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• (1125)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné (Terrebonne, BQ)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting 88 of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g) and the motion adopted by the committee on June 19, 2023, the committee is meeting today for its follow-up study on report 3 entitled “Access to Safe Drinking Water in First Nations Communities — Indigenous Services Canada,” which is found in the 2021 reports 1 to 5 of the Auditor General of Canada.

I would like to welcome the witnesses.

First, we're meeting with the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services.

Thank you for joining us today. I hope that you can stay with us as long as possible. This meeting is important for the committee members.

From the Department of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, we're joined by Georgina Lloyd, assistant deputy minister of Northern Affairs.

From the Department of Indigenous Services, we're meeting with Gina Wilson, deputy minister; Joanne Wilkinson, senior assistant deputy minister, regional operations sector; Nelson Barbosa, director general, community infrastructure; Jonathan Allen, senior director; and Curtis Bergeron, director, strategic water management directorate.

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being here.

Minister Hajdu, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Kwe Kwe. Hello.

I'm so pleased to be with you here on the unsundered, unceded territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin people.

Thank you for the invitation. I have with me, as you have noted, a host of officials with deep expertise in the areas of water and education.

I'm thrilled to be here to discuss the two reports by the Auditor General, one on access to clean drinking water in first nations communities and the other on the socio-economic gaps that indigenous people continue to experience. I appreciate the opportunity to have a practical conversation about both of these critical areas of focus.

To do that, I think we have to go back to where we were in 2015. To put it bluntly, the situation was dire. In November 2015, there were 105 long-term drinking water advisories in over 67 first nations communities. Since we took office, first nations have lifted 143 long-term advisories. That sounds weird, doesn't it? That's more than there were in 2015. In fact, as you know, these numbers are not static. Indeed, this reflects the ongoing work of preventing short-term drinking water advisories from becoming long-term as well. There are no more long-term drinking water advisories in Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Alberta or B.C. Today, 96% of all first nations peoples have access to clean water.

As of today, there are 28 long-term drinking water advisories that affect 26 first nations communities, but thanks to first nations leadership and persistence, including their ongoing collaboration with the department, I'm happy to say that there is a plan and a project team is in place to address them all, which is a far cry from the approach taken by the previous government. Out of the 28 remaining, 17 infrastructure projects are complete, and construction is moving on nine more. These represent over 90% of the remaining projects, which is very good news. We're closer than ever to fixing a situation that should have never been in place to begin with.

[*Translation*]

These figures are important. However, they don't convey the complex obstacles that prevent communities from lifting advisories. Every community faces unique challenges that require unique solutions.

[*English*]

First nations communities need to be in the driver's seat to make the decisions that are best for their needs. For example, two communities in southwestern Ontario, Chippewas of the Thames and Oneida Nation of the Thames, had the option to connect to the provincial water system or to pursue an independent water source. The Oneida Nation of the Thames chose to connect to the existing provincial system because their existing water source wouldn't be able to meet their long-term needs, and construction has started with a target end date of 2025.

The Chippewas of the Thames, which I visited a few months ago, opted for an independent system to ensure that they had full oversight over every component, from treatment to waste-water management. They're currently exploring a potential groundwater source. It will take a full year of monitoring to make sure it can support the community's needs in all seasons.

In both cases, the community determined the best path toward long-term sustainable solutions that work for their needs and goals, and this is how it should be. Time and again, the evidence shows that indigenous-led programs and policies lead to better outcomes.

On education, for generations indigenous peoples have been forced to conform to western colonial metrics of success that don't reflect their own values. The Government of Canada indeed used education as a spearhead to suppress and control, with the ultimate goal of "killing the Indian in the child". It's imperative that we do this hard work to unravel and address the cumulative impacts of these colonial policies.

When we invest in education, we invest in the future. Following the lead of indigenous partners, we're working hard to close gaps in education so that every child has a safe and healthy learning environment, from the school facility all the way to the curriculum. Schools usually end up becoming multi-purpose community facilities for events and cultural gatherings as well. When I visited Kasabonika in October, the celebrations for their connection to the Ontario power grid happened in their school gym.

● (1130)

Since 2016, we've funded projects to build and renovate over 200 schools that serve 35,000 students from coast to coast to coast. Right now, 24 new schools are under construction, with 50 more under renovation. I can tell you that when I visit communities, the new schools and the renovated schools are a great source of pride for community leaders and for families because they are reminders of the investment in youth and the immense potential they represent.

[Translation]

Students learn better when they see themselves in their learning. They're more likely to stay engaged and to continue their education. To meet the specific needs of the first nations students and communities, we're updating the education policies and funding approaches in partnership with the first nations.

[English]

For example, we were the first government in the history of this country to implement funding parity so that kids would get the same resources on and off reserve. We've also signed agreements with communities to put leadership of education systems where it should always have been—with first nations. This work has led to sustainable, predictable education funding for first nations communities, the required resources to develop and maintain culturally appropriate education systems, and a sense of being in control over the education of their students.

These transformative policies have required us to rethink how we measure success. Indigenous Services Canada introduced new metrics this year that reflect calls by first nations to move away from

western expectations of on-time graduation and toward first nations-defined student outcomes.

[Translation]

There's still a long way to go to address the inequalities facing first nations communities.

[English]

After a decade of Conservative cuts and after centuries of paternalism and neglect, we're closer than ever to a future of self-determination for indigenous peoples. I hope that goal is something we can all agree on.

Thank you. I'm happy to take your questions now.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you, Minister Hadju.

Before we start the first round of questions, I want to know whether the committee would mind if I ask a few questions, given that I don't usually sit as chair.

I prepared some questions. I want to know whether you mind if I take the floor when it's my turn, as planned, while obviously abiding by everyone's speaking time.

I see that everyone agrees. Thank you.

Mr. Vidal, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to you and your team, Minister, for being here.

Minister, I'm hoping that, with the late start, we can ask you to maybe hang in there for a bit so we can get in our full rounds of questions. If you're not able to do that, I know that there's some discussion going on, and I'd hope that you would accept an invite to come back and finish this conversation in a very short time frame in the future.

With that out there, I want to talk a bit about education results and, specifically, graduation rates for on-reserve students.

Minister, you appeared at INAN in March. We had a conversation about this. At that time, the department had not yet identified a target for first nation on-reserve graduation rates, even though the 2020-21 and 2021-22 departmental results reports had committed to setting that target by March 2022. That got changed to March 2023. We had a lengthy discussion about that. What was astonishing at the time was that neither you nor the deputy minister was aware of this commitment. In the official record of the meeting, there's an entry that says there's a voice at the back of the room that says, "It's in development now and will be published in the next departmental report."

Has that target been developed and published?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I recall that conversation, MP Vidal.

What I would say, again, is that the target that has been developed has been done with indigenous peoples. I think, reflecting on the conversation at committee last time, what I will tell you is that working with first nations in a very intensive way in this role—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Minister, I'm sorry. I have very little time.

Has the target been developed? It's a simple question.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: The target has been developed, and it's been developed in partnership—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you.

Can you tell me what that target is?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Ms. Wilson, go ahead.

Ms. Gina Wilson (Deputy Minister, Department of Indigenous Services): It's on page 28 of our departmental results report. I can go through the target—

• (1135)

Mr. Gary Vidal: In that target, it says "Maintain or increase results year over year starting with the 2022-23 established baseline". Is that correct?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Yes, it is, along with many other targets.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Yes, but that target is established on that basis. Is that right?

Let me be clear here. For two years, we've been promised this target of setting graduation rates for on-reserve students, and what we've come up with after two years is to "maintain or increase results year over year, starting with the 2022-23 established baseline", which was actually the interim target in the two departmental results reports prior to that.

After two years, what we've been able to accomplish is to actually take the interim targets and determine that they will be the final target. Is that correct?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That target is developed with first nations people.

Let me tell you what José-Tomás Arriola, the clinical supervisor at Kiuna College, said about targets:

...Kiuna College looks beyond numbers and statistics to measure success.... Our students tell us that after studying at Kiuna College they are better able to assert themselves, to ask for what they want and need. Sometimes a student's time at Kiuna College won't necessarily result in a diploma. Some students come to our

institution to access services and figure out what they really want before they move on to other institutions.

The reason I read you that quote is that when individuals are coming oftentimes from so far behind, the measurements that western education systems have imposed are actually undermining the success of the students. That's why the target creation with first nations is so important, because that's exactly how we got here: a colonial system imposing western ideology on indigenous peoples, sometimes in ways that were harmful and oftentimes in ways that were extremely underfunded, including under the previous government, actually did more damage than good, and so—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Minister, I'm sorry to interrupt—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —I'm very proud of the work the department has done to listen to first nations people on how to do this properly, respectfully and in a way that lifts people up.

Mr. Gary Vidal: We're talking about graduation rates, not college entrance and whatever. We're talking about graduation rates.

The reality is that graduation rates, under this department, have declined from 41% in 2017-18 to 34% in 2021-22, and the target that has been set going forward is 26%. Then the measure of success is going to be that we maintain 26%, or maybe we'd get to 26.2% or something, because that would be an increase. That's going to be the measure of success. We've set no targets in terms of where we go with this measurement. It's a critical measurement in erasing the socio-economic gaps for first nations.

I'm astounded that after two years we haven't been able to set a target. I get the decline. The difference is because we've switched to the cohort method. I understand that. We weren't measuring that method properly in the past, so do we have the history? Your report talks about needing baseline data to set the target. What is the history? You're not reporting that history in your departmental results report. Do we know, based on the new cohort methodology, whether 26% is higher or lower than it was in prior years?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: What I would say is that I would go back to the statements of first nations people, because again, and with due respect, this government believes that we don't do things to first nations, as has been done through many iterations of the federal government, but rather we do things with first nations, and we do things with first nations in a spirit of respect.

I will say that StatsCan is showing success, actually, in this model, so in 2016—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Minister, I'm sorry. I'm not going to accept the StatsCan argument, because the StatsCan argument isn't measuring on-reserve students. Your own departmental results—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Then maybe you will accept, MP Vidal, the statement of Denis Gros-Louis, the director general of the First Nations Education Council, who said:

It's a source of pride, and it leads young people to grow alongside their cousins from other first nations. All the culturally appropriate expertise we've developed over time has made it possible for us to provide that environment. We're one of the only CEGEPs that can claim they have a graduation rate of around 92%. That's really good when you consider where our young people come from.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you, Minister Hajdu.

[English]

Mr. Gary Vidal: However, in fairness, your departmental results show a declining result.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Mr. Vidal, it's Ms. Bradford's turn.

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

[English]

Ms. Valerie Bradford (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister Hajdu, for being here and bringing your cast of thousands. We really appreciate it. We've been anticipating your testimony.

I'm going to direct my questions to the area of water advisories. In your opening remarks, you mentioned that the challenges each community faces are unique. Can you give us a few more examples? You talked about how in Thames they came up with two different solutions. Are there any more examples of some of the different challenges the different communities deal with?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will turn to officials in one minute, but it's an excellent question. I think it reflects the different realities across the country from a geography perspective, a capacity perspective, a size perspective and just the proximity—or not—to closer communities.

Maybe I can turn to officials to speak on a more granular level about some of those challenges.

• (1140)

Mr. Nelson Barbosa (Director General, Community Infrastructure, Department of Indigenous Services): Thank you for the question, and thank you for the invite to the committee again.

I think there are three foundational factors that lead to conditions where there may be unsafe drinking water.

The first is largely about infrastructure and infrastructure investments. That includes the establishment of clean drinking water systems and waste-water systems and the distribution systems that take clean water to taps and into schools and health centres. That is a huge part of the investments that have been made since 2015 and that continue to be made to this day.

The second point that probably requires illumination is around operators and the people who make systems work. First nations hire

these operators to manage their services, and there are many first nations that have excellent service providers. Human capacity and capacity developments have been a concerted area that was pointed to as part of the OAG's report where additional investment was required, and we have seen those investments since 2015.

The third is about relationships. I believe the minister talked about the importance of relationships in the education context, and that would extend to water and to many other aspects. I think the joint stewardship of water among provinces, territories, first nations and municipalities is critical: protecting source water and ensuring that sources of water are clean for generations to come. The establishment of agreements between first nations and municipalities is another area where we're seeing success and it is leading to the historic reduction of long-term drinking advisories in first nations in this country.

Thank you.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you very much for that fulsome reply.

Minister, do you have confidence that the progress that has been made, which has been substantial, is going to be maintained? What else can we do to make sure that we never go back to the situation we had before 2015?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, MP Bradford, for that question.

I would say, yes, the progress needs to be maintained. I would say that I have confidence, with a government that understands the importance of equity for first nations community functioning, in maintaining that progress. I would say that the work we're doing on co-development of first nations drinking water legislation to replace the repealed Harper-era legislation will also be a piece of the puzzle to maintain the ingredients that are necessary to support first nations in continued access to clean water.

I would say that we need to work closely with provinces, territories and municipalities to protect the source water, as Mr. Barbosa pointed out. Many times, the Government of Canada is in the very difficult position of replacing access to clean source water because of the poisoning of local water in communities. I think about Tataskweyak, for example, whose local source water has been poisoned, some say irrevocably. The work to replace Tataskweyak's access to source water is under way right now. It's the building of a water pipe 40 kilometres long to a non-contaminated freshwater source.

Those kinds of things have devastation, by the way, not just on the physical health of communities but on the emotional health. When I was in Tataskweyak, the grief that people talked about in witnessing the death of that lake and the death of the many animals that often still drink at that lake, and the lack of access for their children to be able to play in water that had been in their territory from time immemorial, was a deep and profound grief that I bore witness to, and that is not an unusual story.

Ms. Valerie Bradford: Thank you for that.

It is important to hear just how much the outcomes change when the programs and policies are based on self-determination. What's the scale of first nations control right now? Would it be possible for the government to transfer oversight of water systems to first nations entirely?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: In most cases, I would say that first nations are in control of their water systems, with various degrees of support and external resources to provide that support. In some communities that are very small, one of the challenges is having water operators who can provide the ongoing technical expertise to ensure the water is clean and to keep the plant running. In those cases, first nations have contracts with external water support.

I think one of the best success stories is the Atlantic water authority. Maybe I can leave that for Nelson to talk a bit about. It's such an amazing story of collective work to protect water.

• (1145)

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: Thank you for the question.

First, first nations are the owners and operators of their water systems. The role of Indigenous Services Canada is to support that ownership and the control of first nations over their systems, whether it be through capital, operator supports or partnerships.

In terms of transfer, one—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Please keep it short, Mr. Barbosa. The MP's time is already up.

[*English*]

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: Transfer is a core component. We would like to talk about the AFNWA, the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority, and their assumption of the care and control of water for thousands. There will be 4,500 homes managed by the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority in Atlantic Canada in building the first municipal model in this country controlled by first nations. That was done by the design and by the efforts of first nations people in Atlantic Canada.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you.

I'll now use my six minutes to ask questions.

Minister Hajdu, thank you again for being here.

I'll briefly review the background of the audits carried out by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, or OAG. This concerns four separate reports released over the past five years.

In spring 2018, the OAG conducted a performance audit for Indigenous Services Canada. In its message regarding the audit, the OAG called the lack of progress on the indigenous file an “incomprehensible failure.” Those were the OAG's words. That was in 2018, before you took over as minister in 2021.

In February 2021, the OAG released an audit report on access to safe drinking water. That's what we're talking about today.

In 2015, the federal government promised to resolve this long-standing issue. As of today, the issue still hasn't been resolved.

In May 2021, the OAG's report 11 on health resources for indigenous communities was tabled in the House of Commons. The OAG found that Indigenous Services Canada did not obtain personal protective equipment in accordance with its procurement strategy. This is yet another failure.

In 2022, the OAG released report 8 on emergency management in first nations communities. Indigenous Services Canada didn't give these communities the support needed to manage emergencies. The department invested three and a half times more in response and recovery than in emergency prevention and mitigation. That was in 2022. You were the minister at that time.

I'll give another example.

The OAG found that only four out of seven regional offices developed a regional emergency management plan.

Minister Hajdu, is the situation for indigenous people in Canada still a colossal failure, or can you tell everyone tuning in today that the situation has significantly improved since you became minister?

[*English*]

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): The bell is ringing for us to vote. We have 28 minutes. As usual, I'll ask for unanimous consent to continue with the questions. We'll then take 10 minutes to vote.

Does the committee agree?

Good.

Minister Hajdu, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much for the question.

I think your list of Auditor General's reports that speak to the ongoing challenge of indigenous people in a systemically oppressive colonizing system is a fair question. What I would say is that, under our federal government, we have put reconciliation at the core under the federal Liberal government.

In 2015, I was very proud to campaign for a Prime Minister who made a commitment to lift all boil water advisories, which was an ambitious commitment but actually set a goal for this country, and to actually reach toward that goal with tangible investments of money, expertise and a new way of doing work with first nations—not imposing solutions on first nations, but working with first nations on solutions. First nations, for many generations, have known that if they could have control, they could do much better.

What I would say is that there has been an increase in indigenous spending by 168% since 2015. Is it enough to close the gap? I fundamentally think that it is not. We know what the gap is in housing and in infrastructure, for example, and in many other spaces, but what I can say is that the partnership with first nations has improved dramatically since 2015. First nations people now feel that they are at the table, that they are in the space where they are making decisions for their communities and where they are working with a federal government that wants to be a willing partner, a fair partner and a supportive partner. That's a sea change since 2015.

• (1150)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you.

As of March 3, 2023, there were still 32 long-term drinking water advisories. The deadline for implementing long-term solutions to prevent further drinking water issues in the reserves is 2026.

Do you think that you'll reach your goal of providing access to drinking water, a fundamental right, on every reserve in Canada by 2026?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: What I can say is that the communities that still remain with long-term drinking water advisories all have either construction on the go or projects that are complete, and a very few are working on what is an appropriate solution for them. What I can also say is that the fiscal commitment is there to complete all that work.

The speed at which we work is intertwined with self-determination. The federal government's job is to be there with the tools and with the fiscal equity that makes these projects viable and gives people the supports they need to be able to sustain clean water in their community, whether it's equity for operations, whether it's the importance of upgrading systems before they become obsolete and having the fiscal capacity to do that, or whether it's supporting communities with the tools they need to feel comfortable to lift those long-term drinking water advisories, which sometimes communities don't feel comfortable with immediately.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you, Minister Hajdu.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: We are there with those tools, and that commitment is a long-term commitment.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): You make it sound like the department is doing everything possible to resolve this very serious issue.

Are you saying that indigenous people are to blame for the lack of drinking water on their reserves?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: No. I said nothing of the sort. In fact, what I have said is that what has been a failure of this government—the Canadian government is what I mean—is ongoing imposition of colonial approaches to community functioning. This country was formed....

Listen, in my opening statement—

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): You're the minister.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —I acknowledged the unceded and surrendered territory of the Algonquin people. This means that land was taken from indigenous people. Children were taken from indigenous people. Power was taken from indigenous people, and resources were taken from indigenous people.

This Liberal government understands that the way to reconciliation is actually ensuring that the tools of self-determination and equity are in place, and I'm really proud of that work, Madam Chair. I certainly would never ever imply that indigenous people are the cause of their own suffering. In fact, it's a colonial system that has caused that suffering, and I think all members of Parliament should know by now the history of this country.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais (Edmonton Griesbach, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I find myself often disappointed in this space, so I'll share not my words but the questions of the treaty chiefs of Alberta, who are often my teachers in this work. They supplied me with good questions here that I hope you can address on their behalf. My hope would be that you speak directly to the concerns they have.

You mentioned the framework, the tools and the funding required to end this crisis. First nations also need this to be done. They want to be partners in much of this work but find themselves not in a position where they're feeling heard. You mentioned that they feel heard. That's not what I hear. It's certainly not what they say.

For those who are witnessing this right now, I want to thank the treaty chiefs of Alberta for their leadership in this space and for providing me with very difficult questions that I hope you can answer. I know that you're not going to be here for very long today, so if I can't get through the total list of questions they've provided, I'll submit them to your office, and I hope you can reply.

This is the first one. Can you commit to the pending water legislation that will not leave first nations with the problems that successive governments' policy and lack of adequate funding created? Where is the funding attached to this initiative, particularly in a time of austerity?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: First of all, I want to thank the Treaty 8 chiefs myself. I have met with them a number of times on water and on many other issues. In fact, I would agree that the Treaty 8 chiefs have often given me the history lessons that I need to understand not just Treaty 8 issues and historical experiences, but also, certainly, their experiences as communities that have been deeply affected by colonization. I acknowledge the leadership of Treaty 8.

What I would say is that the first nations water legislation has been a process of collaboration, not just with Treaty 8 but certainly with first nations through the AFN, a variety of different first nations deeply affected by boil water advisories who are the litigant group in this case, and many experts and advisers from first nations leadership roles, who have given us a sense of where the legislation should go.

I look forward to being able to table that in this House and to hearing the feedback from first nations. I know that the NDP, the Conservative members and the Liberal members will have thoughtful deliberations on that legislation with the intent of making sure that it's strong and reaches its goal of protecting water for first nations.

• (1155)

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: What about the austerity portion that they are concerned about?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, listen, this government has invested billions and billions of dollars—in fact, at latest count, somewhere in the range of \$8 billion and counting—not just on the infrastructure, as I said, but on the ongoing addressing of long-standing operation deficits, supports for training and new models like the Atlantic water authority to ensure we get to this goal.

What I would say through you to the Treaty 8 chiefs is that it is a commitment of this Liberal government that we will be there with the resources needed, with the expertise that communities may want to tap into and with the support for models that first nations people themselves determine are going to be the most useful in protecting the water in their communities.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Do you commit to meeting with all treaty chiefs of Treaty 8 and, in addition, all tribal treaty chiefs in Alberta? In addition, do you commit to at least a minimum engagement that provides direct consultation to first nations governments and their citizens by way of ensuring they are clear about the legislative priorities you have while also ensuring their words and their advice are actually put into the legislation?

The biggest concern they have here, largely, is in relation to the term you use, which is “co-development”. They earnestly believe that it's not co-development. That's a concern, Minister. You can't say that you've co-developed these things when your partner is not saying the same thing. It's like going to a dance party and saying, “I'm dancing with this person”, and there is no one dancing. Whom are you co-developing this with?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you for that. You're right: The word “co-development” is a challenging space because this has never been tried before. Never in the history of this country has a law been developed with indigenous peoples, and I would imagine that there will be lots of different perspectives on the depth of the engagement, on the true nature of co-development and on whether this approach is co-development.

I am certain that there will be feedback on how better to do the creation of law in this country with indigenous peoples. I know that the UN declaration act this Liberal government passed will provide many useful tools for our first nations people, indigenous people, into the future in having a much more active role in creating law, and I look forward to the way Parliament will be thoughtful about proposing amendments. What happens when amendments are proposed by Conservatives, for example, that may weaken the legislation or strengthen it? How will the NDP interact with first nations partners as they consider which amendments to propose? How will the NDP do their own consultation to make sure that it's not...? What happens if there's a conflict between Treaty 8 and Treaty 6? So—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: You're the minister and you're the government here, and you can ask these—

Hon. Patty Hajdu: —I look forward to the—

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Minister, this is my time. You can ask the parties these questions, and you can ask those questions and you can stand here today. I'm not going to berate you, nor will I participate in any kind of process that would undermine the good work of first nations.

I think the question is simple.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Good question, Mr. Desjarlais.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: They only want to know if you're going to work directly with them.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: My response is that I have worked very closely with first nations through this process, and I will continue to endeavour to consult with indigenous leaders who wish to be part of this process.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you.

Mr. Vidal, you now have five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Chair.

I want to follow up on the conversation, but I'm going to stick to graduates for a bit, because I have a couple of questions that I didn't get to, Minister.

In the briefing document that your department prepared for you when you appeared at INAN back in March, they included some statistics on education attainment of first nations secondary school diploma equivalency. In your opening comments, you talked about those statistics and how the improvements were happening.

In the meeting then, I challenged you—and we did a bit here earlier today—that the data from your own departmental results don't line up with those statistics. In fact, the data in your own departmental results reports indicate that graduation rates for on-reserve students have declined from 41% to 34.2%.

I'm curious. Did you ever question your officials on the discrepancy between those two sets of numbers after we had the conversation back in March?

• (1200)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I will turn to the deputy to speak to that—

Mr. Gary Vidal: No. I asked if you questioned the officials on the discrepancy in the numbers that were provided to you.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm very fortunate to work very closely with all of the officials at this table, so of course we have extensive conversations about education, about water, about infrastructure and about committee appearances, so—

Mr. Gary Vidal: My question was simply whether you ever questioned them about the discrepancy in those numbers. I don't think your officials.... I am asking you if you did.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Yes, of course, and I would like to turn to the deputy to give you some responses on that.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Okay. Be brief, please.

Ms. Gina Wilson: Briefly, any increase in student graduation is positive, I would say.

In November 2022, we did advise this committee that we were developing a new graduation rate methodology. We actually did that in consultation with first nations organizations, because they told us very clearly that they did not want us to develop unilaterally established targets, so—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Deputy Minister, just for clarity, that wasn't my question.

I just want to be clear. My question was about the difference in the speaking notes that were provided for the minister and what the actual departmental results spoke of, and there were clearly some discrepancies there. To me, the fact is that we have these Statistics Canada numbers that are being put before the minister and that display progress on something, but within the departmental results we're not seeing that same progress. That was the frustrating component and that's why I am drilling into this. The frustrating part for me is that, at best, that displays some level of incompetence—and I hate to say that—but at worst, it displays an attempt to be decep-

tive. We're actually not even talking in public about our own departmental results reports. That's the frustrating part for me.

This is a department that, under this core responsibility area—which I know you're changing to something new next year—had a \$10-billion budget in 2022-23 and utilized 300 additional FTEs over what was planned, and overall the department met 17% of the targets they set for themselves in that fiscal year. That's the frustration.

I would suggest, Minister, that for four years now I've heard from the Auditor General, from the Parliamentary Budget Officer, from first nations witnesses at both this committee and INAN, and from people on the ground—as my colleague MP Desjarlais just talked about—who are exhausted by some of the inadequacies and frustrations with the department.

Quite frankly, the elephant in the room and the roadblock to actually achieving outcomes is some of the bureaucracy that happens in the department when we're focused on changing goals and moving targets so that accountability never falls in the laps of the people in the room, so to speak. The lives of first nations, Inuit and Métis people should not be a make-work project for this department, and they should not be treated as such.

There may be some success in the context of saving jobs and whatnot, but that's being done at the cost of indigenous people across our country. Frankly, it's my job, Minister, to hold you accountable, and it's your job to hold them accountable. I am asking how you are doing that. How are you holding them accountable for some of these things I'm talking about?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I hold the officials accountable every single day and I do it through honest, open communication and collaboration and, quite frankly, an insistence that we work at the behest of first nations with first nations using a first nations-determined approach.

I would say that the department, led by this incredible indigenous woman, who has been not only a civil servant but a proud member of Kitigan Zibi, and who has a really good ground-level understanding of what happens in community and what happens in government, gives me comfort. Actually, MP Vidal, we now have, at CIRNAC and Indigenous Services Canada, indigenous women who have lived the reality in community and who have also lived the reality as long-time civil servants, who give me what I would say is exceptional advice.

• (1205)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Are you saying that meeting 17% of targets is exceptional service?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you, Minister Hajdu.

Mr. Vidal, your time is up.

There are just 11 and a half minutes left before the vote.

Ms. Khalid, you can speak for the amount of time needed. We'll then let the MPs go and vote.

Ms. Khalid, you have the floor.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you, Minister and officials, for coming in today.

I'll continue a little bit with what I hope MP Vidal was trying to say.

Minister, over 150 years later we are now prioritizing the work you have been doing so diligently. There have been 143 long-term advisories lifted; there has been significant work on education in indigenous and first nation communities, and there is that nation-to-nation community building that is happening.

Minister, how do you ensure the longevity and permanence of the work you are doing, regardless of which government is in power, to make sure that all of this is not at the whim of whichever government is going to prioritize it or not?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: That's such a great question.

I think there are a couple of different elements of longevity. One is legislation that exists and that sets the Government of Canada on a path of commitment to first nations and, in the area of equity, as I mentioned, equal funding for services for first nations and services that exist in non-indigenous communities and municipalities often-times adjacent to that community.

The second thing, I would say, is the legal tools we provided through things like the UN declaration act, which will ensure that indigenous peoples have the legal tools they need not just to continue that progress, but—and I think this is sad—to fight for the rights our government has established in law, with future governments that maybe don't understand or don't care about the rights of indigenous peoples.

There is a lot of...I would just call it racism and systemic discrimination, both inside of government and outside of government. MPs come to this table, as you know, with wildly different experiences and beliefs, and the law that our government has passed to provide that framework will help to prevent, I would say, ongoing systemic oppression through, for example, a reduction of funding levels or through the removal of first nations care and control over many aspects of everyday functioning. That would be a huge step backwards, to be honest.

What I would expect, actually, after eight years of being involved... Let's not forget that, indeed, Stephen Harper refused to meet with first nations leaders on a regular basis. Our Prime Minister, as you know, commits to meeting with all of the distinctions-based groups at the national level and at the regional level very frequently. At the national level, it's at least once a year. There are formalized mechanisms of meeting with indigenous peoples and leaders across this country. Those exist because of the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party.

Quite frankly, I think the expectation has been raised, and I hope that any party that wins government in the future will understand the importance of those relationships—

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Minister Hajdu, I have to cut you off here. I must keep my promise and let the MPs go.

I let you speak for two extra minutes. The MPs must now go and vote if they want to.

Minister Hajdu, do you want to join us after the vote? I'm asking because this meeting is very important for everyone.

[*English*]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: I'm not able to come back after the vote, but I will obviously be here at your invitation in the future. I appreciate the opportunity.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): That's too bad, but we understand.

Thank you, Minister Hajdu.

I'll now suspend the meeting.

• (1205)

(Pause)

• (1230)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): We'll now continue the meeting.

Before giving the floor to Ms. Khalid, I'd like to ask the clerk a question.

Given all the disruptions today, could we extend the meeting by a few minutes?

Would you be willing to stay at least another fifteen minutes or so, Mr. Taquet?

Does everyone agree that the committee should continue the meeting for a bit longer?

Do the witnesses agree?

[*English*]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Does that mean we're staying until 1:15? I have a hard stop at one o'clock.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Do the other committee members agree that we should sit until 1:15 p.m.?

Otherwise, we'll have only 28 minutes left. I'm worried that we won't have enough time for the people who came here. I suggest that we sit until 1:15 p.m.

[*English*]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: If members are okay with that, I'll make time.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you, Ms. Khalid. I appreciate it.

You have the floor for three minutes.

[English]

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I will ask you, as obviously the minister is now gone. I was curious about the Atlantic water authority structure and its practical role in supporting first nations communities with water system monitoring. Can you help us understand how that works?

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: Thank you for the question.

The Atlantic First Nations Water Authority has been designed and controlled by first nations over the last 10 years, and its function is largely akin to how municipalities run services. I was talking earlier about the need for first nations to manage and control their capital and their operations. The Atlantic First Nations Water Authority will now do that for up to 17 first nations in Atlantic Canada in all of the Atlantic provinces.

That comes with a significant cost. Indigenous Services Canada is supporting the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority to the tune of \$257 million over 10 years. It comes with considerable resources, but it also means that first nations organizations will manage and support first nations in their own affairs. That's a significant shift, and it's part of the departmental legislation that created Indigenous Services Canada, which is largely to support the transfer of programs and services to rights holders and to those organizations.

We're proud to work with the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority and recognize that they're the first organization to be in this space. We hope that many other first nations aggregates and institutions will follow that model, not only in the water space but also in other core areas that have been discussed today, and in others like housing and general infrastructure.

• (1235)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: If I may ask, how do you measure the success of such an authority? How do we know they're actually fulfilling the mandates that the communities and government want them to?

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: That's a great question.

Mandates come from first nations leadership. Certainly, the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority, as an indigenous institution, is accountable to its constituents or the people it's providing services to. Indigenous Services Canada has a funding relationship with the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority that is based on a series of deliverables, but the deliverables, I think, require consideration as the deliverables and improved services that Atlantic first nations people will experience through an institution that's managed by a first nations entity.

Not only that relationship with it, in which we will remain a partner with Atlantic First Nations Water Authority, but the development of that institution and the relationship and accountability it has for leadership and the citizens it provides services to are critical. That includes clean drinking water, waste water, fire flow and other components that were illuminated by the Auditor General. That's a tremendous success in Atlantic Canada.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you, Ms. Khalid.

There's another call for a vote in the House.

If everyone agrees, we'll carry on as we did earlier, while the bell rings for 30 minutes.

This is quite a meeting for a chair. It's really something special.

It's my turn to speak for two and a half minutes.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us.

My questions concern the follow-up to our meeting on June 14, 2022.

Ms. Wilson, my questions are mainly for you. Your predecessor, Ms. Fox, was at that meeting.

I asked her what deadlines had been set since 2021—it was 2022—to implement items such as infrastructure plans to address water-related infrastructure issues.

Ms. Fox responded that she would look into the situation and provide the requested figures. She did this through the department and the clerk of the committee. However, in her response, which I have here, she notes that the first stage of engagement activities to close the infrastructure gap will be completed in 2023.

It's the end of 2023. How far along are you in terms of completing the first stage of engagement activities to close the infrastructure gap?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We haven't completely closed the gap, but we have a plan.

Mr. Barbosa can elaborate on this.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Could you provide this plan? Have you already sent it to the committee members?

Last year, we were told that the first stage would be completed by 2023. However, you're saying that it won't be finished by 2023.

When will the first stage be completed, Ms. Wilson?

When will the infrastructure or investment gaps be closed?

[English]

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: Thank you for the question.

First, I had the pleasure of attending that meeting as well, with Deputy Fox. In the period between that discussion and today, we have engaged first nations from coast to coast to coast on essentially the question about what are some of the paramount infrastructure needs that would be seen in a given community. That was extended to colleagues and to Crown-Indigenous Relations, where they engaged the ITK and MNC on similar questions.

We're proud to announce that we had a tremendously high response from first nations: 72% of first nations came forward to identify their needs in a robust way. We're in the period of consolidating that data. Some of the core findings include the need for continued funding in core areas like community infrastructure, water, which we're discussing today, and the continued need for planning. We're in the process of putting a capstone on that report.

I want to thank first nations for their ongoing participation. Of course, the data collection on infrastructure needs never ends, but we have a good milestone in terms of the overall quantum of need and the prioritization of first nations relative to their infrastructure priorities.

• (1240)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you, Ms. Wilson and Mr. Barbosa.

I'll give the floor to Mr. Dalton, and then Mr. Desjarlais can speak.

If everyone agrees, we'll proceed.

Mr. Dalton, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you for joining us here today.

I have some simple questions for whoever is responsible for education or is the spokesperson for education.

I don't mean to be patronizing as I ask this, but what skills are needed or what education would be needed to be a doctor or a nurse? What are some of the basic skills in the education field?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Do you mean what skills are required among Canadians?

Mr. Marc Dalton: Yes. What skills and what type of education would you need to become a doctor?

Ms. Gina Wilson: You'd need to go to medical school and graduate from medical school.

Mr. Marc Dalton: What subject skills would you need to excel in?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Science, chemistry, biology...

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you. That's correct.

I was a teacher for many years. I know it depends on the type of teacher, but what would be some basic skills you would need to be a teacher?

Ms. Gina Wilson: You would need to be able to adapt to children and be able to work in a school setting. You'd need a Bachelor of Education, perhaps.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you. Those would be some of the things: the ability to read, to write, to communicate. In the trades, if someone wanted to become a heavy-equipment operator or a welder, obviously, they would need training in the vocational skills.

The point of the matter I'm trying to get to is that—I found it a bit offensive with the minister, and I wish she were here—she kept talking about colonial metrics. That's a bit patronizing. I'm indigenous. I'm Métis. Indigenous people want good-paying jobs. They need real skills and education. They don't need fluff. They don't want participation ribbons. They want those skills. I'm a little tired of hearing from the Liberal benches and from others about the other metrics. We want to participate, to be involved in society and to benefit our families, our first nations, our communities and our country. That is really important.

It's very concerning when we hear that the on-reserve graduation rates are decreasing. It's adopting this and it's going lower. It's like we're watering it down. This is not helpful for first nations and for Métis people. I'm appalled by the “woke” speaking from the minister before us. It is not getting boiled down to opportunities.

My aunts and uncles attended residential schools. My father was sent to another residential school so that he wouldn't have to attend the same residential school, but one thing he emphasized was for us, as a family and as children, to get a good education. I have one sister who is a judge, one who is a lawyer and another who is a nurse. Emphasizing education is what first nations and Métis people need, and not just hearing “This is for the world, and this is for the indigenous people.” I'm sorry. We want to succeed and to do well in this society.

I'm just venting a bit—nothing personal towards you—about some of these games that are not helpful to lift first nations out of poverty, on the reserves or anywhere. We want to see that development.

I was an MLA in British Columbia until 2017. At that time, we found that there wasn't funding on the reserves. It was challenging for many of the first nations to get some of the support. I haven't really followed closely, and maybe there's some good news. Has there been some real development—particularly in B.C., and I guess across Canada—with regard to the standards on reserves as opposed to the provincial standards? Has there been a real improvement in investment and in graduation rates on reserves? I actually have the answers already.

• (1245)

[Translation]

Ms. Gina Wilson: Madam Chair, could I have 30 or 45 seconds to respond?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): You have exactly 40 seconds.

[English]

Ms. Gina Wilson: I want to acknowledge some of the back-and-forth we've had on education targets, because it's been a long and very unsatisfactory discussion. I realize that. We've been having it since 2018, when it comes to education targets. It's really unfortunate.

While calls for targets have been occurring at this committee, much has been changing at the programmatic level with standards, and there have been all types of changes in various programs. There has been a co-developing transformation in education with a commitment to developing new methodology within that timeline as well.

Essentially, because first nations criticized our methodology and the OAG criticized our methodology, we actually didn't want to spend a lot of time trying to reinvest in that methodology. We didn't want to rely on it.

We hope—

Mr. Marc Dalton: I'm sorry. I don't—

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Mr. Dalton, your time is up. I can give you five more seconds.

[English]

Ms. Gina Wilson: We really hope to reset this discussion today, if we can, by being allowed to explain the new methodology that we developed with first nations.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

[English]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thanks, Madam Chair.

I will continue with questions that first nations have supplied me with. These are important questions they expect answers to.

First nations are deeply concerned—as are people everywhere—about sustainable and long-term access to water. Water on reserve links to those who are off reserve. I recall the minister saying that in her testimony.

How is Canada ensuring that first nations jurisdictions under treaty are not further undermined through federal water legislation?

Ms. Gina Wilson: That's a very good question. I will ask Nelson to respond to that.

Certainly, source water issues and jurisdiction have come up very frequently as part of this engagement.

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: Thank you for the question.

I think the adherence to rights among first nations—nations being stewards over their own affairs—was a core component of the previous iteration of the legislation, which was the consultation draft shared with many first nations, including Alberta first nations. That consultation draft spoke about many things. I would probably

highlight that the first few paragraphs of that draft spoke about rights and first nations controlling the regulatory, water and legal affairs in their communities. We're hopeful that, should we have the opportunity to bring legislation into the House, those rights would be underscored and we would be able to legislate those rights, in response to questions from chiefs in Alberta.

I appreciate the question. Please thank them for us.

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: I have another question.

The costs associated with the needs of treaty peoples for infrastructure and water are not settled. How can you give over control of a scenario where figures are not fully confirmed or understood?

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: That's an excellent question. I appreciate it.

As I mentioned, understanding the infrastructure gap begins with a conversation. We had that conversation last summer, and 72% of first nations participated in the exercise. In no way is that exercise complete.

In essence, it follows the spirit or tenet of Indigenous Services Canada, which is to continually work with first nations partners, based on their self-prioritized needs. Our first foray into understanding the quantum and delta of what infrastructure is required in first nations has to begin with that conversation. In no way does it end with that conversation. I think we're committed to working with first nations based on the resources available to the department, in order to build the best infrastructure at the best place and in the best time.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you.

Mr. Desjarlais, your time is up.

Ms. Shanahan now has five minutes.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan (Châteauguay—Lacolle, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to give Ms. Wilson some time to explain the new methodology. I was prepared to share my time with Mr. Desjarlais as well, but he isn't here. We'll continue.

Ms. Wilson, the floor is yours.

• (1250)

Ms. Gina Wilson: Thank you.

[English]

Jonathan, can you speak about that?

Mr. Jonathan Allen (Senior Director, Department of Indigenous Services): Thank you.

In our graduation rate methodology, the fundamental change from the one used in previous departmental reports is this: We now follow a cohort of students who enter grade 10 in a given year and provide two sets of data. One is for students who graduate on time—that is, within three years of entering grade 10. We also now, for the first time in the departmental report just published, give an extended time: within five years of entering grade 10. Statistically, 44% of students in that cohort graduated with a year or two of additional studies.

That's very critical, because it reflects what first nations partners have told us about the way first nations students learn. Some need to care for young families, some need to work and some have health, family or community issues. Those two extra years were suppressed. They had not been indicated in any previous ISC reporting, because our previous methodology—which was rightly criticized by partners and the OAG—only measured students who entered and left grade 12, and it was not representative of the full story. That's what we listened to, and that's what we changed and co-developed with partners. This grad rate applies to all first nations. That's what is reported.

We also have regional education agreements that are fundamentally driven by what first nations partners define as their outcomes, needs, goals and objectives. Through a performance measurement framework, they also define the activities they know will close the gaps, and the costing for those activities. That's what a regional education agreement is. The example referred to today, the First Nations Education Council in Quebec, is the most recent public example of this at that scale, with 22 first nations in Quebec. They're working to develop their own first nations-defined metrics, indicators and results, in order to talk about graduation rate in their way. That can complement and inform what the department reports on, as an aggregate.

Also referred to today is not having “one size fits all”. We had to be delicate and listen to first nations expressing concerns about having a set target to work towards. The improvement year over year is based on the new baseline of 26% on-time graduation and 44% extended-time graduation in that same cohort. That's what we'll see going forward. It mirrors the pan-Canadian graduation rate, which is published by Statistics Canada. It also mirrors more closely what provinces do. It will give on-reserve and off-reserve context for comparison or contrasting, based on what our partners see as their vision.

In summary, there's a new methodology: on-time graduation within three years of entering grade 10, which is 26%—newly published this year for students in this cohort—and an extended-time graduation, which shows a 44% graduation rate.

Thank you.

Mrs. Brenda Shanahan: Thank you very much for that thorough answer. I think it helps us. Even though education is normally not the purview of the federal government, it is in this instance, of course, with Indigenous Affairs.

I've had the experience of working, from time to time, with the Kahnawake Survival School in the riding next door to me. It's very impressive. I have seen the results: what the students have gone on to do and how they contribute in a very meaningful way to our

community as a whole. Actually, I'd like to see that.... You know, we say we can always learn lessons from the way different communities do things. I think this is something we could also learn in our more conventional, provincial school systems.

I'll go back to water filtration and water advisories. Water filtration is only a small part of providing clean water. Perhaps, Deputy Wilson, you can talk to us about water protection. What kind of work is Indigenous Services doing to support communities with waste-water and source-water needs?

Ms. Gina Wilson: We would be happy to talk to you about that, for sure.

Go ahead, Curtis.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): You have only 10 seconds left.

[English]

Mr. Curtis Bergeron (Director, Strategic Water Management Directorate, Department of Indigenous Services): I can be very quick.

It starts with the source water. Then—you're right—it goes through the water treatment plant. The types of services provided in that plant vary greatly by different types of treatment. Depending on the quality of water, it goes through different areas within that plant, and then into a distribution system—which also has to be adequate—and into homes. The water coming out of those taps needs to be clean and safe for drinking.

• (1255)

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Thank you.

Before starting our last round of questions, I want to let you know that each party has one minute of speaking time left. We'll have plenty of time to vote. If everyone agrees, there will be one minute of speaking time.

Mr. Vidal, you have the floor for one minute.

[English]

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Chair. I'll be very quick.

Mr. Allen, I appreciated your thorough explanation of the switch to the cohort method and what predicated that. It's all very clear information that's in your departmental results reports.

I'm going to come back to a question I asked the minister. Maybe you can answer it for me. I totally understand the history. I understand how we got here. I may be a little bit frustrated with how long it took, but that's fair.

The 2021 and the 2022 departmental results reports talk about the baseline data being developed for this new methodology. In the 2023 report, all we see is the target going forward. Do you have the numbers on where that was historically? The results reports seem to indicate that you were measuring that data for the last couple of years. I'd just like to know where we were in the prior years relative to where we set the target, if that makes sense.

Mr. Jonathan Allen: Essentially, it took three years to develop the new methodology to produce the new baseline of that 26% and 44% for that cohort we have. We need to have two years to compare and then a year to gather the data, which is why we had to continue to report, in previous years, up to this year, using the old methodology, even though we were developing the new methodology.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Can I ask really quickly...?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): No. I'm sorry. It's Ms. Yip's turn.

Ms. Yip, you have one minute.

[English]

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): I'm not sure we have time. Is the vote at 1:10?

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): You have 45 seconds left.

[English]

Ms. Jean Yip: Okay.

Can you give us a sense of the process of developing and formalizing education agreements with first nations?

Mr. Jonathan Allen: It's done through a structured process. We essentially meet with the mandated team from the first nation, and we start going through various pillars we've defined in our public material.

It starts with first nations defining their objectives, gaps, vision and goals, and then what timeline they would take to get to those closed gaps, beyond the comparable funding that's given now, what defined activities would be needed to close those gaps, and what the defined costing would be for those activities, over a period of time, to achieve gap closing and to achieve the defined vision and outcome.

In a nutshell, that's essentially the process for an REA.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Good.

I'll give myself one minute and I'll be just as strict as with other people.

On June 14, 2022, the Auditor General made a noteworthy statement:

The longer we push back deadlines, the more likely it is that another generation of families in first nations communities will grow up without access to safe drinking water. And yet, this is truly a critical need.

Since we know that development is impossible if basic needs aren't met, we're not only depriving these people of their dignity, we're also depriving them of any possibility of economic development.

Do you feel that you have neglected this file, or are you on the right track to ensure that the next Auditor General's report will say that water advisories on reserves are finally a thing of the past?

Ms. Gina Wilson: Thank you for your question.

[English]

No, I don't believe we've neglected this file. We've worked very hard at prioritizing.

When I first joined the department, the minister indicated to me that her biggest priority was water, so it has been a priority for all of this team. Everyone has done their absolute best, and I'm very proud of them.

[Translation]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): Mr. Desjarlais, you have the floor for one minute.

We'll then finish up the meeting.

[English]

Mr. Blake Desjarlais: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Continuing my question, if this legislation is not intended to deal with treaty matters and with the obligation of the Crown to ensure that first nations entitlements are fully met, where would these important matters be addressed, specifically?

Ms. Gina Wilson: I'll ask Nelson to speak to the treaty issue when it comes to the legislation.

Mr. Nelson Barbosa: I think there are two parts to that question. What the water legislation could or should be, I think, would be a question for parliamentarians, should it enter the House. Certainly, we hope that it would respect first nations' rights and that it would underscore the need to build frameworks for adequate funding to support the infrastructure needs and the development of a regulatory environment.

With respect to other conversations, which could be quite large, I think there are existing tables to speak to education, health and non-legislative water activities. We have colleagues here from Crown-Indigenous Relations, which helps to support treaty negotiations and the implementation of long-awaited treaties.

There are multipronged approaches for many conversations with first nations partners, but we hope we can bring to rest at least a regulatory gap on water affairs through this potential legislation.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Nathalie Sinclair-Desgagné): I want to thank the witnesses for joining us.

Does everyone agree that the meeting should be adjourned so that we can go and vote? Yes? Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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