a firm commitment by saying, for example, that by summer, we can at least improve and make the pilot projects permanent. Is that what you're saying, yes or no?

[English]

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I'll turn to Jean-François.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-François Tremblay: The review of socio-economic region boundaries will begin this year. As you know, it happens every five years.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Minister Gould, we have information from Service Canada—it's not just hearsay—that information about Canadians will no longer be available to MPs and advocacy groups that support unemployed workers in their efforts to obtain employment insurance. Can you explain that change and where it came from?

• (1655)

Hon. Karina Gould: Yes, of course. Thank you for the question.

As we've said before on this committee, it's not necessarily a change in policy, but rather an application of policy. It is important for us, as the Government of Canada, to protect the personal information of Canadians.

As far as MP access to this information is concerned, I will follow up with the departments, because it's important to ensure that Canadians who run into problems with Service Canada programs, whether it be employment insurance or others, can turn to their MPs for help.

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

[English]

Madam Zarrillo, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to make a statement very quickly, because there are few opportunities to plant seeds and there are lots of people here today. I want to talk about menstrual products. One time when Minister O'Regan was here, we talked about this. I know it's part of the Canada Labour Code, but there are also the free products that will be rolling out to federal workplaces.

I just wanted to mention, on the procurement front, that a number of Canadian manufacturers do both reusable and more sustainable products. I would just like to put that out there. We'd love to see some of that taken advantage of in these new programs and perhaps even for the labour code to talk about reusables.

I did want to go back to the labour shortages study that came out of the HUMA committee. Recommendation 16 was around having

the federal government “consider establishing a national Care Economy Commission”, which would be around developing, implementing and monitoring workforce planning.

I'll ask you, Minister Qualtrough, because it would fall in your area, but I think it's also a cross-pollination of immigration and labour. I just wondered if that was a recommendation that was discussed or thought about. Is there an opportunity to start this care economy commission across ministries?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I wouldn't want to commit to what we would call it, but the idea of a horizontal, cross-government approach to the care economy, I think, is very much overdue. What we are doing as ministers across departments, including Health, ESDC—I want to make sure I get them all—and Immigration, is working together on different aspects of the care economy. Now we have a ministerial working group that's trying to bring it all together.

It could head in that direction, but I think it's premature right now to say that's where it would go. Your point is very well taken. We need to make sure there's a better, more coordinated effort on that front.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I hear there's a ministerial working group. Could this committee please get the details of that working group?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It's informal. We form these teams around issues that cross our departments, but yes, I guess I could tell you who's on it.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

I'll just close out, Minister Qualtrough, on Bill C-22. We are all anxiously waiting for that to come to the House. I know that on the NDP side we're ready to see that come through. We'd like to see it all happen before we rise for the summer.

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: It will.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zarrillo.

We will now go to Mrs. Gray for five minutes. We will end after Mrs. Gray and Mr. Long, I believe. The ministers who have to go will simply excuse themselves when the time comes.

Mrs. Gray, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Qualtrough, I have a couple of questions for you.

During some of the questioning here today, you mentioned that there are ongoing consultations regarding working on the regulations for Bill C-22. What I'm hearing from a lot of disability advocacy groups is that the consultations aren't taking place at this point because the legislation hasn't passed. I have had some say that they have reached out to your office, wanting to engage, and they are being put on hold until that happens.

Can you speak to that? What is the timeline, and whom you are consulting with?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: Thank you.

First of all, I think there are two different processes happening. There is work that has been done that was budgeted over three years to work with the disability community. We have actually funded specific national organizations to go out and do those consultations for us and to work with the department to pull together as much information as we can in anticipation of the regulatory process.

What people.... I'm reading into what you're saying. People are probably being told that the formal regulatory process cannot begin until the bill gets royal assent, but there is ongoing work.

Elisha, can you...?

There's a lot going on in that space, but the formal piece hasn't started.

• (1700)

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I think that answers that, Minister. Thank you.

My next question is with regard to the Auditor General's report that came out. This is the accessibility audit for transportation, which referenced that more than a million Canadians with disabilities face barriers while travelling. The Auditor General highlighted a lack of consultation and enforcement.

There was a lot in that Auditor General's report. We don't have enough time to really dig into it here. However, can you give us some insight as to what work is being done since that report, what we expect to see coming out of that report, and how soon that will come out?

Hon. Carla Qualtrough: I hear you. In fact, I think that was a very important report. If governments and businesses respond as we should and will, it's a real chance for change within the transportation sector.

Transportation was identified as a priority within the Accessible Canada Act. It's partially because of the kinds of things that came out through that report. We are looking at different sectors of.... I'm sorry. I don't know transport language very well. I apologize. We're looking at different modes of transport.

A good example is that, last Friday, Minister Alghabra and I released a statement on accessible airline travel, announcing that we will be hosting a summit on accessible airline travel and be working with the CTA to beef up regulatory processes around—I was going to say injured mobility devices—damaged mobility devices. I'm personifying them. I apologize.

There's a lot going on, and I'm happy to.... Let's talk about that, because there's a lot going on in that space.

Mrs. Tracy Gray: Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to turn this over to my colleague, Ms. Ferreri.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, again, to the ministers.

I guess I would go back to Minister Gould when we're talking about child care, the labour shortage, and the fact that one in three children is not getting access—these child care deserts we're hearing about repeatedly.

The Conservatives put forward an amendment during the committee stage that was pretty specific in terms of getting data collection to understand the available child care spaces, the numbers on wait-lists and the progress made to reduce wait-lists for families, and also seeking to prepare an annual report on the progress made, because we really need the data to understand this. However, the Liberals voted it down. If you want to talk about creating these spots, why vote an amendment like that down?

Hon. Karina Gould: In the legislation, there's already a provision for an annual report from the minister to Parliament, so again, it's about the coherence of the legislation. Through the Canada-wide early learning and child care agreements that we signed with provinces and territories, they are required to provide this data to the federal government, and that's complementary to the legislation.

Again, it's about coherence and not doubling up.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thanks, Minister.

I guess it's just that, when these parents are out there, they feel like they are screaming into a vacuum. They don't feel heard, because they just don't have access to child care. I think there are a lot—

Hon. Karina Gould: That is why we're doing this, yes—

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I haven't finished.

I think there are so many parents who are so disappointed with what sounded like this amazing program, because it does sound amazing.

It sounds amazing, but there are no spots there and there's no labour force. It's actually having a “Matthew effect”. We have critics and professionals saying this. The Matthew effect is that an increase in public provision ends up advantaging high-income groups rather than low-income groups. We have on record, from the committee, Ms. Leila. Do you know what she is saying? They are absolutely certain that this is hurting the most low-income families.

There is no access, and unless this bill is changed to include a better labour supply and until you include all of these pillars, you are going to have these child care deserts. I know you're going to say that there are 250,000 spots, but that's not the reality on the ground. That's just what you're saying.

Hon. Karina Gould: Actually, Ms. Ferreri, if we didn't have this legislation and we didn't have this plan, they wouldn't exist either. The whole point of moving forward is that the market has failed.

We hear those families. That's precisely why we put in this \$30-billion investment, and it's precisely why we're working with provinces and territories to grow the number of spaces available. I know those families. I meet with them on a regular basis. We want to build those spaces. I hope we can continue to count on Conservatives' support to advance Bill C-35 so that we can deliver on these initiatives for Canadians.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Ferreri.

Now we have Mr. Van Bynen or Mr. Long for five minutes, to conclude.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Sure. I'll go ahead. Thank you.

We've heard a lot about the social enterprise funding that was announced yesterday. We're hearing also now that there's a desperate need for child care spaces. Is there any way the social enterprise funding could apply itself to the child care spaces?

I know there's a huge need, and I know we've been making a ton of progress in my community, but I'm thinking about leveraging some of these other programs and whether it's possible to do that.

Hon. Karina Gould: Absolutely, and look, the social finance fund doesn't pick specific sectors that it's going to invest in, but certainly child care is one that could take advantage of it as a social enterprise that's reinvesting in community and having a social impact. In fact, as you know, the YMCAs and YWCAs are great examples of how they provide child care through a not-for-profit initiative and then reinvest back into providing social services for their communities. Absolutely, there's an opportunity there.

Perhaps I could reiterate the point that the Canada-wide early learning and child care initiative has four pillars. Those pillars are enshrined in Bill C-35, but they're also enshrined in each of the agreements we signed with provinces and territories. Affordability is obviously an important one, but so too is accessibility. Creating those additional spaces is incredibly important, and it's something that provinces and territories are working on right now.

It's not as quick as doing the affordability piece, because you have to do the hard work of determining where and who is going to provide those spaces, but in just a year and a half, 50,000 additional spaces have been created, and we're working towards that additional 200,000 over the next two and a half years, which is something that would not have been done had it not been for this federal initiative.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: To a large extent, there are two dynamics to accessibility. One is the availability of the space, and the second piece is the appropriateness of the space for children with disabilities. I've seen a huge amount of investment in the day care centres in my riding of Newmarket—Aurora.

How is that program rolling out?

Hon. Karina Gould: There are a couple of things.

First, the four pillars are affordability, accessibility, high quality and inclusion.

We've done a couple of things. Inclusion is baked into the Canada-wide early learning and child care initiative. A province like Saskatchewan, for example, is really leading Canada when it comes to building inclusive child care spaces and making sure that inclusion is front and centre in the work it's doing when it comes to expansion.

Also, then, we have the enabling accessibility fund specifically for child care. I've had the opportunity to visit a number of the centres that received funding and created spaces that are sensitive to children with neurodiversity who have physical accessibility needs, and they are really trying to make sure the child care they're providing is available to everyone.

What we hear, particularly from parents of children with accessibility challenges, is that it's really hard for them to find a space that, first of all, will take their child. Then, second of all, it's really hard to find a space that has the required supports to help them thrive. We're trying to change that now, and we're seeing some incredible progress along the way.

Mr. Tony Van Bynen: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Minister, I want to touch on affordability.

I had a constituent come into my office a couple of weeks back who was very concerned about the 41¢ in carbon tax that they have to pay. I sat down with him and asked, "When's the 41¢? It's 2030. It's not 2023." That was number one.

Number two, we did the math on the 14¢. Compared to the savings from the ELCC, the early learning and child care act that was passed across the country, compared to the savings that the dental program will give families across the country and compared to the changes that the Canada child benefit will give families, you're talking literally thousands and thousands of dollars versus \$73 a year. That's what we ended up calculating. The Conservatives don't ever mention the rebate that families get too.

Can you touch on the affordability measures that we've done for Canadians that the Conservatives voted against?

• (1710)

Hon. Karina Gould: It's really quite astonishing, actually. If you look at from 2015 to today, we've actually cut child poverty in half in Canada, and we've cut poverty rates in half, which is one of the single largest jumps in Canadian history in the last seven and a half years. It's quite impressive.

If you look at a low-income child under the age of six, the lowest-income child, that family could get up to \$7,000 a year in Canada child benefit payments, and if their child is enrolled in child care, that could be an additional \$6,000 a year in savings. This is really tangible, and then if you add the dental benefit on to that, that's another \$650 a year. If you add the climate action incentive rebate on there, we're talking about hundreds of dollars more.

It is really something, the amount of support that this government has provided to low-income Canadians. It doesn't mean that there isn't more work to do. It doesn't mean that people aren't still struggling, but in terms of the actual tangible impact on people, the numbers don't lie. It's quite impressive.

What I would say is that in my travels across the country, what I've heard consistently from parents is that the child care investments and the Canada child benefit are life-changing for them. They say it's transformational, and they're so unbelievably grateful for it, because it's making a difference in the life they can provide for their children every single day.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Long.

That concludes this, unless Mr. Morrice has one question. We have a minute.

Is the committee okay with Mr. Morrice having a question?

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): It's two minutes, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Morrice, you have about a minute and a half.

Mr. Mike Morrice: It's a minute and a half. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ministers. I was going to ask about Bill C-22. I don't understand why we've had an entire constituency week to study the amendments from the Senate, and we're waiting for them to come back.

My question for Minister O'Regan is on climate. You were talking about sustainable jobs. Newfoundland and Labrador is a wind energy powerhouse. We could be creating thousands of good-paying wind energy jobs. The UN Secretary-General has called new fossil fuel infrastructure "moral and economic madness".

I'm curious if your position on Bay du Nord has changed in light of the huge potential of wind energy in that province and the ability to be investing in the jobs of tomorrow there.

Hon. Seamus O'Regan: I'm delighted that you asked this question on a day when I have seconded amendments to the Atlantic Accord. We will now be including renewables within the Atlantic Accord.

We have a strong jurisdictional agreement with provincial governments in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador that have provided the foundation for Canada's offshore oil and gas, and we've enjoyed great success on that. However, things have evolved; times have evolved and energy has evolved, and now this same foundation that we have that was negotiated with the provinces will now be used to springboard and unleash incredible investments in green hydrogen and renewables.

I am incredibly excited. You would think that Mr. Morrice and I had planted the question. We did not. We just introduced amendments this morning. I could not be more thrilled. This is an entirely new chapter that is based on the strong foundation, because you're talking about different jurisdictions here.

This is an amazing day for renewables in my province and in Nova Scotia, and I think for Canada. We're very windy.

The Chair: Obviously, you're passionate on that particular file.

Committee members, we still have to conclude. I need to carry the votes. The ministers can go.

I need to do the votes on the five items that we have.

Shall vote 1 under Canadian Accessibility Standards Development Organization, less the amount of \$2,973,010.25 granted in interim supply, carry?

Shall vote 1 under Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, less the amount of \$3,053,290.92 granted in interim supply, carry?

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

We're in the middle of a vote. Could we have some order in the room?

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm not getting the translation.

Could people be quiet? We're not getting translation.

How are we doing now?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot: That's not what I said, Mr. Chair. I have access to interpretation. I said we were voting, but we can't hear because of the noise in the room.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm not getting interpretation.

Can we try again? Is there interpretation?

Shall we begin with the second one? Shall vote 1 under Canadian Centre for Occupational Health—

Mrs. Tracy Gray: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. Can we restart? Because there was so much ruckus going on, I think maybe people didn't know what was going on. Do you mind if we start from the top?

Thank you.

The Chair: No, not at all.

Just so we're clear, is the interpretation fine, Madam Chabot?

[Translation]

Ms. Louise Chabot: Mr. Chair, I've never had an issue with interpretation. The problem is that there was too much talking in the room. There's no problem with the interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: We shall begin again, now that it's quiet.

CANADIAN ACCESSIBILITY STANDARDS DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$11,892,041

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$8,500,000

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$5,234,213

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,273,326,965

Vote 5—Grants and contributions.....\$9,892,285,081

(Votes 1 and 5 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report the main estimates to the House less the amount voted in interim supply?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: We shall report the main estimates to the House at the next opportunity, which I understand is tomorrow morning.

We will now suspend the first hour while we transition to in camera to return to consideration of version 1 of the housing report. We'll suspend for five minutes for people to have a health break.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

● (1715) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1720)

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