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(HANSARD)

Monday, November 22, 2004

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, November 22, 2004

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1100)

[*Translation*]

CORRECTIONS AND CONDITIONAL RELEASE ACT

Mr. Raymond Bonin (Nickel Belt, Lib.) moved that Bill C-243, an act to amend the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (establishment of the Office of Victims Ombudsman of Canada) be read the second time and referred to a committee.

• (1105)

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: The Chair has examined Bill C-243, an act to amend the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (establishment of the Office of the Victims Ombudsman of Canada) to determine whether its provisions would require a royal recommendation and thus prevent the Chair from putting the question at third reading.

[*English*]

As its title suggests, this bill would create the position of victims ombudsman of Canada, with remuneration for such officers and employees as are necessary to perform the functions and duties. It is abundantly clear that this legislative initiative would authorize the spending of public funds. In accordance with Standing Order 79(2), such a bill must be accompanied by a royal recommendation.

[*Translation*]

Therefore, in its present form, I will decline to put the question on third reading unless a royal recommendation is received for this bill.

Today, the debate is on the motion for second reading which will continue as scheduled.

* * *

SECOND READING

Mr. Raymond Bonin (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to speak today in the debate on private member's Bill C-243, which I have proposed and which creates the office of Victims Ombudsman of Canada.

The prime objective of this office, which will be completely independent from the Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board, is to act as a voice and an advocate for the victims of crime. It will conduct investigations, reviews of Correctional Service or Parole Board policies and studies into the problems of victims related to decisions, recommendations, policies, acts or omissions of the service or the board.

Moreover, this bill will require the Victims Ombudsman to maintain a program for communicating information to victims concerning the function of the Victims Ombudsman and the circumstances under which an investigation, a review of Correctional Service or Parole Board policies or a study may be commenced by the Victims Ombudsman. Thus, the bill concerns the rights of victims and the way these rights are respected.

The purpose behind establishing the Victims Ombudsman is the same as for all other organizations sharing the principles of justice, fairness and administrative responsibility for victims, by requiring that the public servants in the Correctional Service and Parole Board be accountable to the Victims Ombudsman when one of their decisions is directly linked to an act that harms an individual.

[*English*]

I stand in the House today to offer legislation that would give victims of crimes a voice and an advocate in our correctional system. The bill is founded on four guiding principles.

First, the correctional system belongs to Canadians, to our society. It is run by officials for the people of Canada. It does not belong to those officials, no matter what their professional credentials.

• (1110)

Second, for justice to be done it must be seen to be done. Under the current system, once an accused is convicted, custody is transferred to a correctional system that offers very little information on how sentences are served.

Corrections officials would have us believe that this process is best, that they know best, to trust them, and that they have an obligation to protect the privacy of inmates.

Private Members' Business

Others see it in another way. It is a convenient way to make decisions that cannot be justified to the public and certainly a more convenient forum in which to hide mistakes. And by way of leaks and reports provided to reporters, we know that there are mistakes.

All we have to do is look at the case of Michael Hector, who was released from penitentiary and then murdered three people. What of the case of Constable Joe MacDonald, who was executed by two individuals, Suzack and Pennett? A few short years after his conviction, Suzack was transferred from maximum to medium security. Joe MacDonald's family and the community were hurt, offended and outraged, but that did not matter to corrections officials who believed they knew better, so nothing was done.

Third, Canadians are reasonable, intelligent and wise. They understand fair play. They understand the importance of rehabilitation and can distinguish between a proper and improper way of administering a sentence.

The air of secrecy surrounding how sentences are served and administered only fuels distrust of our corrections system. Open the doors and windows into the system and it will be found that Canadians will support reasoned approaches to corrections and some of that distrust will fade away. In the end, a better system will emerge.

Finally, and most important, victims want and need a voice and advocate in the corrections system. When a crime is committed, public policy dictates that it is to be prosecuted and treated as a crime against society. That is a fair way to proceed to ensure a fair and just penal system as long as we stop to consider the individual who has actually suffered the loss and hurt. That individual and that individual's family carry the physical and emotional burden of the crime. Any fair and just system must take those views into consideration, notably in the administration of a court ordered sentence.

In my life, I have met victims and their families. Those meetings are not easy and can be very emotional. However, it has always struck me that their requests are so very simple: explain the process to me; keep me informed; who can I talk to when I have a question; and, how and when are my needs and views taken into account?

For whatever reason, the federal corrections system has failed to adequately respond to victims on all those matters. How do I know? Victims have had to contact me, their member of Parliament, to get basic information that should be provided in an automatic fashion.

In one case, a unilingual anglophone victim was given a contact number in which the voice mail was in unilingual French. Despite attempts to correct the situation, the victim had to contact my office to get results. That is simply not acceptable and is the result of a system that is insensitive and not responsive to the needs of victims and their families. It is neither equipped nor eager to serve the legitimate needs of victims.

I firmly believe that this must change. A victim needs to know that justice is being done and how it is being done. This information does not always heal the wounds, but it can help bring closure to a hurtful situation. One thing is certain: a corrections system that does not respond to the needs of victims does add to the hurt and

unnecessarily prolongs the healing process. That is simply no longer acceptable.

How would this bill help? Simply put, this bill would establish an independent ombudsman for victims within the corrections system. This ombudsman would be the bridge between the corrections system and victims. He or she would be independent, educate victims, investigate their complaints and ensure that corrections officials properly respond to their needs.

The ombudsman would also work to ensure that the system becomes more sensitive and responsive to the needs of victims. This would include reports to Parliament on how the system is doing and what changes are required.

All in all, the ombudsman would make sure that those victims and their families will be able to understand the process, be kept informed, ensure that a qualified and competent official is available to answer their questions, and make sure that their needs are responded to and their voices are heard.

•(1115)

Having an advocate for victims in the corrections system is a reasonable and logical measure. There are three sides to every crime: the offender; society as represented by the state; and the victim who suffers the hurt and loss. In our corrections system, the offender is represented by the correctional investigator, who acts like an ombudsman for prisoners, and the state is represented by corrections officials, but the victim has no representative. It is time to change this unacceptable and unfortunate situation.

It is my hope that this Parliament will see the wisdom in establishing an ombudsman for victims. I trust that members of Parliament will reach the consensus that providing victims with a voice and an advocate will improve our corrections system and that by providing a mechanism by which victims can have their complaints investigated we will advance the transparency and accountability of the system.

Victims need and want to be heard. I trust that the House is listening. While something has been accomplished for victims over the years, much remains to be done. With the goodwill and effort of everyone in the House, I know we will get there, but there are specific improvements that I am calling on the government to make.

First, we should change the law to make it clearer that victims have the right to make a statement at National Parole Board hearings. The board does this in practice now and I applaud it for making this change, but the law needs to make it clearer that we can never backtrack on this.

Second, we should expand the definition of who is a victim so that the people taking care of injured victims or young victims can have the same access to information as any other victim. Where the victims are not able to speak for themselves, there has to be respect for those around them who can speak for them.

Third, when victims are unable to attend the hearing or do not want to attend but still want to know exactly what went on, arrangements should be made for them to listen to a tape recording of the parole hearing.

Private Members' Business

Fourth, we should authorize the National Parole Board and the Correctional Service to provide victims with the gist of information about an offender's participation in treatment and programs. Victims are not interested in revenge. They want to know that the offender who has harmed them is getting treatment, hopefully, and will not again harm anyone. Years can go by with victims having no idea if the offender is doing anything productive or is just doing time.

Fifth, we should provide financial assistance to victims who wish to attend parole hearings. This is something we hear from victims constantly. They would like to attend the parole hearing and they have the right to attend the parole hearing, but they cannot afford the cost.

Sixth, we should create a dedicated independent position that would have the authority to receive questions and complaints from victims, follow up on those matters and report to the minister through the deputy minister. This is what I have been trying to do with my bill. It is absolutely essential that this office be independent and separate from the parole board and the Correctional Service and that it have the ear of the minister. Victims need to know who to call. They need to know that they will not be passed from pillar to post.

These are all measures under the authority of the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness. Let me also say a few words about what I am calling upon the Minister of Justice to do.

I would like to see greater coordination and leadership of all federal government victim programs so that we are sure every department is playing the full role it should in responding to victims' needs. It may be, for example, that a victim is a war veteran and we would need to be sure that Veterans Affairs is coordinated with other partners.

I would like to see more comprehensive policy and legislative development so that we can be proactive and not always play catch-up in meeting victims needs. We also need more research to identify the effectiveness of our victim programs and to identify new trends or issues.

We should not forget that sometimes Canadians are victims abroad. For example, Canadians were injured in the tragic bombing in Bali last year. We need to be able to support them when they need help. We need to be sure that our embassies have the right training to do so.

● (1120)

I am also calling on the government to do more to help victims in the three northern territories, where the Attorney General of Canada is responsible for criminal prosecutions. Not only are there challenges in the north due to the remoteness of some communities, there are particular cultural issues that must be addressed in meeting the needs of victims.

I would also like to see better information about existing victims' services and how to assess them. This should also encompass making sure that there is consistency in victims' services across the country. I have just referred to gaps in the north, but this applies in other areas as well.

Last, I call on the government to expand the resources it has to develop new programs and services. Many of these can be done by

community organizations if they have the money. I know that the Minister of Justice is a firm believer in restorative justice, and that approach is centred on helping communities help themselves.

If the government would take action on all these fronts, then maybe there would be fewer complaints from victims, less frustration and more chances for victims to heal and to move forward with their lives. We all want that, and victims deserve nothing less.

[*Translation*]

It is time for action. Victims of crime need our support and expect that their elected representatives in this noble institution will act as quickly as possible to give them a voice and an advocate who can protect their rights from a system that seems, increasingly, to care nothing for the safety of ordinary citizens.

[*English*]

I look forward to a fruitful debate on the bill and I invite members who support a stronger voice for victims of crime to lend their support and speak in favour of Bill C-243.

Hon. Roy Cullen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Nickel Belt for his keen interest in the rights and the needs of victims. Certainly we have taken note of the challenges he poses in terms of what he is looking at for the government to act upon.

Before I get into my formal remarks, I want to ask the member a specific question. He talked about the fact that victims are invited to go to parole board hearings but often cannot afford the cost. If their expenses were reimbursable from the government, does the hon. member think there would be a big take-up by victims to attend parole board hearings? Would that be a beneficial thing to do?

Mr. Raymond Bonin: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I definitely do think so. This is a big country, the hearings are not always held close to victims' residences, and victims are not always able to afford a journey. I have cases in my riding in which it would be almost impossible for those victims to pay to attend these hearings and they have a right to be there.

In addition, I should mention that it is the practice that the Correctional Service of Canada and the parole board have started to allow impact statements, but that is not in law. I have another private member's bill that would make that law.

This initiative started about seven years ago when we developed a comprehensive bill on the Correctional Service, but a comprehensive bill of 35 pages made it easy for the minister of the time and the department to work against the bill. I have split that bill into four different bills, so they are very clear.

Private Members' Business

The question on this issue is very clear. Prisoners in jail have the equivalent to an ombudsman. Is it not reasonable to ask that the victims have at least the same privilege?

• (1125)

Mr. Peter MacKay (Central Nova, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the bill brought forward by the hon. member for Nickel Belt. I congratulate him for the effort he has expended. He gave a very comprehensive speech outlining what Bill C-243 would do which, in essence, is the creation of a victims' ombudsman's office. This has been an issue that I have personally supported for a great deal of time, having worked with victims as a crown prosecutor and a defence lawyer prior to that, and having worked on a number of cases involving horrible victimization where for practical reasons there was not the necessary support there at the time.

We have come a long way in providing the type of support that is more than just financial and, as the hon. member referred to in his remarks, that is there within the community to provide support and information that allows victims to feel that their voices are being heard within the criminal justice system.

Steve Sullivan and those who work with the victims' resource centre have advocated the creation of this position for some time. I moved a private member's motion in 1998 calling for similar provisions on behalf of the government to properly fund a victims' office that would have at least the equivalent budget of the correctional investigator.

There is a terrible anomaly, which I would describe as perverse, that within our justice system we would have, for lack of a better phrase, a one stop shopping office for prisoners where they have complaints but not a similar commensurate budget and office for victims. The bill would address that anomaly. It would establish the office, provide a voice and an active place where victims and members of the family can go.

I also support the expansion of the definition of victims and streamlining a process that allows victims to access the resource to travel. With the very nature of this country and the fact that families move, in many cases they live thousands of kilometres from their loved ones. When instances occur where people have been victimized, where they have had their dignity stripped away, where they have had a personal invasion upon their being, the first people they should be able to turn to are their families. Being able to provide the necessary resources and support to get them there during a trial, during a parole hearing, in the aftermath of these horrible instances that occur is a very laudable goal.

I would suggest as well that within the context of this discussion we should talk about the ability for victims to be compensated when they are off work for considerable periods of time, which is often the result of being victimized or having a family member caught, through no fault of his or her own, in the cycle that then follows a crime when the justice system kicks in. Sadly it is a matter of delay in many instances.

Having a support network of people and resources to insulate in some cases the victims and their families from the normal stresses and trials and tribulations that come along is something we should be doing, and through this victims' ombudsman's office, we would be putting in place concrete and very real support networks.

Having said that, it has to be properly funded. The hon. member would know that the lack of funding has been a serious problem. In fact there have been recent reports, even in today's paper, regarding the discussion around the necessary support. Just to do with parole hearings, there was an estimate that it would cost roughly \$1.7 million a year.

The Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime received information under access to information with respect to travel that produced these figures and that the federal government has shied away from making that commitment. Hopefully this private member's bill will address that, will turn the government's mind to the importance of this. We need to keep this increased pressure coming. We need to see that the bill not only passes through Parliament but receives the adequate funding.

I would strongly urge the government to institute a royal recommendation to see that the bill does become law in the life of this Parliament. We need to give it priority and put it forward with the cooperation of all members, and I think we will see that. This is clearly a bill where there is unanimous support coming from both government and opposition benches.

This type of office, as I said, is a responsive, responsible and respectful approach that will provide victims with the ability to access the information they need to get the actual support required when these things occur. I would suggest as well that, as outlined by the hon. member, the research that goes into providing the type of background that victims require in many cases is very much caught up in the overall picture, the overall purpose.

• (1130)

In regard to information sharing, victims do not want to be revictimized by the terrible aggravation and frustration when they cannot find out when parole hearings are taking place or when they have been cancelled, sometimes at the last minute. When they have to travel to be there for court hearings they simply want to know what is happening.

It is an extremely impersonal system and victims are often left feeling out of the loop with the crown prosecutor, police, judges, lawyers and even the victims office that currently exists. We have many of those offices and many individuals working very diligently on behalf of people who have found themselves unwittingly into the justice system, people like Coreen Popowich in New Glasgow and Judy Whitman, who do wonderful work daily to support those who have found themselves in the unfortunate circumstance of being victims.

I know that at the provincial level as well there is a great receptiveness to this initiative and a great willingness to work cooperatively at all levels of government to see that this office is put in place. It is truly a measure of this country's humanity, the way in which we treat victims, the way in which we respond in a personal way reaching out, giving them a sense that somebody cares and that there is compassion in the aftermath of what could be a life-altering occurrence when people find themselves victimized. The feeling that they have had their dignity taken away is something that has to be addressed.

Private Members' Business

This system and office will have to be extremely sensitive in assuring that this is not done in a callous way and is not depersonalized further. I suggest it will require and of the system to have good people working in the office, which will require the financial commitment to which the hon. member has also referred.

The financial assistance for people to travel to national parole briefings is a big part of any success. Many terrible occurrences and many shortcomings have been outlined in recent days of parole hearings that went awry and resulted in individuals being released too early, those who were in halfway houses on mandatory release, or statutory release as it is referred to, cause a great deal of mistrust and a great deal of cynicism within the justice system itself.

I am encouraged to see this legislation coming forward from the hon. member for Nickel Belt. I am encouraged by the initial response and the initial support that it will receive I am sure today through the debate but, more important, as I said earlier, the government will have to get behind the legislation. The preference would be that the bill itself came from the government and not through a private member. To that end again, a royal recommendation is what will be necessary for this to become law.

The legislation is comprehensive. It can be added to, as the hon. member said. It is one that at least provides some parity with victims and recognizes that their rights are implicit within the justice system as well, and that they are playing an important role in some of the decisions that occur around their own lives after they have found themselves victimized.

The legislation, as it appears before the House is something the Conservative Party supports very strongly. I know my colleague from St. John's also supports this, as do members in the House. We look forward to the bill moving forward quickly. I think if it passes through the House in an expeditious way and receives the royal recommendation and the support from the minister, we could have it in law as soon as Christmas. What a wonderful Christmas gift that would be for victims in Canada to see this new victim's ombudsman office opened and providing them with the critical support and information that they so badly need and deserve.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Ménard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I must say that I share the enthusiasm of the member for Central Nova concerning this bill and I would like to tell the member who introduced it that it is certainly worthwhile. I believe that he deserves congratulations for having promoted this bill for seven years, as he told us.

Essentially, we will agree with this bill. We hope, as does the representative from Central Nova, that it will come into force quickly.

However, there are still some difficulties that I would like to raise and that might be solved, I hope, before it is studied in committee. I hope that its mover will appreciate that this is a criticism to improve his bill and not to discourage him from proceeding.

I would say that my first reaction, when I was told about the establishment of the office of victims ombudsman, was, "Gosh, is the federal Liberal Party still obsessed with interfering in provincial

jurisdictions?" Because, as far as I know, compensation for victims of criminal acts is a provincial jurisdiction. I thought that this was the member's objective. As soon as I started reading the bill, I understood that it was instead the Parole Board ombudsman. The member is thus clearly within federal jurisdictions.

Let us consider the word "ombudsman". When used in the context of any organization—I think there is even one at the CBC—it is clear that it means that the public can contact this person to ask something of the organization for which he or she acts as the ombudsman. Perhaps, to prevent confusion in people who may have thought like me at the beginning, this ombudsman could be called the parole board ombudsman, since this is clearly what the hon. member is seeking.

In section 198.12, the hon. member asks that the governor in council be allowed to appoint a person to be known as the victims ombudsman of Canada. As we know, we have in our statutes a considerable number of laws that have never come into effect even if they have been enacted. It seems to me that, to achieve the result we are all looking for in terms of improving the parole board, the provision should read that the governor in council "shall" appoint a person.

I might add, before I go any further, that I remain a staunch believer in the need for a parole board. I think that, in difficult circumstances, the members of the board carry out their functions very well. I would not want the creation of this ombudsman position to be viewed as criticism, at least not on my part, of the overall work they do.

Let me remind the hon. members of this House that we often forget that to deal with the prisoners is to deal with failure, all failures. Those who are in prison represent a failure of society, school, family and, in many cases, personal failure. So, to ask a correctional service or a parole board to be 100% successful in managing the failures of everyone else in society is to ask them to do the impossible. It is difficult the work in these conditions.

My second reaction in reading this bill was that it was again creating administrative difficulties. The government has loads of good ideas. That is how deficits are created, by its developing structure upon structure. Indeed, here we have yet another structure being proposed.

However, I do believe that, in this case, given the complaints filed in the past by victims, as well as the misunderstanding of victims and their helplessness in dealing with the system, this is an excellent idea and that it is right to establish the office in question.

Now we would like to see an obligation created to appoint an ombudsman, and we would also like that position to be independent. I am sure that is also the intent of the member who introduced this bill. A five-year period is relatively short when the mandate is renewable. Let us not forget that this ombudsman would often be criticizing government policies. We think there would be greater independence if he were appointed for a longer period, say a 10-year, but non-renewable mandate. There would therefore be objectivity on both sides.

Private Members' Business

There is one section, however, that really causes me a problem, the major problem I have with this bill. It is 198.27 (3), which creates an exemption from the application of the Privacy Act and the Access to Information Act.

• (1140)

My first comment is that it is going a bit too far to state that such exemptions would be necessary in the interests of the minister. That is going a bit far. I feel that this needs a lot of rethinking, even here, and it is my hope that we will be able to do that together, before the discussions in committee begin on the reason for this exemption and from what the exemption will be.

The Privacy Act sets out some values of importance to today's society, particularly since invasion of privacy has become so much easier with modern technology. This means there is a general conflict of values that must be resolved in some better way than merely creating an exemption that can be used in a highly discretionary way. I very much want to see us reach agreement on that point.

I want to point out one last problem with section 198.37 so that it can be corrected at committee. This section would make it an offence if someone "without lawful justification or excuse, refuses or wilfully fails to comply with any lawful requirement of the Victims Ombudsman". I have looked in this bill for the ombudsman's requirements, but I cannot find them. The closest thing I see to ombudsman's requirements is in section 198.21 where it says, "in the course of conducting an investigation, a review of Service or Board policies or a study, the Victims Ombudsman may require any person" and then it lists a number of things. In French it says "peut demander à toute personne".

As far as I know this particular wording does not create a requirement. When I am asked to do something I have the right to say no, unless I am being given an order. I do not think this is a bad idea. We might want to give the ombudsman the authority to call witnesses and require them to give information or produce documents. I think this is worth considering in order to improve this aspect of the bill. Do we want to give the ombudsman the powers of a judge or could these powers be exercised by reference to the Federal Court, which does not take its orders from the ombudsman?

I think if we tell a person, through legislation, that they may be required to do something, then we are telling them they may refuse to do what we are asking.

However, section 198.27 seeks to create an offence. We think—and rightfully so—that if this is mandatory, the legislation should clearly say so and the procedure be set out.

All in all, having learned this morning that this bill was first initiated seven years ago, I cannot help but join my colleague from Central Nova in warmly congratulating its originators. If this ombudsman ever comes into being—which I hope happens—they can proudly take credit for making this improvement during their time in Parliament and know that we are able to put politics aside when it comes to improving our system.

• (1145)

[English]

Mrs. Bev Desjarlais (Churchill, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to join in the debate on this private member's bill and to again acknowledge, as I think this happened last week as well, that we have representatives of all the parties supporting a piece of legislation. It happens very rarely so I think we should celebrate it to some extent.

It is understandable that it is supported. There is a feeling out there among our constituents, certainly among mine, that there needs to be more done to protect victims, to give them the opportunity to be part of parole hearings, and to know what is happening to the perpetrators of crimes. This bill is very much a good start in that direction.

I want to acknowledge the ruling of the Speaker prior to the debate and query whether or not the process has been established as far as the government putting in place a royal recommendation in this bill. I know right now that we have a situation where there is a surplus in place. It seems like a very opportune time to proceed with a new office. The dollars are obviously there. The dollars are there to ensure that victims get some representation. It is important that the government put the steps in place for a royal recommendation. I would urge all party members to encourage the government to do so. I am sure my colleague will inform us as to whether there is any process happening.

I also want to take this opportunity to comment on the importance of adequate funding for this ombudsman. If we proceed with the ombudsman, which I believe we should, it is important that there be adequate funding. We have just had a situation with the policing agency of the government. That is how I like to refer to the Auditor General right now. She seems to be keeping it in control a bit by saying this is what the government should be doing because it is not doing it well. She is left in a bit of a precarious position of having to go to that same government and get funding for her department.

There seems to be some push from the government to not necessarily proceed that way. I think it is important that there is adequate funding, certainly in the Auditor General's department. If we go along with this position, we must also ensure that the funding is there so we do address the issue of victims and families are able to attend hearings to find out what is going on.

I have gone through the bill and it addresses a lot of the areas of concern I have heard about. I am not going to get into all of them. I want to reflect a bit on what my colleague from the Bloc was mentioning in regard to whether or not the ombudsman may do something or should do something. My understanding for the reason we use the terminology of "may" is that is the legalese term that gives the office of the ombudsman the opportunity to do what it wants to do. If this were to proceed to committee, we would clear up that indication. It would be up to the office of the ombudsman to make the decision as to whether it requires that type of information.

I also want to comment on the fact that there are penalties in the bill to ensure that if someone does not follow-through or impedes the process of the ombudsman, there are some penalties in place to address that.

Private Members' Business

I also think that having an ombudsman in place will give victims an opportunity, and quite frankly maybe an opportunity for the perpetrators, to be part of something more along the lines of restorative justice or a healing circle where perpetrators have to see and address the victims and families of the crime. In a roundabout way, we are getting to a type of process that is used in a number of communities right now throughout Canada, mostly aboriginal communities, as they are trying to address a different way of proceeding with justice.

I am referring a lot to what my colleague from the Bloc had to say because it was extremely interesting and brought some different perspectives. He mentioned that often the perpetrators of crime are not highly educated, there are problems in their backgrounds, and they have low incomes. What often happens is that the victims of the crime also fall into that category. All the more reason why we need this type of process in place in order to give victims the opportunity to have a say and to know what is happening.

I hope we are able to see the royal recommendation put in place and the bill proceed further. As was mentioned, it would be great to see this happen before Christmas. It would certainly be something that would be applauded throughout Canada.

• (1150)

Hon. Roy Cullen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for Nickel Belt for his hard work for victims. The points he made earlier about what he would like the government to do have been duly noted. We will work with him on those items.

[*Translation*]

I am pleased to join in the discussion of private member's bill C-243, proposing the establishment of an ombudsman for victims of crime.

I think that this debate would be well founded by setting the context for this proposed alternative.

[*English*]

To this end, I will briefly set out the current state of victims in our criminal justice system with reference to recent history. In particular, I shall refer to the area of corrections where victims can participate in the administration of the sentences of those offenders who are of interest to them.

I must emphasize that the majority of victims do not seek intimate involvement in the circumstances surrounding a trial, conviction, sentencing and eventual release of the offenders who have wronged them. Many choose, instead, to leave justice to the justice system. They do not request additional information or ask that they be allowed to participate by giving information about an offender. That does not mean that those who do wish this type of approach should not be considered and considered very seriously.

[*Translation*]

The movement to provide more inclusive processes for victims of crime who do maintain an interest in the outcome of cases has gained momentum in Canada over the past decade.

In 1992, the Corrections and Conditional Release Act recognized the interests of victims and introduced entitlements relating to corrections and conditional release.

[*English*]

Victims could, on request, receive certain information about the offender who had harmed them. They could attend National Parole Board hearings as observers and they could receive copies of board decisions, including the reasons for the decision. The act also recognized the value of information that victims could provide to decision makers for risk assessment and conditional release consideration. Subsequently, the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights issued two reports dealing with victims' issues.

In October 1998, the first, entitled "Victims' Rights: A Voice, Not a Veto", addressed the significance of the interests of victims and supported their greater involvement with the corrections and conditional release. It recommended a number of changes to the Criminal Code of Canada and the Corrections and Conditional Release Act.

The government enacted a number of amendments to the Criminal Code in June 1999 in what hon. members will remember as Bill C-79. However, changes to the corrections legislation were left in abeyance pending the report of a parliamentary standing committee then conducting the five-year review of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act.

[*Translation*]

The standing committee report on its review of the correctional legislation was tabled in May 2000. Entitled "A Work in Progress", the report found the Canadian federal correctional system to be basically sound. Where the need for improvement was noted, victims' issues were addressed as a priority.

Six recommendations were made to enhance the involvement of victims in corrections and conditional release: advise victims of inmate transfers; provide victims with information on offender program participation, institutional conduct and new offences; prevent unwanted communications from federal inmates to victims; allow victims to read a prepared statement at National Parole Board hearings; allow access for victims to the audio tapes of National Parole Board hearings; and establish a national office to provide information, investigate complaints and report findings.

[*English*]

In November 2000, in response to the standing committee, the Ministry of the Solicitor General, now Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, set out a comprehensive strategy based on consultation and involvement of all relevant stakeholders, with particular emphasis on victims and their advocates. This strategy provided balance, addressing the respective needs, concerns and privacy rights of both victims and offenders.

Private Members' Business

•(1155)

The response acknowledged that the portfolio, through its correctional agencies, was not the sole or primary service provider to victims. Rather, Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board are key partners with other orders of government and community based groups that must work collaboratively to coordinate and provide improved information and services for victims.

In building the strategy, the government recognized the input of victims collected in 39 consultation sessions across the country, which indicated that victims wanted more access to information earlier in the process and more opportunities to be heard and to provide information. It recognized that these things could best be achieved with an approach that sought to understand and address the underlying needs that created victims' requests and interest. In this context the response was founded on an open, citizen-centred approach that emphasized timely information and assistance for victims.

The Victims Policy Centre at the Department of Justice was consulted in the preparation of an integrated model for service delivery. The response was therefore consistent and complementary with the ongoing endeavours of the Department of Justice.

[*Translation*]

In March 2001, the Department of the Solicitor General, as it then was, in collaboration with the National Parole Board and the Correctional Service of Canada, conducted national consultations with victims of crime and victim service providers. Eight meetings were held in major cities across Canada. The report of these consultations, "National Consultation with Victims of Crime: Highlights and Key Messages", was released in August 2001.

The National Parole Board also held 31 sessions in smaller communities to seek input on how best to implement the proposed changes to the corrections and conditional release processes so they would be of greatest benefit to victims.

[*English*]

During the consultation process, victims told the government that they wanted a voice, a real say, in the justice process, not to be vengeful but rather to create fairness and to have their concerns considered in decisions that would have an impact on their safety, their families and their community.

In addition, they expressed a wish to be treated with respect in all dealings with the criminal justice system and its individual representatives. Victims reinforced the need for comprehensive victim centred information, information on their specific case, information regarding how the criminal justice system worked generally and information about where to obtain help and counselling.

I again congratulate the member for Nickel Belt. Our government has responded in the past to the needs of victims. There is more to be done. We look forward to working with the member in his initiative. We all share the same objective, that victims deserve our attention, they deserve the right to information and they deserve the right to

participate in the justice system. As a government, we will strive to do that.

•(1200)

Mr. Russ Powers (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased and honoured to rise today to address Bill C-243, an act to amend the Corrections and Conditional Release Act which proposes the establishment of what is referred to as the office of victims ombudsman of Canada.

I was indeed honoured to second them motion by the hon. member for Nickel Belt. I know the member has given a great deal of thought to the bill, and I recognize his efforts to address an issue that is of concern to members of the House.

The government could not be more serious about addressing the concerns and needs of victims, improving the services available to them and enhancing the crucial role victims play throughout each stage of Canada's criminal justice system. In recognition of these responsibilities and the more general responsibility for improving public safety in all Canadian communities, all aspects of the criminal justice and corrections systems are under constant and rigorous review by the government.

Whereas many aspects of the criminal justice deal in objective determinations of fact, dry debates concerning the interpretation of statutes or logical considerations related to policing and corrections, the situation of victims is a unique element which touches the heart in a very profound way. Whether one has been a victim of a serious crime, is acquainted or related to a victim or is merely exposed to their stories by way of the media, their stories are often deeply poignant.

At some point, I am certain that most members of this hon. House have communicated with constituents on this issue, be they victims of crime or third parties who seek to further the cause of victims, and have personal experience regarding how heart-rendering the plight of victims can indeed be.

However, I am pleased to state that there has been in the last 15 years or so a growing awareness of victims' issues. A lot of it is by the onus of the victims themselves and their collective efforts. A good deal of progress in this area has been made at the federal level as well as the provincial and territorial levels as a result of cross jurisdictional cooperation.

In this regard, I would like to take this opportunity to commend those outside of government who tirelessly dedicate themselves to advancing the interests of the victims. They have proved themselves to be invaluable partners in developing the initiatives that have been introduced thus far and in the important work that continues on this issue, which I would like to address before turning to the merits of the bill before us today.

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A major step forward was taken in 1989, when amendments were made to the Criminal Code to allow for victim impact statements, for victim fine surcharges and to improve restitution in compensation measures. Three years later, in 1992, another important milestone was the recognition of the role of victims, when Parliament enacted the Corrections and Conditional Release Act or CCRA. This act replaced the Penitentiary Act and the Parole Act and became the primary legal framework governing the federal corrections system, guiding the operations of the Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board. The enactment of the CCRA marked the introduction of legislatively mandated victim participation in the corrections and conditional release processes.

Since the CCRA came into force in 1992, a number of initiatives have been adopted to respond to the calls of victims and their advocates for case specific and general information. For example, the National Parole Board has appointed community liaison officers and the Correctional Service of Canada has appointed victim liaison coordinators at their respective regional offices, community parole offices and correctional institutions. These officials provide victims with excellent services, such as information about offenders of interest and about the correctional system in general.

Moreover, to address recommendations as set out by the report of the all party Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, entitled "Victims Rights: A Voice, Not a Veto", Bill C-79, which was brought into force on December 1, 1999, amended the Criminal Code: to ensure that victims are informed about the opportunities to prepare and read a victim impact statement if they should choose to do so; to require police and judges to consider the safety of the victims in all bail decisions; to expand protections for young victims and witnesses testifying at trial; and to require all offenders to automatically pay a victim surcharge, that is an additional monetary penalty, intended to increase revenue for provinces and territories to expand and improve victim services.

• (1205)

When the Corrections and Conditional Release Act was enacted on November 1, 1992, it contained a stipulation that a comprehensive review of the act be undertaken after five years. To address this obligation, the solicitor general of the time released the consultation paper entitled—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired. The member still has four minutes left. The order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*Translation*]

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT ACT

Hon. Stephen Owen (for the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development) moved that Bill C-23, an act to establish the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and to amend and repeal certain related Acts be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, thank you for allowing me to speak on this bill to create a Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

This is particularly gratifying to me as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, since it allows me to speak about such topics as the importance of helping Canadians access the skills development and lifelong learning opportunities they need to make their own special contribution to our country, and also how this new department will make this goal a reality.

[*English*]

On December 12, 2003, the government announced the reorganization of the old Department of Human Resources Development into two new departments: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, HRSDC; and Social Development Canada. The Department of HRSDC was created by a series of orders in council approved on that date. This was done within the statutory framework of the Public Service Rearrangement and Transfer of Duties Act, a statute which allows the governor in council to reorganize the institutions of government to address priorities and public needs.

Since then, HRSDC has been subject to the Financial Administration Act, the Public Service Employment Act, the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act. Parliament is now being asked to consider legislation that formally establishes the department and sets out the powers, duties and functions of the Minister of HRSDC and his mandate. The legislation also sets out the powers and duties of the Minister of Labour, as well as his mandate.

Let me inform the House that we are proposing as part of the legislation to include a uniform set of privacy provisions governing the disclosure of personal information. These provisions would apply to all programs and activities of the new department.

Since December 2003, HRSDC and Social Development Canada have been working together to ensure uninterrupted services to Canadians. That working relationship will continue as the departments jointly provide services to Canadians on behalf of each other, a fact which will be duly reflected in the draft legislation.

With this legislation we are confirming our improvements to date and building on them by giving the minister and the new department the legal means to fulfill their mandate. The mandate as we have set it out in the proposed Department of Human Resources and Skills Development act is to improve the standard of living and quality of life of all Canadians by promoting a highly skilled and mobile workforce and an efficient and inclusive labour market.

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In my opinion, having a department focused primarily on skills development and learning tells Canadians that we are ready to address the profound changes that face our economy and society in coming years, including skills shortages due to the aging of our workforce and an increasingly global and knowledge based competitive environment where having good skills and access to lifelong learning opportunities are key to finding a job and having enough skilled workers are the difference between business success and failure. They are also sound bases for a high quality, fulfilling life.

These profound changes make it vitally important that we have a department in place that can focus on enhancing Canadians' access to skills development and lifelong learning so they can fully benefit from the many opportunities being created by our economy every day and working closely with its partners to share ideas and resources and develop common approaches to preparing our citizens for this very challenging future.

That is where the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development comes in. With a mandate to foster a culture of lifelong learning, where people at every stage in life can pursue lifelong learning opportunities and acquire the skills they need for career success, as well as personal fulfillment, and organizations can find and access the highly skilled workers they need to take on the world.

Access to learning and skills development involves making sure students with the ability and desire to pursue some sort of post-secondary education can get the financial help they need to make their dreams come true. Statistics point clearly to the changes demanded by an increasingly knowledge based economy. Some 70% of all new jobs in Canada will require some form of post-secondary education and 25% will require a university degree.

With that in mind, the Government of Canada already provides considerable assistance. The Canada student loan program helps 360,000 students every year and last year provided \$1.6 billion in loans. Some 90,000 students in financial need have been awarded \$285 million per year in the Canada millennium scholarship program.

● (1210)

Canada study grants worth over \$70 million annually have been awarded to approximately 50,000 students. The Canada education saving grant program has provided almost \$2 billion in grants since its inception, leveraging over \$13 billion in private savings. To date, some two million children between one year old and 17 years old have benefited from that particular program.

We all know that access to post-secondary education is a work in progress, so the new department will have to find innovative and better ways of improving service and responding to emerging needs. For example, we will need to work with our provincial and territorial government partners to find new ways of enhancing the access and affordability of post-secondary education so Canadians can pursue learning opportunities throughout their lives. This cooperation will be vital in implementing the enhancements to the Canada student loans program contained in the 2004 federal budget.

We will also need to work with our partners to improve assistance to high need students, such as those living with disabilities and those

from low income families, to help them overcome the barriers they face.

The 2004 budget announced a new grant and improvements to an existing grant that will help these students as they pursue a post-secondary education. For disabled students that involves a grant of \$3,000 each year in college or university.

Finally, the department will need to improve the uptake of RESPs and the Canada education savings grants by low income families to enable more families to start saving early for their children's post-secondary education. This will involve introducing the new Canada learning bond and enhancements to the Canada education savings grant to kick-start savings by low income and middle income parents. The legislation includes informing low and middle income families of the importance of saving early for their children's education and providing assistance to help them access these benefits.

For those reasons I would encourage all members of the House to join me in supporting Bill C-5, the Canada education savings act, which is currently at committee stage, which would enact the provisions that I mentioned in the 2004 budget. Among other things, interestingly enough, Bill C-5 has built into it cooperation with one of our key sets of partners, the provinces and the territories, in the RESP program and the RESP grants program, which is proposed in the act.

Many of these initiatives will involve areas of provincial and territorial responsibility and will have an impact on key stakeholder groups. Therefore the department will continue to work closely with all its partners, including other levels of government, the private sector, educational and training institutions, financial institutions and other stakeholders, to ensure their needs are represented and addressed.

This is exactly what this new department has already been doing from the beginning, through its participation and support of a number of working groups. For example, the intergovernmental consultative committee on student financial assistance brings together federal, provincial and territorial officials at the director general and director level to develop common approaches to post-secondary education and student financial assistance.

Again, the national advisory group on student financial assistance allows colleges and universities, student groups and representatives of the full spectrum of post-secondary institutions to make their views known to the Government of Canada on federal assistance to post-secondary students.

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Another example, the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada helps provincial and territorial ministers of education to develop common approaches and cooperate with national educational organizations and the federal government on educational issues.

• (1215)

It is my personal view that the new department should become, as it were, the federal government's designated hitter to the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada. This does not mean that HRSDC should be the only federal department involved in lifelong learning, far from it. Departments like Justice, Corrections Canada, Defence and Indian and Northern Affairs will, for example, continue to deliver literacy programs which are part of lifelong learning. However the Minister of HRSDC, fully briefed, can become a consistent link between the federal government and the provincial and territorial ministers of education in the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada. This will strengthen the partnerships that must exist between us and the provinces and territories in the area of lifelong learning.

I chaired the standing committee that unanimously recommended that the former Department of Human Resources Development Canada be split. This bill is, in a very real sense, the enactment of the clearly expressed will of the House of Commons at the time that HRDC be split. The committee recommended the division of that department, not only because it was a very large department but also because it was too diverse to be manageable.

When HRDC was formed by an earlier government, several former federal departments were simply rolled into one. They never really reconciled their different cultures. The bill addresses this directly. It brings together different but related regimes under one set of rules and procedures. As chair of the standing committee that considered these matters, it gives me special pride to speak to the bill today.

Also, speaking personally, I believe strongly that in addition to its formal duties within the federal system, the new Department of HRSDC can become a valuable point of first contact for all federal departments in matters related to lifelong learning and training.

Those are some of the challenges facing the new department to be created by the bill. While addressing these issues may be challenging, the rewards Canada reaps will be enormous. By improving access to post-secondary education and lifelong learning for all Canadians, we will go a long way toward ensuring that no Canadian gets left behind and that businesses and organizations will be able to find the skilled workers they need to compete and thrive in the global economy. This represents a win-win situation for all Canadians.

For most of my time in this House, I have worked with the government caucus on post-secondary education and research. This is a group of MPs and senators who have followed, all the way through from the middle nineties, the various roles of the federal government in higher education and research. It is a group that has a very active interest in those matter, but which has made it clear from the very beginning that we have no interest in the federal government encroaching on the roles of the provinces and territories. Quite rightly, in our Confederation the operation of the elementary

schools, high schools, colleges and universities are provincial and territorial matters, which is the way it should be. It produces across our country a network of related but different educational systems that are extremely productive.

This is not to say that the federal government and other governments do not have responsibilities in those areas. I can give very direct examples where, very badly in many cases, the federal government organizes elementary schools on the first nations. Some of them should be changed very quickly. We have a used computer program where we give the high schools used computers, and it has worked very effectively. When they get to the end of high school, the millennium scholarship program is a federal program that helps high school students.

We work with the community colleges of Canada. They are, in many ways, a rapid response system that helps Canada keep its economy current.

• (1220)

For example, it was this government that first flowed research moneys to community colleges, recognizing their role in applied research and their role in the commercialization of research. We still work with the community colleges in all sorts of ways. Aboriginal education is a really good example. English and French as second languages are other examples. The federal government has important links with them, as it does with the universities, and has moved the public funding of research, largely in the universities, from being 14th or 15th in the world to perhaps 5th or 6th.

These are all examples of the ways in which the federal government, and not just one department of the federal government, is involved in higher education. Let me say that the Department of National Defence runs a university, the Royal Military College, where one can get degrees in engineering and so on.

The federal government has these roles. One of its roles is to capture the best practices. If in Quebec, Nova Scotia or Nunavut there is something going on which the whole country should know about, it is the federal government that can capture it in higher education.

My enthusiasm for the legislation is that the federal government is going to have a new department, a very large and powerful department, which will be focused on these matters of lifelong learning. It is my hope that, first, it will perform very important functions itself, but second, that it will become a point of contact for all federal departments that work in the area of lifelong learning and that it will also become a key point of contact with the provinces and territories.

I believe the new department represents a win-win situation for all Canadians.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

For this reason, I intend to support this bill and urge all members to do likewise.

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[English]

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have three quick questions. I congratulate the member for his excellent work as the chair on the work that we do in post-secondary education. It is an excellent initiative of the government. He has done a fine job over the years. He gets a tremendous number of people from Canadian society involved in that initiative.

First, why do we have to split two departments and send people to two different departments for those issues?

Second, this is rightfully a machinery of government question. Where the Prime Minister and governor in council can decide structures of government, why do we have to come back to Parliament and have a debate about this?

Third, in view of his vast experience related to community colleges, if this department is going to be the spokesperson or the key or champion government department for education, I have an issue related to the research councils. They have been doing a good job in the last year of getting more research money into community colleges, but the way they are structured now is that the research money has to go to universities. There is no university north of 60° in the northern half of our nation, which limits the amount of research money that is going there. Would the new department as the focus of education help us in championing that task, which I have to say the granting councils are moving on right now?

Hon. Peter Adams: Mr. Speaker, I have made a note of my colleague's questions.

His first question was about why these two departments are being split. We should know that the previous department of HRDC was by far the largest department in the federal government. In the very early 1990s, in fact before I was elected, that department was created. I might be exaggerating if I said six, but somewhere between four and six old federal departments were put together in one. In some cases those old departments continued to work well and in some cases they cooperated, but in other cases that was just not the case.

Really what we had was a very large department. Its budget, as I recall, was \$60 billion, which is a great deal of money even in this place. That was one dimension. It was one department answerable to one standing committee and responsible for \$60 billion.

Much more significant was the point I tried to make in my speech. It was this question of cultures. In that department were public servants who were very keen on their individual mandates. There were people involved with employment insurance, for example, and people involved with the Canada pension plan, all in the same department, but if people moved between parts of the department, the culture was very different. The culture in EI was very different from that of the Canada pension plan.

An interesting example, which I also mentioned in passing but which is dealt with very carefully in the new legislation, is that there were four or five different privacy regimes. My colleague will understand this. This is the question of protecting information provided to the department by Canadians. The department needs information. One can well imagine that Canada pensions cannot

simply be given out; personal information has to be gathered in order to be sure the money is going to be well spent.

There were four or five different regimes, each of them good, each of them secure as far as the privacy commissioner was concerned, but the fact was that they were different within the same department. I think that is just one example of the need to take this large department and divide it carefully, so that, for example, Canada pensions are now with Social Development Canada and EI is with HRSD, the legislation which we are considering.

I would also add, though, that they are not completely divided. For efficiency's sake, for example, the human resources management of the two departments is going to be conducted jointly. Another example is with respect to services to Canadians. Canadians going into HRSD offices in ridings, for example, will not see a difference at the public counter. They will go to the window and they will be dealt with sometimes by social development staff and sometimes by HRSD staff, but that side of it will not be divided.

"Why Parliament?", my colleague asked. First of all, I know he believes that Parliament is very important and so do I. I think it is often necessary for the governor in council, that is, the cabinet, to do things and often to do them quickly. They are done well and they are done legally. That has certainly been the case here. There is very rapid movement.

In the end I would say to my colleague that the House should seize itself of what is going on. We can do this when we debate this legislation. We are now at second reading.

The other thing is that we are, and again I would use the example of privacy, changing regimes which are enacted. There is legislation dealing with these different privacy issues. In order to change these four or five different privacy regimes, we need to come back to the House of Commons.

I appreciate his point about having a federal champion for the community colleges. There are roughly 1,000 community college campuses, which are very important for education and lifelong learning of all sorts across the country. They are very important for apprenticeships, for aboriginal people and so on. We do need a champion.

I made the point as an example that the federal government has started funding research in colleges. The granting councils are very conservative institutions, and that is not a word that I use lightly. They are only coming around to the idea that in particular cases community colleges should be funded for research. The Canada Foundation for Innovation, which was established by the government and provides money for research infrastructure, has consistently provided money to the colleges, as I think my colleague knows, and does so very explicitly.

● (1230)

When I asked the question of the granting councils that my colleague has asked of me, they said they do give money to the colleges but the qualifications of the people who apply are not high enough. That is a very chicken and egg argument. They say if the proposal is good they will receive it.

I do believe that the case of the northern colleges, the territorial colleges, should be special. As my colleague said, in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and Yukon there are no universities except the University of the Arctic, which is an international organization. All the granting councils and all federal departments should treat those three colleges in a very special way.

• (1235)

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I commend my hon. colleague from the great city of Peterborough. I want to talk about a situation that I have run into since being elected back in late June.

In my riding, which is very rural, of course, we have over 100 communities. The largest community in my riding has less than 15,000 people.

In 1992 the cod moratorium in Newfoundland and Labrador resulted in one of the largest layoffs in the province's history. A lot of fishermen aged 40, 50 or 60 years old found themselves without work. At that time, they were described as general labourers. It was difficult to find work as a general labourer in our situation because of these smaller towns, and the choice was not that great. So the emphasis then became retraining. We needed to find work but to do that we needed the skill set to do it. We needed retraining, so it is music to my ears to hear that we now have the Human Resources and Skills Development department, because skills training is essential, especially in our situation with the moratorium. Now people are acquiring skills to get better work.

In this situation with skills development, will the training be commensurate with local job availabilities? In other words, will training also keep in mind the available labour within that market, especially in small rural areas like mine? Will the department look favourably on people who want to obtain certain skills but also be sensitive to the fact that there are certain jobs out there that need to be filled and these people can be retrained?

Hon. Peter Adams: Mr. Speaker, I know of my colleague's interest in these matters. First of all I want to congratulate Memorial University in Newfoundland and the colleges in Newfoundland on the extraordinary grassroots work they have done in education and training over the years.

The answer to his question lies in the parts of my speech about partnerships. My hope now is that this coherent and unified department will be more sensitive to the real partners. He heard me mention cooperation with provincial ministers of education. Ministers of education in the provinces and the territories are among the most powerful ministers in their jurisdictions. We must have a single voice working with those people, and then the special needs which my colleague describes in his riding will be automatically taken into account and met.

The tragedy which my colleague described in Newfoundland was one of the drives to make the whole federal effort in the area of lifelong learning more efficient. As he knows, it is particularly difficult in rural communities. We are going to need distance education, special grants, and special programs for students in rural areas. By the way, whatever age they are, these are essentially students with special needs and we should focus on them. No one

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should be left out. I do believe that as this new, very powerful department gets going, it will help in improving these situations.

Mr. Peter Van Loan (York—Simcoe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to split my time with the member for New Westminster—Coquitlam if that is possible.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): This being the opening round, in order for the member to be allowed to share his time, he will need unanimous consent.

Is there unanimous consent for the member to share his time?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, I would like to say at the outset that we do not oppose this bill. It is a position that we take, however, not without many reservations.

In the recent election campaign, one of the major messages I received from my constituents was their concern that there was a government in Ottawa, a Liberal government, that was rife with waste. They saw a lot of mismanagement. Their concern was to see a lot of this corrected. That is what they asked me to do here in Ottawa, in large part.

It is not a coincidence, I believe, that what we are seeing in this bill is really an effort to rename the HRDC Department, that my colleague had so much trouble recalling. It is a name of a department that many Liberals might wish to forget because of course the HRDC Department had a notorious track record for bad management and bad waste. That HRDC boondoggle is something that the government wants people to forget. Why not use the easiest device, in the finest traditions of George Orwell, of using language and names? The new name of HRSDC is one way of leaving behind that HRDC history and the bad memories that went with it. I believe that has a lot to do with why we are facing the bill in front of us.

However, in practical terms, there is very little that I see coming from this legislation that achieves any successful outcome in terms of reducing government waste and mismanagement. In fact, in a similar vein, my constituents wanted to see a smaller and more responsive government. That is very much something that they wanted to see from government that had been lacking from Ottawa in the past.

Through the process of these companion bills that would create the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and the Minister of Social Development, the effect would indeed be to create an additional cabinet post, a new department and, in fact a larger, more diffuse and bureaucratic government. I am not sure that is what my constituents want to see when they think in terms of a smaller and more responsive government.

Curiously, we see an aspect of the legislation that says there may be a labour minister. It would be an optional consideration. We do have a Minister of Labour in this government but, apparently, it would be an optional position, suggesting that once again we are looking at a government that is much larger than it needs to be. That is a question that we are all concerned about.

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Overall, one of the most troublesome aspects of the course we have followed here, and we heard it in one of the questions across the way, is the question of the process that this has followed. It is a process that speaks to the continued arrogance of the government, and in fact a lack of respect for this House of Commons and Parliament.

This department was effectively created through order in council a year ago. It has continued to operate for a year without any bill ever coming before Parliament to create the new departments and to divide them. The fact that this bill is before us today to create that department suggests to me one of two possible potential rationales.

First, it is an acknowledge of the government that the process that has been followed was in fact inappropriate and that the government should have come to this House of Commons before creating that department. The only other option is that the bill is in front of us as indeed a waste of time, something with which to keep this House busy.

I do not believe that the government is interested in wasting the time of the members in this House. It values that. That leads me to conclude that we are facing a piece of legislation that would make legal what is in effect a *fait accompli*, operating by order in council for about a year. That, to me, smacks of a disrespect for this institution, the House of Commons, and the processes of Parliament.

I want to talk a bit about the importance of treating taxpayers with respect and treating taxpayer dollars with respect.

The reorganization of the departments does not come without a cost. Any reorganization of this nature does require time and effort. Restructuring always involves costs. Often, we want to see restructuring taking place in order to save money and create efficiencies. I do not see any efficiencies coming out of this, but I do see additional costs coming from that. I see a lack of respect for the taxpayers of Canada through the steps being taken in this process before us. I do not see the companion material benefit that we would like to have.

I did notice in the legislation a recognition of the continuation of the Employment Insurance Commission. That brings me to another important point that I think is worthy of some comment in passing in this House. The way that the employment insurance system has been run in this country for close to a decade is similar to the other concerns I have about the attitude of the government toward taxpayers who are really viewed as people from whom to grab revenues for the purposes of the government rather than people to be served.

● (1240)

There have been enormous surpluses generated out of that system. Those surpluses come from the real money paid by workers and by employers through their employment insurance premiums. Yet, while they think they are getting insurance for those dark days when they might face the need to search for a job when they lose theirs, in fact, that money has not been pouring into a fund. For several years now, it has just been pouring into general revenues.

Some \$46 billion has been grabbed from the workers and employers in this country and diverted to the general revenues to be spent on programs entirely unrelated to the needs of workers and

unrelated to their insurance for the dark days when they lose a job. That smacks of arrogance of a government that sees every program and every chance to reach into people's pockets as a chance to grab their money for the ongoing operations of government.

That is not what employment insurance is about. That is not what it should be about. That ongoing surplus will continue to run this year. One need only look at the numbers of projected economic growth and revenues that have been coming in to know that this tax grab will continue. That is simply unacceptable.

I hope that through the continuation of the commission the government will see the opportunity in the weeks and months ahead to bring in real changes to restore the operation of the employment insurance system to a genuine insurance system that serves the needs of workers and employers.

Right now it is serving as a tax. It is a tax on jobs. It is a tax on economic growth. It is a tax on prosperity. The worst part of it all is that it is a tax that is regressive. It hits those ordinary workers more than anyone else. That is because after a person passes a certain income level the government stops collecting the tax. That person has topped out his or her contributions. It is a regressive tax. It is a tax that hurts the constituents in York—Simcoe tremendously. People are working hard. They are trying to get ahead and make a better life for their family. That is something that we need to see changed.

I look at Bill C-23 and, other than the opportunity perhaps to use that vehicle of continuing the employment insurance commission as a vehicle for further change in the future, I do not see a great deal of improvement. All I see is a process that leaves us with a lot of questions about the way the government does business and its lack of respect for the elected representatives of the people of Canada.

However, that being said, what would be the implication if we were to oppose the bill and put back the genie in the bottle of creating a new department? At this point in time I expect that it would only create further additional costs from a further reorganization. That is why we on this side find ourselves in the very uncomfortable position of being faced with a decision on do we or do we not support something that happened a year ago? Do we or do we not support a reorganization and the creation of a new department that happened a year ago?

In those circumstances, the challenges of the choice that we have to make can be surely understood. That is why, reluctantly, we will not be opposing this bill. We will only support it because of our concerns with the potential cost of trying to roll-back that restructuring at this late stage in the game.

● (1245)

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member for York—Simcoe spoke at length about his displeasure with HRDC. We have now a split in the department. Could the member elaborate further if he is opposed to the present situation? What would his party support and what would be his party's solution to HRDC?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House the perspective of the Conservative Party has been very simple. We believe that government should be smaller. It should be more efficient and more responsive to the needs of taxpayers.

Government Orders

The creation of new departments, new bureaucracies, and new cabinet ministers may be very helpful for allowing more spending and more bureaucracy, but the experience of the taxpayers of York—Simcoe is that the more bureaucracy they encounter, the less responsive it is, and the less service they get. The more they see their taxes go up, the more they see their taxes wasted.

Our solution would be a smaller government that takes less from the taxpayers and allows them support where they genuinely need it, not more spending and more programs in Ottawa, as indicated if the employment insurance system actually did function as an employment insurance system.

Our solution on things like HRDC, which is now becoming HRSDC, is to not have wasteful grant programs where the Auditor General has to be critical of the political interference, the lack of tangible results and the lack of accountability. Our solution is to focus on accountable processes, accountable systems and not look for ways to spend money, but look for ways to respect taxpayers' dollars and to allow them to spend their money the way that they would like to see it spent in order to make their lives and their families' lives better for many years in the future.

I do not see how the creation of new ministerial posts help to achieve that. A new cabinet minister may help a Prime Minister who is concerned about keeping his caucus happy, happier by creating more opportunities within, but that does not create new opportunities for people in my community who are working hard and trying to build better lives. In fact, it makes it tougher for them to do that when they see bigger and larger government. Bigger and larger government is not the answer in their lives. More opportunities for them is the answer in their lives.

• (1250)

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague mentioned EI and the money going into general revenues. On the one hand, it seems to me that he is interested in the change in HRDC because of a report of the Auditor General. However, as he knows, in the 1980s the Auditor General said that the EI moneys should go into general revenues. Does he believe that in this case we should overrule in some way the Auditor General?

Mr. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General has been quite outspoken in her criticism of the employment insurance system and the surpluses that have been run up. That is money that has been taken from taxpayers without accountability. That has been taken not from taxpayers, in fact, but taken from a specific group of taxpayers, workers who have been paying into employment insurance and employers who have been creating those jobs.

I can tell the House that I do not read into anything that the Auditor General has said in regard to the approval for that tax grab of \$46 billion to be taken away from the ordinary workers and employers in Canada. In fact, I read very much the opposite. There is a desire to see the system brought into account where we stop taking more than we need to run the system, where we ensure that we do not build up huge surpluses that are then diverted away to general revenues.

If the member is talking about having the government, through its general revenues, run it as a social program, that might be a different

issue. However, what we have seen is a vastly politicized process of setting the employment insurance rate by the government. In fact, in the Auditor General's words, the government has been breaking the law that requires that there not be surpluses run up. Of course, it is a difficult law because it is a law that requires a certain degree of foresight. It requires looking into a crystal ball to set the rates.

It is very tough to hold people to account except in retrospect after they have made the decisions. That has been an opportunity that the government has taken advantage of to grab \$46 billion from workers and employers in this country, to take \$46 billion out of the economy that should be creating jobs and letting people live a better standard—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): Resuming debate, the hon. member for New Westminster—Coquitlam.

Mr. Paul Forseth (New Westminster—Coquitlam, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am addressing the presentation of the government's proposed Bill C-23, specifically known as an act to establish to the Department of Social Development and to amend and repeal certain related acts.

The bill establishes the department of social development, over which presides the Minister of Social Development. The bill sets out the minister's powers, duties and functions. It also describes the rules for the protection and the making available of personal information obtained under departmental programs, other than those covered by similar codes found in the Canada pension plan and the Old Age Security Act.

The bill proposes to legalize in statute what the government has already done by order in council. The Government of Canada is asking Parliament to approve this human resources and skills development act, but we must never forget the order of things. The governments may propose, but Parliament must ultimately vote the appropriation. Parliament is not the government.

I observe that there have been many within the Liberal orb who have been on the inside and in power positions so long that they think Parliament is just another hurdle in a process, and often just an inconvenience to them for the senior bureaucrats to have their way. Too often it looks like they have their way with these, what I would describe, rather weak Liberal politicians. It seems they are quite comfortable that they can manoeuvre these less than visionary politicians around to have what they want.

It is an approach that says Canada will get what the Liberals deem is good for the country, what they know is best for the rest of us. That whole superior attitude is what I smell in this bill and also with sister Bill C-22. The two bills take care of each part of the old department which was divided into two, and this being the so-called social development side.

Government Orders

Now the hon. member for Eglinton—Lawrence was made Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development upon appointment to cabinet. One wonders if he has looked more like a deer caught in the headlights about all the manoeuvring around the creation of these two departments out of the former one large department known as HRDC. It certainly was not this minister's decision to do so.

Human Resources Development Canada was reorganized into two new departments: Social Development Canada, SDC, and Human Resources Skills Development Canada, HRSDC. Both departments are presently still governed by the existing Department of Human Resources Development Act.

The Prime Minister, somewhere with his unelected advisers, agreed to what had been put to them by the bureaucracy about this plan. The Commons standing committee from the previous Parliament had also been led along to believe that this was the way to go. However, it remains to be seen just how wise this move is. Any such disturbing change is disruptive to lower level staff. There is always a lot of internal energy wasted with office changes, clarifying mission statements, shuffling of staff and their physical offices, creating new positions and then staffing them with all the subsequent union appeals and the hurt feelings that go along with it. New reporting relationships with new materials in hand with unspecified and unclear budget authorities also come at quite a cost. There is also a huge loss in productivity when there is such so-called reorganization.

I have observed that the Liberals have not been very good managers in the past, so why should this scheme go any better than the others? The best ideas on paper often do not deliver meaningful and productive outcomes for the consumer of the service. The effort to get from point A to destination B and C at the same time, with different parts of an old team, can be quite inefficient.

The Government of Canada has tabled the human resources and skills development act, which contains the mandate of the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and the Minister of Labour and Housing. The mandate is included in the act to provide a foundation and a rationale for the department's programs. For the first time, the legislation includes a proposed harmonized code governing the disclosure of personal information of Canadians. This new code is supposed to provide more consistency in administering personal information than is currently the case, given the various statutory and regulatory provisions governing the disclosure of personal information. The Liberals claim the bill provides a greater degree of transparency for Canadians. We will see about that. If anything, the government has been anything but transparent in the past.

We go back to December 12, 2003, when the government had to do something to look like it was a little different from the previous regime, so it picked on this one. By means of a series of orders in council, made pursuant to the Public Service Rearrangement and Transfer of Duties Act, various portions of the Department of Human Resources Development and related powers, duties and functions of the Minister of Human Resources Development were transferred to the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, HRSDC, to a new Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development.

Therefore, the arrangement on the ground is a done deal, and the shuffling has been going on, money is being spent and lives are being affected, but Parliament has not yet granted its approval. This is the way Liberals do things. They now admit that department legislation is required to address these new mandates and responsibilities of Social Development Canada, SDC, and the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Maybe Parliament should not be blackmailed in this way. Maybe we should say no. Then what? Maybe we should raise the low hurdle around here and make the government really make its case for why this move is wise at this time and why the changes will substantially raise the quality and the value for dollar to the taxpayer. There is absolutely nothing that I have heard about case examples of how this change will help one single individual in his or her specific life situation.

● (1255)

The government says that the drafting of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development legislation provides the opportunity to ensure that the minister and the department have the legal powers and tools needed to fulfill the minister's mandate. When has that ever stopped a Liberal? They Liberals claim that the HRDC is working closely with officials from SDC on legislative issues of mutual interest. I certainly hope so.

The minister then goes on to say that the proposed legislation includes a harmonized code of governing the disclosure of personal information. Liberals say that there are some enhancements here that other statutes of privacy laws do not sufficiently cover. If this is so and more legislation is really needed, that fact poorly reflects on the core law of privacy in Canada. I suppose more will be revealed about this whole mess in due course. They claim that this new code will replace the current five statutory and regulatory regimes that govern the disclosure of personal information. If this is needed, then where is the agenda to fix the whole thing? In a way, it is an admission of legal weakness for privacy law, but they will never admit that now will they?

Liberals assert that the additional new code will provide more consistency in administering personal information than is currently the case, given the various statutory and regulatory provisions governing the disclosure of personal information. They say that it provides a greater degree of transparency for Canadians resulting from this harmonization, and codifies the current administrative practices to protect personal information used for research purposes. It also includes an offence provision for knowingly disclosing personal information violating privacy laws. The code also describes departmental commitments, these nice sounding phrases of reassurance to protect the privacy of Canadians, including both the use of personal information for internal research and the conditions for disclosure of personal information outside the department.

The Liberals say that they are committed to improving the social and economic well-being of all Canadians, including the most disadvantaged, and will deliver accountable and efficient policies and programs. They have not done it yet, so I do not see any evidence that this rearrangement of the deck chairs on the ship will do much in that regard. They have not made its central case.

Government Orders

They put it this way. Liberals say, in the promotional literature, that Human Resources and Skills Development Canada plays a key role in meeting the commitments through its efforts to help Canadians acquire skills to get productive and meaningful jobs. They go on and say that it will enhance the access to a post-secondary education, promote skills development and promote a cultural of lifelong learning. They boast that these efforts will result in a better quality of life for all Canadians. That is quite a mouthful. One can ask those who do not have a job or who cannot afford to upgrade training how they feel about what is out there now for those who want to improve themselves, and one will find quite a different story.

That group has been in power for over 10 years. The situation on the ground is their responsibility.

Then Liberals claim labour and housing programs will continue to promote safe, healthy, stable and cooperative workplaces and will continue efforts to help communities reduce homelessness. Such promises do not make the grade. Any average Canadian knows that homelessness is much worse now than it was, say during the period of 1984 to 1993. Just try to walk to Parliament Hill. One has to be blind not to see the situation. The last Liberal leader actually claimed that he talked to a homeless person. At least our Governor General tried in east side Vancouver this year to do it. When was the last time our Prime Minister ever stopped his limo cavalcade to talk to and tune into what it is like for those sleeping on the sidewalk by which he zooms?

For the bill, there is also the assertion that the legislation will provide the framework to ensure that the Government of Canada continues to make Canadians the best trained and most highly skilled workers in the world. We have never been there internationally as a whole and despite this kind of overblown rhetoric, I am skeptical that the department reorganization will deliver the kind of sensitive and comprehensive help that is really needed to meet those kinds of inflated objectives.

I want to hear the government really make its case for these two bills, Bill C-22 and Bill C-23. I am prepared to compliment the government when it goes in the right direction, but so far what we have seen and heard is a lot of bureaucratise and not much reality selling of substance to Parliament, where the ultimate approval must be made. I wish them well.

● (1300)

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened to my colleague, and I must have lost the logic somewhere. The department of HRDC, which both the speakers on the other side dislike so much, was set up by a Conservative government. It was set up in a way which did not involve clear legislation, as we have here, showing how the old federal departments were being amalgamated into one huge whole, to the point where it left four or five different privacy arrangements within the same legislation. That is one aspect that my colleague chose to ignore.

The other point is the decision to make a change, and I suppose I have to accept this, did not come from the government or the cabinet; it came from the House. The standing committee conducted hearings for several months and listened to witnesses from all over

the country. It was not a Liberal majority or a something else majority pushing it through. The committee unanimously recommended that this very large, overly diverse department, which had been set up by the Conservatives, be divided. What is happening now with the legislation is that the House of Commons itself is dealing with recommendations which it actually made.

My colleague made some disparaging remarks about Canada's higher education and the state of its training. I think most people in the House believe that we have a way to go in terms of lifelong learning. I want us to go further and faster to deal with this matter. It is very urgent. However, Canada has the highest percentage of students in post-secondary education in the world. We have some limitations in other areas of post-secondary education, but that certainly is not one.

We have the world ranking economy at the present time. In any way we look at our economy, it is either first, second or third by the various economic measures. That is not by accident. That is because we are an efficient, highly qualified and diverse workforce already. He should be very careful when he is criticizing these things.

My question is on transparency. Let us take the area of privacy alone, privacy of information provided by Canadians to the federal government. Does he think the regime of four or five different privacy codes, which were set up by the Conservatives in the old HRDC department, is an advantage? Does he not think that streamlining, and there is other streamlining in the legislation, alone is worth the effort of the House at the present time?

● (1305)

Mr. Paul Forseth: Mr. Speaker, yes, I did acknowledge the role of the standing committee of the previous Parliament. However, there are ways of bringing a standing committee to its conclusion, especially in view of the very lacklustre administration that we were getting from the government at the time.

What is the practical level of how it is delivered on the street for the average Canadian who pays the bills and who expects some service? They do not care about how departments are organized in Ottawa, but they can certainly measure outcomes by what is going on in the street. I am talking about that aspect.

Government Orders

The history of Liberal administration has been one of missed opportunity and that we are not necessarily in the forefront of innovation, skills training or support for higher education. I put it to the government that it should make the case, using case examples. It should talk about how the average person in my community will see a difference, rather than more departmental shuffling. That is the standard. We measure by actual outcomes at the community level. If we can achieve that and if the government can make the case, I really think that is appropriate. I am not being unreasonably critical about vision for the future, but I have to look at an estimation of future performance based on past behaviour and past results. It has not been particularly good. The history is of government mismanagement, of waste in the public service and not particularly great support for the employees at the lower level. The government has usually been in quite a tangle with its unions rather than developing a supportive work climate.

It is the practical outcome of departments that are supposed to provide benefits and services to Canadians. I am asking the government to make its case in specific examples so that it is not just an academic exercise, but in a simple way that average Canadians can approve of what is being done today.

• (1310)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have this opportunity to address this bill on behalf of the Bloc Québécois. I will do so by discussing five specific issues. First, I will present our position. Then, I will examine the objectives set out in this legislation and also its mandate and vision. We will see if, given the stated objectives, this mandate and this vision are in harmony. Finally, I will deal with the programs as such, particularly the employment insurance commission.

The Bloc Québécois disagrees with this bill. We do not share its vision, for two main reasons. First, this bill does not in any way improve the current situation regarding the jobless. On the contrary, it confirms the direction taken so far by the government.

The second fundamental reason is that by splitting the current department into two to create a social development department, the government is increasing its interference in provincial jurisdictions, particularly those of Quebec. Later on, I will explain why I am alluding to Quebec in particular; it is primarily in light of the arguments presented by the hon. member for Peterborough regarding continuing education, among others.

On December 12, 2003, the Prime Minister announced the decision to split the department into two separate parts. The reason that he gave at the time was to achieve better strategic results in management improvement. However, we should, among other things, remember the purpose of the employment insurance fund.

The Prime Minister also contended that he wanted to promote an efficient labour market. The government systematically gets back to this issue and claims that the employment insurance fund works well, when in fact employers, workers and all stakeholders in that sector are unanimous in saying that the system no longer works.

The Prime Minister is also saying that he wants to do more for lifelong learning and student aid. In so doing, he is indicating that

the federal government will get even more involved in provincial jurisdictions, particularly those of Quebec.

In order to achieve this goal, the federal government wants to mobilize various groups, including the private sector, government organizations and communities, regarding community development and the social economy. The reason I am reminding hon. members of the statements made by the Prime Minister is that we still do not see what is in it for workers affected by the employment insurance issue.

On that same December 12, 2003, the leader of the official opposition in Quebec announced he would be firmly and categorically opposing this new attack on the prerogatives of the provinces, including Quebec. He stated at the time that he unreservedly opposed the establishment of the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, of the Department of Social Development and of a cities secretariat.

It is my understanding that, administratively, cities do not come under the federal government but the provincial governments. This goes to show how clear and definite the intent is; the government is going as far as wanting to enshrine it in legislation. The structures announced will serve no purpose and clearly reflect, once again, interference from the federal government.

The hon. parliamentary secretary and member for Peterborough is right when he says that these are important departments and that it may be useful to consider a certain division of responsibilities in terms of their missions, particularly the social mission.

• (1315)

It is recognized that the social aspect, as far as day care centres, parental leave, compassionate leave, seniors and so on are concerned, should come under the responsibility of the provinces.

From the moment that attempts are made to make these the responsibility of a given department, this shows the particular nature that is intended to be given to this department with respect to areas of provincial responsibility.

In addition, administratively, this will complicate things instead of easing and simplifying them, as promised. The Secretary of State acknowledged that much when he said we would have a single window for all the services announced.

So, what will change in terms of services? The body, the service delivery organization, remains the same but a second head is attached to it. We end up with a body with two heads, with the drawbacks this normally entails: more complex directives, and often two sets of directives.

Government Orders

I think the member for Peterborough will acknowledge it. Officials from his own department have acknowledged that the legislation is already very difficult to enforce. They have a hard time with it. I am talking about the Employment Insurance Act. If the same approach is used for the other services there will be no end to the problems.

That said, let us look at the vision and mission of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development. Let me start with the vision. The vision is to build a country where everyone has the opportunity to learn, and to contribute to Canada's success. However, we have the right to expect a policy that would make things easier for people who have the misfortune of losing their job, that would simplify the rules and makes it easier to access employment insurance. We want this department to contribute to Canada's success.

As I was saying earlier, this is interference in entirely provincial jurisdictions. The bill talks about promoting an efficient labour market and a highly skilled workforce. This comes under the area raised earlier by the Secretary of State. This entire area has to do with training the workforce. There is still no measure to correct the whole employment insurance fund problem.

As for the mission, we are still making quite extraordinary discoveries about the government's intention. According to the mission statement, the department will contribute to achieving its two objectives by supporting human capital development, enhancing access to post-secondary education—a jurisdiction of the provinces and Quebec—supporting workplace skills development, and encouraging lifelong learning for Canadians.

This is a niche the federal government created for itself in 1997 through its famous agreement with Quebec. There are four areas of jurisdiction, four well-defined niches that belong to the provinces: on-the-job training, immigration, seniors and young people and persons with disabilities.

● (1320)

This is also very interesting, because the federal government is getting involved in a new jurisdiction, one in which it did not get involved in the past. The government is also promoting a working environment that is safe, sound, fair, stable and cooperative.

So, the act, for those provinces that have one—and heaven knows that Quebec is far ahead in this regard—deals with people who are injured at work and who are affected by occupational diseases, through a body called the CSST.

Quebec also has legislation on the prevention of occupational diseases and accidents on the job, which gives the Quebec government a lot of flexibility to support businesses and workers, to take preventive measures and, when an accident occurs, to ensure that the individual and the company are affected as little as possible.

We have this body called the workplace security and safety commission—the CSST—which operates at arm's length, and in a way that we want to propose to the federal government for the employment insurance fund.

Let us now turn our attention to the employment insurance fund. First, we must look at the programs. The seven programs announced

by the government, which will be under the responsibility of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, deal with employment insurance benefits, employment programs, the workplace, learning, work, the homeless, service benefit support and benefit distribution.

Of those areas, there are already four in which there is federal interference in provincial jurisdictions, including, of course, those of Quebec. First, there is employment insurance. The government is once again keeping the whole empty administration shell of the employment insurance fund, by putting responsibility for it in the hands of people who are directly appointed by the government. We know what this way of doing things has led to so far: the government has dipped into the surpluses, thus largely contributing to the fiscal imbalance, and this is unquestionably an infringement on the provinces' ability to use that money for other means, or for the same purposes.

There is also the whole issue of replacement workers in cases of conflicts, the antiscab legislation, which I will not talk about here, in the House, since someone else must probably do so today or in the next few days. The issue of homelessness comes under provincial jurisdiction. As for training and manpower development, I will not say more, because I talked about this earlier.

However, concerning the Employment Insurance Commission, the government is staying the course. What is it telling us here? It is maintaining the commission. It is recommending four commissioners. One commissioner shall be the Deputy Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, who shall be the chairperson. The Associate Deputy Minister shall be the vice-chairperson. A person shall be appointed after consultation with organizations representative of labour and representative of employers. They will have no power. It is an empty shell. All they will have to do is manage the what goes on, without having one word to say about what the government is doing with the employment insurance surplus, among other things, but mostly with the premium and benefit issue as such and the whole regulation of employment insurance.

Consequently, the Bloc Québécois, speaking for Quebec, disagrees totally with this approach. What we are favouring and promoting is, of course, the bill we introduced, which calls for a commission consisting of a chairperson, two deputy ministers, an associate deputy minister, seven management representatives and seven labour representatives. Why so many? Because it is these people who invest in the fund. It is for them that the fund was created. Since 1980, the federal government has not invested one cent in the fund.

● (1325)

This is not to make the fund strictly independent and strictly under the jurisdiction of the representatives of the two parties that contribute to it, that is workers and employers. The government will also be involved in its capacity as legislator, in order to ensure follow-up on decisions taken by the House on the recommendation of this new commission.

Government Orders

This approach matches in every aspect the repeated requests from all employers through their respective associations. Again this week, they made requests in subcommittees appointed by this House, and all of the labour organizations and other stakeholders which have voiced an opinion on this commission have done the same. Consequently, we have trouble understanding why the government does not bow to this demand and why there has been no openness on this front so far.

To quote what Hassan Yussuf, senior economist for the Canadian Labour Congress said only days ago:

The Employment Insurance Commission needs to be at arms length from the government. It must be independent in order to supervise the situation and then report to the public. We do not want to see it administered solely by workers and employers, but see it instead as tripartite. The government must be an equal partner.

We agree with that. It is very similar to Bill C-280 introduced in this House by the hon. member for Manicouagan.

In addition to this statement, there was another very important one by the secretary general of the FTQ, who said, "...it would be fair for the federal government to join us. So we very much agree on an independent fund, or even a trust."

He gave as an example a trust like that of the CSST, Quebec's workplace health and safety board.

I will conclude with a brief aside concerning the anti-scab bill recently introduced in this House by the hon. member for Louis-Hébert. It contains one very important measure, given the impact related to the role of labour in working relations.

I can say right now that the government ought to support Bill C-263, since the minister of Labour himself opened up the issue recently.

I have a lot more to say, but I will save it for later. In conclusion our position is this: because it proposes an Employment Insurance Commission without any real power, with the opposite makeup to that outlined in Bill C-280, which I mentioned previously; because it institutionalizes blatant constitutional interference in the jurisdictions of Quebec and the provinces, particularly with respect to the National Literacy Secretariat, Learning Initiatives Program, Office of Learning Technologies and the homeless issue, the Bloc Québécois believes that Bill C-280 proposes a more suitable Employment Insurance Commission to respond to the needs and realities of the labour sector.

Therefore, in conclusion, the Bloc Québécois believes that the mandate given to the Department of Labour in Part 2 of Bill C-23 is in harmony with Bill C-263 on replacement workers. Consequently, the Liberal government should support the Bloc's initiative by voting in favour of this bill, thereby amending the Canada Labour Code.

• (1330)

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in his speech the member stated that the federal government does not contribute one cent to the EI program but that the premiums are paid by the employees and employers, and self-employed people pay the full amount.

In fact all Canadians who participate in the EI program have federal tax credits for all of the premiums that they do pay. Effectively the federal government is subsidizing, and even for the lowest income Canadians, at a 17% federal tax rate. That is available on every dollar of premium paid. There certainly is a substantial support level by the Government of Canada with regard to EI.

The member also commented about provincial jurisdiction which is something we could talk about for days. There is health care, social welfare, post-secondary education and equalization issues, and the list could go on. Every level of government has a role to play.

I put it in the context that the measure of success of a country is not the measure of its economic condition but rather the measure of the health and well-being of its people. Each and every jurisdiction has a role to play in that. Sometimes the federal government has a direct role to play through research, for instance health research, whereas with regard to health, the provinces deliver the health system. There are also child care and community issues, et cetera.

We all have a role to play in some way, fashion or form because the best interest of the country is to ensure that the health and well-being of Canadians continue to improve. Does the member not agree that there is a very important role for each and every level of government throughout Canada to play in terms of the health and well-being of Canadians?

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, first I would like to remind the hon. member that the Canadian Constitution of 1867 provided that these were provincial jurisdictions. It was only in 1940 that the legislation was changed, with the provinces' consent, to deal with the crisis brought about by the war and all that. Everything would get back to normal over time, but only the employment insurance fund was affected. That is one thing.

On the one hand, with all the infringements that have taken place since, we can see what road the government has taken, using this control over the EI fund to chip away increasingly at the portion of the jurisdiction that belonged to the provinces.

On the other hand, the hon. member said that the government is subsidizing at a 17% federal tax rate the contributions made by employees and employers; this may be true for some workers while others cannot necessarily take advantage of that. All in all, will the hon. member agree with me that, during the past year, of the surplus that was used for other purposes \$3.3 billion came exclusively from that fund?

Only employers and employees contribute to this fund. Will the member not agree with me that they are contributing a lot and that this is turning into a disguised tax?

According to the Auditor General, over the past eight years, the portion of the surplus that was used for purposes other than what the EI fund was intended for totalled approximately \$46 billion.

If the hon. member wants to deny that, that is his business. This is a fact, however, and facts are stubborn; they tend to catch up to you. For him to say that the government is contributing to the fund is a major mistake. He should look at how the fund is administered and how the surpluses are used.

[English]

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to what my colleague had to say. He is a very thoughtful member of Parliament and I suspect we share many common values, but we do disagree on one important matter. This is the federal government and we are functioning in what is arguably the most efficient and decentralized confederation in the world.

We have to think about what are the appropriate roles of the federal government. I try to go to some trouble to point out that I have no wish to move into areas of provincial jurisdiction. However, in a confederation each partner—and in this case there are three, the municipalities, which my colleague also mentioned, the provinces and the federal government—should be strong. We should protect our own rights and responsibilities, but we should all contribute and ideally cooperate together.

The value of a confederation over a very centralized state is that all sorts of diversity can exist within the same unit. We have the possibility therefore to capture diverse best practices or to avoid worst practices going on. We can capture these things very quickly. One of the reasons we are doing so well as a nation at the present time is just that. Wherever creativity occurs in the country we are able to seize upon it.

We can look at different parts. My colleague knows I greatly admire what Quebec has done in the area of child care. I greatly admire the fact that the CEGEPs are free; there are two free years of college. Those are two examples of best practices. However in the province of Quebec the students pay the highest non-tuition fees in colleges of anywhere in the country. I think that is something which people from Quebec and the rest of the country should note.

I am just giving examples of best practices and less good practices. Quebec is the only province in which university enrolment has levelled out.

British Columbia has a very interesting system of colleges, university colleges and universities. It has very good linkages between the different levels of post-secondary education. I think we should learn from that. On the other hand tuition fees in B.C. are going up in a way that they have not in Quebec. The province of Alberta is an example in apprenticeships. There are these advantages out there.

Does my colleague not think that the new arrangement—and the department existed before but it is now being divided—will not allow us all, including Quebec and Alberta, and other provinces and territories which I could have mentioned, to see what is being done well in one part of the country and take advantage of it, and to see what is not being done so well in another part of the country and to

Government Orders

avoid those problems? Is that not a role for the federal government in a system like ours?

• (1335)

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Lessard: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his question and his speech, which offers me an opportunity to add to what I have said.

For example, where the provinces cover tuition, students—and we see this even in Quebec—do everything they can to avoid having to pay new fees.

The hon. member must understand that the problem related to funding, whether health or education, lies in the fact that the bulk of the money collected from the taxpayer according to the responsibilities allocated to the federal and provincial levels, goes to the federal level rather than the provincial. Thus the fiscal imbalance. Everyone acknowledges this except the Prime Minister. It is also obvious from the facts being mentioned in today's speeches.

The Secretary of State is telling us that the provinces and the federal level are forces and resources that complement each other, and this cannot help but be beneficial to both. That might be the case if the funds came back to the provinces in a proper proportion to their responsibilities.

When only one of the parties benefits, only one out of eleven, while the others all get it in the neck, unless they have strong economies like some of the resource-rich western provinces—and we are happy for them—there is only one conclusion: this is not the case for everyone, Quebec included.

I would therefore like the hon. member to explain how he reached the conclusion he has just presented to us. Earlier, I referred to stubborn facts. Fiscal imbalance is one of those, and is acknowledged by everybody. It is not a stubborn fact just because I say so, but because this has been recognized for some years, even by this House. So what is his reaction to that? And how does he plan to deal with it? He cannot just pass it off as a matter of continuing education, as he has. Everything has to be examined thoroughly, the EI fund included.

• (1340)

[English]

Hon. Ed Broadbent (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, at the outset I would like to obtain the consent of the House to share my time with the member for Burnaby—New Westminster.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): Does the member have unanimous consent to share his time?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my colleagues in the New Democratic Party, I lend our support to the creation of this new department. As has been said already in the introductory comments, this is a reconstitution of a department that existed before.

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I want to speak very directly to one component of this department and underline why I want to give particular emphasis to its saliency, and that is to say that it will narrow the focus and make someone quite accountable for housing.

Today is National Housing Day and I want to say something about that in the context of this new ministerial responsibility we will get for housing. I want to do it particularly by focusing on the situation in housing in the nation's capital.

I had occasion not long ago to go to the capitals of many Scandinavian countries, to Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands. I did not do a systematic tour, but I can say that I did not see the signs of homelessness on the downtown streets of those cities that I do on the streets five minutes away from the House of Commons.

One of the reasons for that is that all of those countries, like the majority of industrial countries, have a national housing program. We are the only one in the G-7 without continuing, coherent, stable funding allocated for affordable housing and that is a national disgrace.

This began in 1993 when Brian Mulroney abolished the federal housing program. The error was compounded and worsened when the province of Ontario elected a neo-Conservative government in Mr. Harris who immediately scrapped provincial programs that disastrously affected Ottawa, the nation's capital.

It should not surprise us that in the 1990s in the nation's capital, and I am not only talking about my riding but I am talking about the whole city, we actually had a decline of some 4,000 rental units in the city precisely at the time when the population was mushrooming. This was an inevitable consequence of two governments, one at the federal level and one at the provincial level, abandoning their responsibility for housing.

I want to say to my federal Liberal colleagues that it was a Liberal government in 1976 when I was here that took on the obligations of an international treaty, the covenant on economic, social and cultural rights, which has within it the obligation of the federal government to move to ensure that as a matter of right, not option, Canadians are entitled to housing. We have had that obligation since 1976 but it certainly has not been lived up to.

Finally, three years ago, eight years after the Liberals were elected in 1993, a new housing program was brought in with \$25,000 per unit put on the table, but for that to go out into the community the provinces had to match the funding. Only three provinces took it up. Needless to say, the Conservative government in Ontario did not. Therefore not a single new housing unit in the affordable category has been built in the nation's capital since that period.

I want to say what is needed and what this new department with the new minister responsible ought to be doing. Here in the nation's capital 13,000 households, most of them with children, are waiting for social housing. The waiting period is six to eight years.

On a typical night here in the nation's capital 1,000 people go to bed in a homeless shelter. There are 250,000 Canadians nationally who are homeless. This, I repeat, for a rich industrial democracy is a national disgrace.

What do we say should be put in its place? The government actually boasts about having \$61 billion in surpluses and that it has run surpluses for seven years in a row. We actually have a Minister of Finance who boasts that we have the lowest debt to GDP ratio in the G-7. Is that not incredible? We have 250,000 homeless families, over a million poor kids and 1,000 homeless people who sleep in shelters here in the nation's capital every night and the Minister of Finance has \$61 billion in surpluses but has not spent a bloody cent on the housing that we desperately need in the country and in the nation's capital.

• (1345)

I hope the new minister recognizes that our international obligation in housing is a social right, which should lead to other initiatives. For example, we need a 10 year housing program that would include the building of 20,000 new, affordable units, particularly in the co-op and non-profit sector so low income Canadians could then have access to housing.

We should have lots of renewal of existing housing stock that is in virtual slum conditions. Those houses should be rebuilt and re-established. We could have a program for some 100,000 units there.

As a result of the low income position of many Canadians, we should provide rent supplements for all Canadians. My own party has calculated that there are at least 40,000 low income tenants.

I want to comment about my colleagues in the Bloc Québécois. As a Canadian I understand nationalist sentiment very well. I understand that nationalist sentiment and social democratic philosophy can go hand in hand. Although I respect the arguments put forward by my colleague across the way, it deeply disturbs me, as a social democrat, to note that whenever there is a conflict between a nationalist impulse and a social democratic obligation for everyone from coast to coast, it is always, for the Bloc Québécois, the nationalist impulse that wins out. I appeal to those members to once in a while say that surely our social democracy from time to time should transcend old constitutional restrictions that were first put in place on this continent in the 19th century.

[*Translation*]

There are Quebeckers and Canadians in the other provinces who are poor. They all have to work together from time to time to benefit everyone.

[*English*]

We have money. We have an accumulated surplus of \$61 billion. This has gone on for seven years. We have another surplus now. We now have an obligation to get on with the job of creating affordable housing units that thousands of Canadians, many of them here in the national capital, badly need.

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Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am a big fan of housing. I spent five years with the housing authority in my own riding where we had rent supplements and rent geared to income programs, half of which were family units and half of which were seniors units. The member will know that the seniors units always are the best kept and the best managed because they take care of them. Unfortunately, 75% of the other units are occupied by mother led families with children. This makes it kind of difficult because there are more problems than simply the need for housing.

I am appealing for some words of wisdom from the member to provide the House with a little insight into the aspect of social housing versus affordable housing.

In my view, social housing has more dimensions simply because it is available but people will not take it because they are afraid, or they have mental health problems or there are other exacerbating circumstances that do not seem to mesh people with the social housing stock that is available.

Affordable housing, on the other hand, is not affordable for the people who legitimately need housing in major centres like Toronto, Ottawa or Vancouver. The fact is that housing in urban centres cannot possibly be affordable for those who are living from paycheque to paycheque on a basic minimum wage.

We have to recognize that both of these situations require a more comprehensive approach than just simply providing affordable housing. We have to somehow find a way to get affordable housing to be really affordable but not necessarily in the major urban centres of Canada but to appreciate that there are places to go outside of downtown urban Canada.

• (1350)

Hon. Ed Broadbent: Mr. Speaker, the member's question is a serious one and I will try to give a serious answer. I think that the approach to housing has to be multi-faceted, as the member suggests.

The reality is that every industrial country has recognized that for roughly 85% of a population the market serves, the market provides housing. Whether we are talking about western European countries or North American countries, the market can serve most of us with above average incomes, or as I say, the top 85% of income. Then there is the other 15%, including, as the member alluded to, the working poor. We are talking about the working poor and other people who may need social housing. I think we need a mix of low income housing, non-profits and co-op housing. We need social housing and it can be provided in an esthetically and functionally attractive way. It is quite acceptable.

In the city of Ottawa we have the LeBreton flats project, a major project in the centre of the city. It happens to be in my riding. I have worked with the NCC on this. There will be a combination of housing in this project.

The member asked if, in effect, we should have all the low income people move out of the centres of the cities. I say no. Any decent city, any good city, ought to have a mix of all income and occupational groups. What we are doing on federal land in the LeBreton flats housing project is that 75% will be marketable housing, housing according to market prices, another 25% will be affordable housing, for the bottom 30% or so of income earners, and

then within that there will be an additional 9% or 10% social housing. They will all be able to live as they ought to be able to live.

The people who lived in LeBreton flats before this were low income people, so rather than ostracize them to the suburbs where they do not necessarily want to go, we can accommodate all income groups in an urban development, as we should. But in addition to providing different kinds of housing, as I have said, this also will require, and let us face it, income rent supplements for a lot of low income Canadians to enable them to get by.

Men and women working in the city as couples, if they are at minimum wage, cannot afford things. They have to make decisions. "Do we pay our rent or do we buy food?", they have to ask. The only way we will be able to deal in a sensible and civilized way with people like that who are working hard is to have some kind of rent supplement program like other industrial countries have.

The member is right. We need a multi-faceted approach to resolving this over time. It is exactly this kind of approach that our party favours and which, I will say with all due respect, his own party has abandoned for the past dozen years.

• (1355)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member from Ottawa Centre for agreeing to share his time with me.

He talked a lot about the issue of housing and the homeless. I want to add to what he was saying and I want to talk about how Bill C-23 relates to persons with disabilities in the country. This is an extremely important issue. The NDP is in favour of referring this motion to committee. What we want in particular is for extensive consultations to be held in committee. We want there to be consultations with labour groups across the country, as well as women, first nations, young people and student groups. Equally important: we want groups representing persons with disabilities to be consulted as well.

Some aspects of this legislation have a profound affect on the issue of persons with disabilities. If we improve their situation somehow, then we might improve the general situation for persons with disabilities in Canada. However, if we do nothing, if the legislation is nothing but policy, then their situation will not change at all. After 10 years of having a Liberal government, their situation is not good.

[*English*]

I do want to speak to this bill and speak to the vigilance that is required when we are talking about persons with disabilities in this country. We know that persons with disabilities represent almost 13% of the population and that currently there is a 50% unemployment rate among people with disabilities and one of the highest suicide rates in the country. In my region, homelessness has tripled over the past three years. We also know that nearly half of those who are homeless across this land are people with disabilities.

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Obviously their situation is very serious and we need to address it. We need to address it immediately. We are hoping that we will have consultations through the process of the examination of this bill in committee so that we can actually start to address these long-standing issues for people with disabilities.

One thing we would like to see developed is a labour market strategy for persons with disabilities, which would include a plan for increased participation in the federal government workforce. As we know, increasing employment for the disabled would go a long way in improving the quality of living of these Canadians.

We would like to see an independent commissioner reporting directly to Parliament who would monitor the federal government's compliance, in all departments, with policies for persons with disabilities. This commissioner of course could further advise ministers about the effect on persons with disabilities of upcoming legislation or regulations.

We know that increased employment will not be sufficient. Expanded measures are also needed to help employers other than the federal government make workplaces accessible and accommodate persons with disabilities.

Some of the facts are pretty daunting when we look at persons with disabilities in this country. We know that they represent 12% to 13% of the Canadian population and that government programs are the main source of income for the majority of persons with disabilities who are not in the labour force.

I have mentioned the employment rate for persons with disabilities. It is almost half that of their non-disabled peers.

As we know, additional costs are associated with living with a disability and persons with disabilities typically need higher incomes to maintain an adequate standard of living.

Working age persons with disabilities get only 76% of the average household after tax income of all Canadians.

As well, cost has been cited as the main barrier preventing individuals from obtaining the assistive devices they need to be integrated into the workforce.

Less than one-half of the 1.9 million persons with disabilities in Canada over the age of 15 receive the help they require with activities of daily living. Forty-five per cent say they need more help than they are receiving and 10% say that they receive no help, this after more than 10 years of Liberal government. It is clear that the situation for persons with disabilities in this country is shameful.

When we look at sources of income, either from paid employment or from income support, we see that the majority of persons with disabilities continues to experience chronic poverty and inaccessible support.

Persons with disabilities are more likely to experience food insecurity in this country than their non-disabled peers are, and as I mentioned earlier, 41% of those using food banks have either a disability or a long term illness.

The situation is deplorable. There is so much more we can do. At the committee stage we are hoping to raise some of these issues that

are important in the consideration of human resources and social development. More could be done in regard to greater recognition of the extra costs involved in leading a life with a disability. We could look at an expansion of the special opportunity—

• (1400)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): Order, please. As it is now 2 p.m., we will go to statements by members.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today on an issue that gained prominence recently when Canada's highest military honour was to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. The Victoria Cross, awarded to Corporal Fred Topham for his gallantry while a medic in the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, is threatened with becoming a part of a private foreign collection.

Therefore, I am pleased that a provision has been found which will help prevent the export of Canada's military heritage. I find it encouraging that the money is being raised to keep Corporal Topham's medal in Canada.

I thank the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Minister of Canadian Heritage for their support of the schoolchildren and veterans working to ensure that Corporal Topham's Victoria Cross remains in Canada.

The Government of Canada shares the responsibility to preserve for future generations those symbols of our freedom that were won through the valour of great Canadians like Corporal Fred Topham.

* * *

CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS

Ms. Belinda Stronach (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this past Saturday marked the 18 month anniversary of the BSE border closure, a direct result of this Liberal government's mismanagement of the critical trading relationship with the United States.

To mark that anniversary, the Prime Minister predicted that the border could remain closed for months to come despite the assurance from the U.S. president that the White House will begin to consider the process of reopening our border.

This is finally a piece of welcome news to the thousands of Canadians for whom the BSE crisis has been a nightmare, but it took 18 months to get the president to agree to a specific action because of the poor relationships of both the Prime Minister and his predecessor.

Where is the comprehensive and strategic action plan for a sophisticated political relationship with our largest trading partner, on which Canada's prosperity rests so heavily? Why has the government not been working for the past 10 years to develop the next generation of institutions and wide-reaching political relationships across the United States that would help inoculate against these kinds of border crises?

Canada's national interests demand and deserve better.

* * *

[Translation]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in 1929, thanks to five tenacious individuals, women were recognized as persons in Canada. As a result, Canadian women became eligible for appointment to the Senate, like men were. Today, 65 of the 308 members of the House of Commons, or 20%, are women. This facilitated access to other public positions.

Many women blend work outside the home and family life. All the associations dealing with women's issues must however receive more recognition and more tangible support from governments.

Historically, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly have been recognized as engines of social development. Thus, we encourage women's associations in Quebec, Canada and the far north, which campaign for the well-being and prosperity of all. These people deserve our respect for their tremendous contribution.

* * *

[English]

2004 GREY CUP

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a 22-year season ticket holder with the Toronto Argonauts, I want to pay tribute to the team of destiny.

The Canadian Football League is our game. With distinctive Canadian rules, it is excitement personified. Since Lord Grey first presented the prize for supremacy in Canadian football 92 years ago, we have seen this game played in snow, rain, fog, sub-zero weather and every other element imaginable.

Today I would like to congratulate Mike "Pinball" Clemons and the entire Argo team. Many thought this team would not even make the playoffs. It was an injury-plagued team, with a quarterback, Damon Allen, who was considered by some to be past his prime.

Yet Damon Allen won most valuable player of the game. He represents Canadian football. He is determined, gritty and a tremendous tactician of the game.

Canadians have rediscovered what many of us already know. There is no game like it. Give me the CFL any day, a league in which we can still afford to take our family to a game without having to take our bank manager. Thanks to Toronto for a tremendous year. Argos!

● (1405)

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JIMMY SHELSTAD

Mr. Ken Epp (Edmonton—Sherwood Park, CPC): Mr. Speaker, words are inadequate to express the gut-wrenching, heart-breaking grief experienced by the family on the death of a child. That emotion is multiplied a million times when the death could have been prevented.

This summer, 17 year old Jimmy Shelstad was tragically killed in a marked crosswalk in Sherwood Park. He was struck by a drunk driver. One cannot imagine the overwhelming burden of grief on Jimmy's parents, Blake and Gladys, grandparents Keith and Carole, and the rest of the family. His school friends have erected a memorial at the intersection where this tragedy happened. I drive by it frequently and grieve for the family.

Jimmy had to pay the supreme price for his killer's mistake, but his killer will probably get a conditional sentence. This has to end. How we all wish that the penalties could be severe enough to actually stop drunks from driving. Then we would have no more shattered dreams and broken hearts.

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DANIEL ANDREW IANNUZZI

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua (Vaughan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to offer my deepest condolences and sympathies to family and friends on the passing of Daniel Andrew Iannuzzi.

Mr. Iannuzzi, known to his friends as Dan, was an exceptional citizen. A third generation Italian Canadian, he grew up fluent in English, French and Italian.

His presence extended well beyond the borders of this nation. His love was Canada.

He was the founder of the world's first multilingual television station broadcasting in 24 languages. He was also the founder of the Ethnic Press Association of Ontario and of Canada's leading Italian language newspaper, *Corriere Canadese*.

He was a member of the Order of Canada and a recipient of the Order of Ontario.

Dan Iannuzzi was truly a bright light and a beacon for multiculturalism. He understood the country, was a great agent for change, a man ahead of his times.

Canada is a better place to live for all Canadians, thanks to his great efforts. He made a great contribution.

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[Translation]

ALINE LÉTOURNEAU

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I rise in this House today to acknowledge the extraordinary volunteer efforts of one of my constituents. Aline Létourneau has returned to North Hatley following an assignment abroad for the Canadian Executive Service Organization, or CESO.

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Ms. Létourneau travelled to Balti, Moldova, at the request of a non-profit organization providing services to unemployed women, to promote private enterprise development in accordance with international standards. She assisted with staff training, helped develop a project for adolescents and participated in the final stages of a project to reduce the gap for women entrepreneurs.

According to CESO, Aline Létourneau is a dedicated and highly qualified cooperant who works without pay. Her contribution abroad shows what people from here can do for the development of disadvantaged economies. Once again, congratulations to Aline Létourneau.

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[English]

2004 GREY CUP

Ms. Marlene Catterall (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure today to congratulate the organizers of the 92nd Grey Cup festivities in Ottawa.

The nation's capital welcomed football fans from across the country in what turned out to be a truly festive Canadian experience. When we have Canadians from coast to coast to coast picking their favourite teams, cheering them on and all joining in this great Canadian tradition, that is truly a remarkable situation.

Kudos to the Canadian Football League, to Brad Waters and the Renegades Football Club, to the cities of Ottawa and Gatineau, to our service clubs, volunteers and organizations for being great hosts, and to the NCC for turning on the Christmas lights early.

Congratulations mostly to the B.C. Lions and the 2004 Grey Cup champions, the Toronto Argonauts.

* * *

DANIEL ANDREW IANNUZZI

Ms. Bev Oda (Durham, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to pay tribute to Dan Iannuzzi, who passed away in Rome over the weekend.

Dan Iannuzzi, a third generation Italian Canadian, dedicated his entire life to international and multicultural media. He founded *Corriere Canadese* and the Ethnic Press Association of Ontario.

I have known Dan for over 28 years, an inspiration to many over the years and a friend of my family. He was a man with deep passion and a vision for Canada. I worked with him when he fought for and launched CFMT-TV, the first multilingual television service in the world.

Dan Iannuzzi was fiercely Canadian and proudly Italian, the masthead on his newspaper. The country has lost a champion and community leader with the passing of Daniel Andrew Iannuzzi.

* * *

• (1410)

GRENADA

Hon. Jean Augustine (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. speaker, I am pleased to rise today in honour of the visit of the

right hon. Dr. Keith Mitchell, Prime Minister of Grenada. It is a pleasure to have him here in Canada.

I would like to take this opportunity to bring attention to the current state of affairs in Grenada. It has now been over two months since the wrath of hurricane Ivan hit that island. In a matter of hours, lives were changed forever. Immediately after Ivan struck, Canadians and members of our communities rallied to contribute relief materials and to raise funds.

The Government of Canada has also responded. The regions that were hit by Ivan have received emergency aid. At the same time, we are very concerned about the stress level of individuals in Grenada who need our assistance at this time.

The fight is not yet over. Ninety per cent of the island was devastated. I call on all of my colleagues to continue to support the efforts to rebuild Grenada.

* * *

2004 GREY CUP

Mr. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to rise to congratulate the Toronto Argonauts on winning the 92nd Grey Cup yesterday, which I watched on TV with my family.

Congratulations in particular to Damon Allen, the game's MVP, and to coach Mike "Pinball" Clemons for guiding a team that nobody picked to win at all, and bringing the Grey Cup back to Toronto. All across Canada millions watched yesterday's exciting game which capped off the CFL's renaissance season.

The CFL is our game. We would not trade three downs and a bigger field for the world.

Congratulations to the Argos, to the B.C. Lions who also played a great game, and to the city of Ottawa for making yesterday's Grey Cup a huge hit.

It is good to see the CFL back. We look forward to another exciting season next year when the Grey Cup will be held in Vancouver.

* * *

HOUSING

Hon. Judi Longfield (Whitby—Oshawa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform the House that November 22 is National Housing Day.

Shelter is a foundation upon which strong and healthy communities and individual dignity are built. While the majority of Canadians are well housed, there are still 1.7 million Canadians in need of affordable adequate housing. Therefore the government is committed to ensuring that those Canadians who are most in need can access safe and affordable housing.

Over the next few years we are investing \$1.8 billion to address the increased need for affordable housing and housing for the homeless, as well as renovation of existing housing stock.

So far, more than \$286 million has been claimed for the provision of over 12,700 affordable housing units across Canada. Through our national housing agency, we provide an additional \$2 billion a year in housing assistance through long term agreements primarily in support of some 636,000 lower and moderate income households.

In the recent Speech from the Throne the Government of Canada committed to extend and enhance existing programs such as affordable housing, RRAP and SCPI.

* * *

2004 GREY CUP

Mr. Peter Van Loan (York—Simcoe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Grey Cup holds a special place in the hearts of Canadians. An entirely Canadian championship in an exclusively Canadian league is a unifying and defining part of our identity.

Yesterday we were thrilled as two teams battled on the gridiron to the final minute to determine who would take home Lord Grey's gift to Canada.

An outstanding B.C. Lions team moved to an early lead with pinpoint passes and rugged running, showing us they truly belonged in the big game. But the Toronto Argonauts, led by a disciplined defence, super special team members, and outstanding play of Damon Allen's commanding presence, methodically marched ahead to achieve victory in Canada's great national game.

Today we congratulate both teams for a superb show. We pay special tribute to President Keith Pelley and the entire Toronto Argonauts franchise, the 2004 Grey Cup champions. They demonstrated that with hard work and superior leadership, the underdog team in blue can prevail to surprise the pundits and come out on top in Canada.

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•(1415)

[Translation]

CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS WEEK

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this week marked the launch of Correctional Officers Week, its theme: We're inside too.

What a sad statement that is, when we see the inaction of the federal government with respect to the negotiations between the correctional officers union and management. Once again, after meetings on November 15 and 16, the Treasury Board has rejected the union's recent proposals out of hand.

The conciliator says only that negotiations with the Treasury Board cannot progress as long as Treasury Board remains inflexible. Correctional officers have been without a contract for more than two years now. When will the President of the Treasury Board make the decisions that will allow settlement of this matter which has been at a standstill for far too long?

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[English]

WEST COAST LIGHT STATIONS

Mr. John Duncan (Vancouver Island North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has silenced 17 foghorns on the west coast. The last three were silenced in September but after a storm of protest, they have been reconnected. Government members of Parliament are beating their chests as if restoring these three has resolved the issue. It has not.

The minister, who so brilliantly dismissed west coast fog as not a problem, now says he will restore these three foghorns, at least temporarily. He does not want to talk about the other 14 and hopes the issue will go away. This will allow his bureaucrats to continue to dismantle west coast light stations piece by piece.

Coastal British Columbians know the DFO game of slowly making the light stations non-functional and they are not impressed. When will the minister stop dismantling the lights?

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PHYSICIAN'S ASSISTANTS

Mr. Lui Temelkovski (Oak Ridges—Markham, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wish to address the issue of the recognition of physician's assistants within the federal health care system. Physician's assistants are trained to a level of skill that makes them an invaluable resource to health care and to Canadians as a whole.

Originating for the purpose of providing top-notch health care to military personnel, the physician's assistants' extensive skill sets provide Canada with an opportunity to bridge a gap that currently exists within the federal health care system.

Physician's assistants have long been recognized in other nations for their unique skills as medics trained to a higher level of independent duty. Their training ranges from orthopedics, pediatrics and emergency medicine to psychiatry, internal medicine and general surgery. They are also qualified to provide prescriptions.

Many Canadian trained physician's assistants have gone abroad to practise as their skills are not yet properly recognized in Canada—

The Speaker: Order. We will now proceed to oral questions.

*Oral Questions***ORAL QUESTION PERIOD***[English]***CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION**

Hon. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during the recent election campaign, word on the street was that one could jump the immigration queue by working on the minister's campaign. According to reports this past weekend, the minister's staff actually set up shop in her campaign office, files and all, and said that help could be had.

How can the minister justify having staff doing immigration department business in her campaign office in the middle of an election?

Hon. Judy Sgro (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to reiterate the fact that last week I personally asked the Ethics Commissioner to review the whole process. Now that the official opposition has approved of that process as well and did a subsequent request, we should let the Ethics Commissioner do his job

Hon. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the minister were concerned about the ethics, she would have asked the Ethics Commissioner before it appeared in the newspaper and was raised in the House of Commons.

The minister has been asked to explain why her staff was doing immigration business in her office. She can offer no answer to the House. If she has to wait for an answer, why does she not step aside until the Ethics Commissioner can answer the question for us?

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister did the right thing in referring this matter proactively to the Ethics Commissioner. The Ethics Commissioner is an independent officer of Parliament. The minister has also indicated that upon receipt of the report from the Ethics Commissioner, she will make that report public. What the minister is doing is both accountable and transparent.

• (1420)

Hon. Stephen Harper (Leader of the Opposition, CPC): The government would not know accountable and transparent if it hit it between the eyes, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, during the election campaign the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration failed to report the presence of an illegal immigrant, encouraged others to jump the queue, and encouraged her staff to deal with immigration files while working in her campaign office.

Is the minister prepared to do the right thing and resign from cabinet until the Ethics Commissioner has ruled on the case?

[English]

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have said, the minister proactively referred this matter to the Ethics Commissioner. We all know that the Ethics Commissioner is an independent officer of Parliament. The Ethics Commissioner will

review this matter. The Ethics Commissioner will report, and the minister has indicated that the report will be made public.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Central Nova, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it appears that the immigration minister's campaign office worked a bit like a beer store. Walk in, drop off a case and walk out with a permit.

The minister's senior adviser, Ihor Wons, on leave from his job in Ottawa to help the minister's re-election bid, fast tracked the immigration files from the campaign office. On the stripper file, the *Toronto Star* was told that "they opened the file and sat down with us".

How can the minister justify the fixing of immigration files for campaign workers by political staff on leave? Will she step aside until this matter is resolved properly?

Hon. Judy Sgro (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I indicated earlier, we have an independent Ethics Commissioner for whom we all have asked. I have asked that independent Ethics Commissioner to review all the aspects of this case, as has the opposition agreed to as well. I await the response of the Ethics Commissioner.

Mr. Peter MacKay (Central Nova, CPC): Mr. Speaker, apparently the minister's campaign office was a very busy place during the election and not just with election matters. It is reported that anybody ready to jump the queue would help in the office. They could come in and get assistance on immigration files. The queue jumper's husband stated that there was no question that the minister's campaign office was instrumental in getting an order to allow his wife to stay in Canada.

The evidence is mounting daily that the minister acted inappropriately in getting preferential treatment for a campaign worker. Again, will she step aside until this investigation is complete?

Hon. Judy Sgro (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have indicated, we have an independent Ethics Commissioner who was introduced and fought for by our Prime Minister on this side of the House because we wanted an independent and transparent government. I will await the Ethics Commissioner's response. I will not prejudge it, nor should the opposition should do that.

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*[Translation]***AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD**

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Quebec's farmers have chosen today to express their despair, after more than 18 months of having the American border closed to Canadian beef, particularly cull cattle.

How can the federal government be so insensitive to the plight of the farmers of Quebec, whose uncompensated losses have reached \$241 million so far?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Hon. Andy Mitchell (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, those comments are just not accurate. Under business risk management, we have put more than \$366 million with producers in the province of Quebec. That has been a substantial amount of money.

I was very pleased to see over the weekend the progress in opening the border, with the referral of the rule to the office of management and budget. We are working on that as well.

We are meeting with the organizations in Quebec. We understand that there is some additional work that needs to be done, and we are determined to do it.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Gauthier (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Mr. Speaker, let us be clear with the minister. Right now, a farmer can get between \$100 and \$200 for a cull cow. The same cow is then sold to consumers at between \$800 and \$1200. It is not surprising that the abattoirs have more than doubled their profits over last year.

I call on the minister to do something, which will cost him nothing, and that is to work with his counterparts from Quebec and the provinces to establish a base price for cull cows in order to save the farmers. It will cost him nothing, requiring only good faith.

• (1425)

[English]

Hon. Andy Mitchell (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are working with the province of Quebec. I talked as recently as last Thursday with the minister from Quebec. The member is not accurate when he says that no money is flowing: \$92 million under the TISP and \$17 million under the cull animal program.

I do agree that there is a need to do additional work. There is a need to deal with this specific problem. We intend to work with producers and with the government to deal with just that.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, if it is so clear then I invite the minister to go say that to the farmers currently protesting in Montreal at Lafontaine park. He can go tell them that and see if it is so clear.

The farmers have announced that they will set the floor price for cull on November 29. This is a pressure tactic they are using to save their business.

Does the government realize that it has just a week to act and work with the farmers from Quebec and all the provinces on setting a floor price in order to save hundreds of farm businesses in Quebec from bankruptcy?

[English]

Hon. Andy Mitchell (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, perhaps the Bloc Québécois has just realized that there is a problem in Quebec. I have been working on this issue since I was appointed in July. It is nice that the Bloc members finally have come to recognize there is an issue.

We are working with producers in Quebec and with the Government of Quebec. We understand that there is an issue with cull animals, and we are working to deal with that.

[Translation]

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, farmers are exasperated because for a year and a half now they have been suffering the effects of the U.S. border being closed to Canadian beef.

Why has the federal government not realized that its aid package for farmers with cull is inadequate and that setting a floor price would be much better and cost the federal government absolutely nothing?

[English]

Hon. Andy Mitchell (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said in answer to an earlier question, some \$366 million has been directed in business risk management to the province of Quebec. In terms of establishing a floor price, the province of Quebec has the ability to establish a floor price within the province of Quebec. It does not need the federal government's assistance in doing that.

However, they are right. There is an issue with cull cows. There is an issue for producers. There is work to be done, and we are determined to assist them. That is why we are working with the producers and with the Government of Quebec.

* * *

HOUSING

Mr. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Finance. Until the Prime Minister literally abolished the affordable housing program, Canada stood as a world leader in the construction of affordable housing. Since the Prime Minister took over the reins, when he was finance minister, we have seen nothing but a growth of homelessness from coast to coast to coast, and people dying in the streets.

My question for the finance minister is this. How can Canada be the only G-8 country that does not even have a housing program?

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada provides some \$2 billion in ongoing support programs for social housing in cooperation with the provinces across the country. At the moment, we have a \$1 billion allotment for the new construction of affordable housing. The housing minister and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation are very actively pursuing options in the future. Members will know that it was part of our election campaign platform and our throne speech, that we plan to move on this in this Parliament.

Oral Questions

Mr. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, how dare the finance minister include in his numbers money to build shelters for homeless people as though it is some kind of housing program. The government is constantly portraying itself as the great saviour of people who are homeless. If that were the case, why would it not establish some goals for affordable housing construction? Why would it not establish some goals for reducing homelessness in the country?

The only goal the finance minister cares about is his debt to GDP ratio. Where will that leave people who are in the streets? Will the—

• (1430)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Labour and Housing.

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member would know that I was in Toronto on the weekend. I met with leaders of homelessness in Toronto and in this province, Mr. Shapcott and Ms. Cathy Crowe. They have indicated that they appreciate the leadership that has been given by the government since 1999: \$1 billion on the homelessness initiative, \$1 billion on affordable housing and \$2 billion on social housing. We are leading the world in many ways. We will continue to work with the provinces and communities to deliver more in terms of social housing.

* * *

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government now faces a serious situation. Allegations pointing to abuse of power by the immigration minister have come from Liberal insiders and public servants. In one example, the minister, just three days before the election, rushed through a residency and work permit for a campaign volunteer, boosting her over the heads of thousands of others waiting in the queue.

Why is the minister being allowed to continue to make decisions affecting the lives of immigrants and refugees with this ethical cloud hanging over her?

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I have mentioned before in the House, the minister has referred this matter to the Ethics Commissioner. The Ethics Commissioner is an independent officer of Parliament. He will investigate this matter. He will report fully. That report will be made public. Let us not prejudge the work of the Ethics Commissioner. He is independent. Let us let him do his work.

Mrs. Diane Ablonczy (Calgary—Nose Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the sad truth is the minister just asked for confidential advice on one narrow matter, not a thorough investigation as the government tries to make out.

Troubling questions have come out as to whether the immigration minister has abused her position to offer political favours. To preserve confidence in our system and until these matters are cleared up, will the minister be asked to step aside?

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is my understanding that an expanded review has been asked for by the Ethics Commissioner. It is also my understanding that the Ethics

Commissioner has agreed to that expanded review. I again repeat that it is important we let the Ethics Commissioner do his work and that we not prejudice the work of this independent officer of Parliament.

[Translation]

Mr. Rahim Jaffer (Edmonton—Strathcona, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration was wrong not only in giving preferential treatment to the detriment of honest immigrants, but also for having created a system of corruption in her riding. First she gets rid of officials in her election headquarters, then she attracts volunteers by promising favours and, finally, she gives preference to applicants who do not deserve it.

Will the Prime Minister put an end to these schemes?

[English]

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there are outrageous assertions and allegations being made by certain members of the House. I think we all know full well that they are only making these allegations in here, where they are protected from the consequences of these outrageous, unproven allegations. The Ethics Commissioner is an independent officer of this Parliament. This matter has been referred to him. Let us not prejudge the outcome of the Ethics Commissioner's work.

Mr. Rahim Jaffer (Edmonton—Strathcona, CPC): Mr. Speaker, these allegations are coming from Liberal insiders and public servants. The minister should listen to what is happening on her own side.

Under the stewardship of this government, Canada's immigration system has become known for more cronyism and unethical treatment than helping legitimate immigrants and refugees. The minister has engaged in shady practices throughout her campaign. She has rewarded her election workers by allowing one to queue jump and another to escape deportation.

When will the Prime Minister demand better of his cabinet and ask the minister to step aside?

• (1435)

Hon. Anne McLellan (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, those are the most outrageous and unproven assertions and allegations.

It is incumbent upon all of us in the House not to abuse the immunity and privilege of the House but to act as responsible parliamentarians. That is what the minister has done. The minister has referred this matter to the Ethics Commissioner. The government will cooperate with the Ethics Commissioner in his inquiry. The report by the commissioner will be made public. Let him do his work.

*Oral Questions**[Translation]***HOUSING**

Mr. Christian Simard (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, since 1994, the Liberal government has not invested in the construction of social housing. Since 2001, it has merely invested in affordable housing. However, it does not meet the same needs and does not help the same people. Today, FRAPRU, the popular front for urban redevelopment, held a major rally and asked the federal government to take a new direction and invest in social housing.

Will the government change direction and invest massively in social housing to make up for the ill-advised decisions that it has made repeatedly, year after year, since 1994?

[English]

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I attended the meeting with FRAPRU this morning. We share FRAPRU's objective which is to ensure that people in this country can find affordable housing. That is why the government has committed \$2 billion on an annual basis for 636,000 social housing units and an additional \$1 billion in affordable housing. We will continue to invest in people.

Housing is much more than bricks and mortar. It is about building people's lives. We will continue to do more, especially in the province of Quebec.

[Translation]

Mr. Christian Simard (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, intention is not enough, the government must take action.

Last week, the CMHC announced a \$2.4 billion operating surplus. In order to give new hope to those who are directly affected by the massive cuts made in social housing since 1994, should the government not force the CMHC to now invest its surpluses in the construction of social housing?

[English]

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I believe I answered the same question by the same member last week indicating that I am looking at all of the options that are available to the government with regard to additional investments in social housing.

During the election we committed an additional \$1.5 billion to what we have already committed. We are committed to making sure that people can find affordable housing. I want to applaud the Government of Quebec and the communities of Quebec for partnering with the Government of Canada for delivering those affordable housing units and social housing units in Quebec.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Boire (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, there is currently a major housing crisis in several major cities. Vacancy rates are at their lowest and there is no indication that the situation is improving.

Considering that it refused to invest in social housing between 1994 and 2001, will the government recognize that it contributed considerably to this housing crisis and that the best way to solve this problem is to agree to allocate 1% of its expenditures to the construction of social housing?

[English]

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to acknowledge the fact that the BQ is finally recognizing the federal government's help to the provinces in delivering housing, that it welcomes that, and that it applauds the federal government. I want to indicate to the BQ that we will continue to work with the provinces and communities to ensure that we deliver more affordable housing and social housing in this country.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Boire (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, strangely, this year the CMHC recorded a \$2.4 billion surplus, while there are glaring needs in social housing.

Why would the government not take advantage of the CMHC surplus to make up for its past mistake in social housing, when it refused to invest any money, between 1994 and 2001?

[English]

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I indicated before, the government is looking at a number of options available to it, including the retained earnings in CMHC. We are looking at more flexible tools. We are looking at working with communities and provinces to look at innovative, creative solutions. We are looking at working with the private sector and big labour to provide the funding available to ensure that all communities and the people there get affordable housing as one of their main objectives.

* * *

● (1440)

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is clear the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration is caught in a web of her own making.

From May 21 to June 29, staff members claimed more than \$11,000 in travel expenses. Her staff claimed these expenses for work done in her riding during the campaign. This is wrong. The minister just does not get it and she clearly does not care. Now, taxpayers are on the hook for thousands of dollars that essentially funded her campaign.

When will the minister do the honourable thing and step aside?

Hon. Judy Sgro (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me assure members that the Ethics Commissioner will be looking at all of the issues that have been raised. I have great confidence in my integrity and in all of the decisions that I have taken. I will await the Ethics Commissioner and will not prejudice him.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Mr. Speaker, perhaps the minister can tell us exactly which Treasury Board guidelines say government staffers can bill taxpayers for their campaign expenses.

Oral Questions

When one of her staff takes leave during the campaign but then continues to direct the ministry, that is wrong. When her director of parliamentary affairs submits claims for \$5,900 for working on her campaign, that is wrong.

In light of her ethical lapses, will the minister step aside?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: It is evident that the President of the Treasury Board is very popular, but he is rising to give an answer, not to receive the applause and accolades of the people.

The hon. President of the Treasury Board has the floor.

Hon. Reg Alcock (President of the Treasury Board and Minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is important to note that Treasury Board guidelines do not allow people to be paid expenses for working on campaigns.

However, under Treasury Board guidelines each minister is recognized as having to take on responsibilities to serve the government while an election is on and each minister is allowed to take one staff person to handle their ministerial responsibilities during a campaign. It is very straightforward and the minister has complied.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, whenever she is asked about her selective use of ministerial permits, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration spouts sanctimonious nonsense about her passion for human rights. Her words are belied by the fact that she is blocking genuine humanitarian cases from entering this country.

Thanks to this minister, Mingli Lin, a former prisoner of conscience, continues to languish in China two years after this House voted unanimously to permit him to rejoin his family in Canada.

Why does the minister continue to oppose his entry into Canada, when she herself voted for it two years ago?

Hon. Judy Sgro (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canada's immigration policies are very clear. There is a process for people to follow that want to immigrate to Canada.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on April 21 I hand delivered a letter to the minister requesting that she intervene personally in this case. The minister wrote back that she would not issue a ministerial permit, but that Mingli Lin could apply for refugee status if he first performed the impossible task of going to a third country.

Will the minister stop obstructing the unanimous will of this House of Commons, and allow this man to enter this country and rejoin his family as we all voted to allow him to do?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The minister has the floor. I am sure she appreciates the help with the answer. She seemed ready to give her own answer and we will want to hear it. The minister has the floor.

Hon. Judy Sgro (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, Canada's immigration policies are

clearly there. There was advice given and I suggest that is the advice that should be followed.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Health.

I know that he made an announcement about hepatitis C today that would be of great interest to members of the House. Could the minister please inform the members here as to how the government's intention with respect to Canadians infected with hepatitis C through the blood system?

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during the election campaign the Prime Minister said that we were open to looking at options as to how to provide financial compensation to people infected with hepatitis C pre-1986 and post-1990. The caucus, the government and cabinet have considered that difficult issue.

The representatives of the pre-1986 and post-1990 class action have asked us to look at this issue. We have looked at the changed circumstances. We have given the mandate to the lawyers to discuss compensation and all available options to deal with this issue.

* * *

● (1445)

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, truly an NDP move, but at the pace of a Liberal.

Today Newfoundland is suffering from its worst oil spill in history. Later this week provincial ministers from B.C. will be in Ottawa lobbying the Minister of Natural Resources to lift the moratorium in the Hecate Strait and put the west coast in the same jeopardy.

According to the government's own reports, 75% of British Columbians do not want oil drilling off the west coast and 100% of first nations said they do not want it. Very simply, will the minister say yes to the people of B.C. and protect the environment or say yes to Gordon Campbell's dangerous pipe dream?

Hon. R. John Efford (Minister of Natural Resources, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, at this point in time we will not say yes or no. We received the third report of the Royal Society, the Priddle report, and the Cheryl Brooks report on the first nations consultation. We will review those reports. I will consult with my colleagues from British Columbia and the Government of British Columbia. Then we will make recommendations, but not until we have done a complete review and everybody understands the reports very clearly.

Oral Questions

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let me remind the minister of the report's findings: 75% of British Columbians said no and 100% of first nations said no. That answer is absolutely pathetic.

Thousands of people are contacting me saying they do not want oil and gas drilling polluting B.C. because they know renewable energy is the future for real jobs for real people, not pie in the sky projects. For 11 years now the Liberals have increased pollution. Canada now has the worst environmental record in the entire industrialized world. Canadians do not want to pollute any more.

Will the minister agree with all of these people and his own report, and just say no to offshore drilling in B.C.?

Hon. R. John Efford (Minister of Natural Resources, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, from 1985 to 1989 I was in the opposition in Newfoundland and Labrador. I never ever asked a question that I did not know the answer to or have factual information. I would suggest the same to the member opposite.

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NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Gordon O'Connor (Carleton—Mississippi Mills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our navy is forced to rent U.S. civilian helicopters to support our vessels at sea rather than use the 41-year-old Sea Kings. It has been 10 years since the Liberal government arbitrarily cancelled the replacement of the Sea King helicopters. Liberal Party electioneering put the safety of our air crews at risk and allowed the performance of our helicopters to decay.

Will the minister confirm that the Liberal government decision to cancel the Sea King replacement was high risk, irresponsible and expensive?

Hon. Bill Graham (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud of the fact that we have ordered the replacement of the Sea Kings.

I can also inform the House, and there was a news report about it this morning, that the use of civilian helicopters to bring mail and other supplies to our ships makes great common sense. The U.S. navy did the same thing on the same exercise and it has thousands of helicopters. We use our helicopters for military purposes and we let civilian helicopters do theirs.

Mr. Gordon O'Connor (Carleton—Mississippi Mills, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadian taxpayers have paid a helicopter cancellation fee, a search and rescue replacement fee, and extraordinary costs for maintaining the Sea King helicopter fleet. These huge expenditures still have not provided us with a reliable maritime helicopter. Due to political and bureaucratic interference, the projected helicopter delivery dates keep slipping.

When will the contract be signed and will the Canadian Forces continue to contract out services?

Hon. Bill Graham (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we will sign the contract as soon as the paperwork is done. We are going to sign it as quickly as we can. The House and everyone knows that the contract provides for delivery within four years. This will be policed by contract rules which have penalties and encouragement. I am confident we have purchased the right

helicopter at the best price. This is the helicopter the navy wanted. It is going to perform a great service for us.

I am very pleased that this is happening now. We can now turn our attention to other equipment issues in the armed services. I will work with the member and members of the committee to ensure that our armed forces personnel have the best equipment so they can do the job that we ask them to do.

* * *

● (1450)

HEALTH

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, six years ago the Liberal government voted against an opposition motion to compensate all the victims of hepatitis C. For six years these victims were left to fend for themselves while the government racked up huge profits from the interest on the hepatitis C compensation fund.

Finally it appears that the government is preparing to cave in and do the right thing.

Why did it take so long? Why have the Liberals opposed fairness and compensation for the hepatitis C victims for so long?

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said, the Prime Minister indicated during the election campaign that we were open to this issue. I said that several weeks ago. We had two debates in the House. The Standing Committee on Health unanimously said that we should do it.

I would urge the member opposite to be a little more compassionate and humane and not politicize the issue.

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is an astounding response after the government has, time and time again, delayed and filibustered compensation.

The government has denied hepatitis C victims for six years. Hundreds of people have died and many families have been destroyed.

Will the government apologize for six years of unfairness to hepatitis C victims?

Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh (Minister of Health, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier in the House and as I have said outside the House, the circumstances have changed.

The representatives of the pre-1986, post-1990 class asked us whether or not there was an option to look at these issues and all the options available. We said yes. The Prime Minister said yes. The government said yes. We are prepared to do the right and responsible thing.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

WORLD POLICE AND FIREFIGHTERS GAMES

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on June 26, 2005, Quebec City will be hosting the World Police and Firefighters Games. It will be opening its doors to 10,000 participants, as well as an equivalent number of visitors, from 60 different countries.

Can the minister responsible for Quebec confirm today that the federal government will be injecting \$2.2 million into this, to complete its financial contribution and thereby ensure the total success of this international event?

Hon. Liza Frulla (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for Status of Women, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada has contributed \$1.305 million to the games since 1999, and has committed to another \$100,000 in 2005-06. Canadian Heritage contributed \$875,000, a sizeable sum. It is true that the organizers are now asking for an additional \$2 million, but I do not as yet have a printing press in my basement for turning out money.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the minister responsible for Quebec needs to be realistic. We are only seven months away from the World Police and Firefighters Games which will generate an estimated \$50 million in economic spinoffs. This is a major event for the region.

As well, since we know that the last instalment of Quebec's contribution is tied to the federal contribution, what is keeping the minister from making an announcement on this promptly so that the problem will be settled once and for all?

Hon. Liza Frulla (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister responsible for Status of Women, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have spent \$1.275 million, so we do agree that this is a major event, one that may bring a great deal of money into Quebec City. That said, where the additional \$2 million are concerned, Quebec promised to contribute that amount provided we do the same. This means we need to find \$2 million, and as I said, we have not managed to do so.

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● (1455)

JUSTICE

Ms. Rona Ambrose (Edmonton—Spruce Grove, CPC): Quebec parents are not the only ones who are worried about their children. Georges Radwanli, a known procurer, shows absolutely no remorse after his light sentence, and why not, for he is still on the loose. He was trafficking in sex and drugs and now he is going to pretend to do good works for 200 hours.

When is the Minister of Justice going to propose punishments that Canadian families can respect?

[English]

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our whole approach with respect to drug strategy is to ensure that we have prevention, that we have appropriate treatment and that we have proper education.

Ms. Rona Ambrose (Edmonton—Spruce Grove, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the sentence that Mr. Radwanli received is outrageous. He has been found guilty of nine counts of having sex with underage

girls, guilty of encouraging adults to have sex with children, guilty of trafficking banned substances and guilty of running a common bawdy house.

His sentence is 18 months of time served in his own apartment and 200 hours of community service. The message this sends is that sexual predators can trample the rights of women and children.

Why has someone so dangerous been allowed to remain in the community?

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will not comment on any particular case. I will just say that our whole approach with respect to protection of children and other vulnerable persons has been set forth. The first piece of legislation introduced by this government was to protect children and other vulnerable persons against sexual exploitation.

* * *

PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Public Works and Government Services.

Seven years ago his department took the bold move of outsourcing a number of services, including maintenance, for the 300 office buildings housing public servants. I also know there has recently been a competitive and open process to replace the existing contract.

Could the minister please tell the House whether this experiment with outsourcing has been successful and what it has meant for the bottom line?

Hon. Scott Brison (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this outsourcing has been a tremendous success for the Government of Canada. The 1997 contract delivered high quality services and generated savings to the taxpayers of about \$20 million per year.

Further, I can announce today that SNC-Lavalin ProFac Inc. has won the new contract for property management services. This will save the government \$50 million per year over the budgeted amount.

This is another example of how Public Works and Government Services Canada is helping to deliver smarter and better services while ensuring the best possible value for hard-earned tax dollars.

* * *

UKRAINE

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, disturbing reports are coming out of Ukraine today following yesterday's election. It appears that anti-democratic forces are threatening to resist the results of the election if it does not go in favour of the existing regime.

Other countries have already sent diplomatic warnings that if this is the case there will be severe implications on diplomatic policy.

Has Canada sent a similar warning to the existing regime in Ukraine that we will not countenance and we will be very concerned if there is a resisting of the democratic outcome in that election?

Hon. Dan McTeague (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member's question is a very important and serious issue.

We call on the Ukrainian authorities to fully investigate and promptly remedy these violations to ensure that there is, above all, transparency and that the election results truly represent the democratic will of all people in Ukraine.

* * *

TERRORISM

Mr. Stockwell Day (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member said that he would call on them but it does not sound like the government has actually made that call yet. It is important that it does so.

On a similar note, four years ago the Privy Council warned the government about organizations that were raising funds in Canada for Palestinian terrorist groups. One of those organizations was the Jerusalem fund, now called IRFAN, and that group still raises money for Palestinian terror groups today.

Even Saudi Arabia has announced that it will shut down those types of organizations within its country. When will our country at least rise to Saudi Arabia's standard and shut down these groups that are raising money for Palestinian terror groups?

Hon. John McCallum (Minister of National Revenue, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while I cannot comment on specific cases, I can say that it is extremely important that charitable giving gets to legitimate charities. That is why my department works with other agencies of government, solicits information from Canadians and conducts vigorous audits to root out and remove the charitable status of illegitimate charities in this country.

* * *

● (1500)

[Translation]

GOODS AND SERVICES TAX

Mr. Maka Kotto (Saint-Lambert, BQ): In September 1996, the finance minister who is now the Prime Minister replied to those who were asking for the elimination of GST on books:

That not taxing books would cost \$140 million; he asked those who advocated such a measure to explain where the money would come from.

Is the Prime Minister prepared to admit that the \$8.9 billion surplus this year could be the answer to his question? If so, and if he really wants to eliminate GST on books, why does he not go ahead and do it?

[English]

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Finance, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with the fiscal update last week, we are now officially and formally in the prebudget cycle. I am sure in that cycle that I will receive representations on all sides of the House about future changes in fiscal policy, future changes in spending plans, plans with respect to the debt, and other matters that will go into budget preparations.

Oral Questions

Let me say to the hon. gentleman that I understand the importance of his question and of the issue that he has raised. I will take it under advisement in the preparation of my budget and try to make everything balance at the end of the day.

* * *

HOUSING

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today is National Housing Day and housing and homelessness groups across Canada, including the community action on homelessness in my area, are making a concerted effort to raise awareness of the need for more affordable housing. This need is felt across Canada. In my area of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour we have specific needs.

I wonder if the Minister of Labour and Housing could inform the House of what is being done for affordable housing in our region.

Hon. Joe Fontana (Minister of Labour and Housing, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, let me thank the hon. member for his hard work with his community, in fact this past weekend at a rally in support of affordable housing for Dartmouth and the area.

I want to indicate that the federal government, with the Atlantic caucus as well as the provincial government, has made it possible to deliver something like 22,700 low income households in Nova Scotia with \$70 million in support, an additional \$985,000 for the creation of 47 new units of affordable housing, and a three-year allocation for the renovation program to make sure people can remain in their own homes in Nova Scotia.

* * *

[Translation]

MIRABEL AIRPORT

Ms. Caroline St-Hilaire (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Transport insists that long term leases for those whose lands was expropriated at Mirabel is an adequate solution. Still, the minister ought to know that a lease, even a long term lease, only encourages temporary types of agriculture and not investment in farming operations.

Can the Minister of Transport tell the House what is preventing him from returning this land to its former owners, when we know that, even if he reassigned these parcels of land, an area twice the size of Dorval would still be available for the operation of Mirabel?

Hon. Jean Lapierre (Minister of Transport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the answer remains the same. The Government of Canada, represented by the Conservative minister at that time, Jean Corbeil, gave a 60-year lease to ADM, including all the land. That is why it is incomprehensible for the Leader of the Opposition to go to Mirabel and not recognize the signature of Jean Corbeil, a former Conservative minister.

Privilege

Consequently, we are bound by that signature. That is why we are going to respect ADM's lease. That corporation has offered to lease the land to the farmers until 2023. The offer is still on the table until 2023.

* * *

[English]

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Right Hon. Dr. Keith Mitchell, Prime Minister of Grenada.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: I would also like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Premier of the Northwest Territories, Mr. Joe Handley.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

• (1505)

The Speaker: Before we begin routine proceedings, the Chair has notice of two questions of privilege today and I will hear them in the order in which the notices were received.

[Translation]

First, I will hear the hon. member for Central Nova.

* * *

[English]

PRIVILEGE

COMMENTS OF MINISTER OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mr. Peter MacKay (Central Nova, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a question of privilege pursuant to the provisions of Standing Order 48 where, if it has been demonstrated and if in your wisdom, Mr. Speaker, you find that there has been deliberately misleading information put forward by a member of the House, you can rule accordingly.

On Friday, November 19, in my absence, in response to a question from the House leader for the official opposition, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration said the following:

The deputy leader of the Conservative Party requested a permit a couple of weeks after the election for a personal friend. I have since learned that the hon. member's personal friend was a former Conservative candidate and has been a big political contributor to the Conservative Party. I guess I should have asked, did he work on the campaign?

Mr. Speaker, that information is inaccurate. I was asked to intervene for a minister's permit, for the first time in seven years, I might add, for a visitor's visa for a student from India. That visa was granted. It lasted two weeks and that student then subsequently left the country. Information has been provided to the minister's office as such.

This original request had been made to a Liberal member at the time, in Mississauga, and because of the election the matter was not processed, so I was simply following a process that was initiated by a member of the government.

The person requesting the permit was the husband of a former Progressive Conservative candidate who ran in the 2000 election. I might add that although I met that individual through political circles on a few occasions, I would hardly deem that a personal friend, and I say that respectfully.

There was some negative implication, I would submit, that somehow this was an indiscretion or somehow this was an inappropriate intervention made on my part. The minister implied that this person then may have worked on my campaign. I am quick to add that the individual in question, coming from India, came to Ontario and never set foot in the province of Nova Scotia, nor did the individuals making the request ever leave the province of Ontario during the election.

Since there is no evidence that would lead to the minister's accusation that the fact that somehow I had acted inappropriately as a member of Parliament, this information that was provided was clearly false. I can only conclude that the accusation was made to deflect attention away from the current situation in which the minister finds herself, that it was done for a political purpose to deter the official opposition from asking questions in the House on this particular issue, which I find disturbing, and deflect away from the actual real issue, and that is one of her own inappropriate and preferential intervention.

It is my understanding, Mr. Speaker, that the Privacy Act itself prohibits personal information of this sort from being under the control of the government, again I add, from being released without the consent of the individual. I would suggest that the minister is treading dangerously close to the line of breaching the Privacy Act when she starts to disclose information about interventions made by members of the House with her department. It is reckless on her part and it is not supposed to be done without the consent of the individuals in question.

Page 111 of the 22nd edition of Erskine May states:

The Commons may treat the making of a deliberately misleading statement as a contempt.

Page 141 of the 19th edition of Erskine May states:

Conspiracy to deceive either House or any committees of either House will also be treated as a breach of privilege.

I would refer the Speaker as well to a ruling by the Chair on October 29, 1980, at page 4213 of *Hansard*, where the Speaker states that:

—in the context of contempt, it seems that to amount to contempt, representations or statements about...members should not only be erroneous or incorrect, but, rather, should be purposely untrue and improper and import a ring of deceit.

Mr. Speaker, these comments made by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration are not only inaccurate and incorrect, but her statement was politically motivated, and it was a deliberate attempt to tarnish my reputation for in some way making an intervention for a citizen of India visiting this country for two weeks on a visitor's visa as a student.

Privilege

The minister also implies by referencing requests from members that representations from either party, any party in this House, are somehow inappropriate and that somehow an opposition member, or a backbench member of the government, for that matter, could actually be responsible for the issuing of the visa, which is clearly untrue.

She is also well aware that the only person who possesses that authority is herself as minister and therefore the only one who could use that authority is herself, which she has done clearly in some cases. Her referencing of members' requests in the context of the abuse of power is reckless and misleading, and I would suggest that there is an air of intimidation when a minister tries to reference these interventions from members of the opposition.

The real issue is the minister herself being the exclusive authority to benefit a campaign worker and in some way indirectly benefit herself and her campaign.

• (1510)

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, as you yourself ruled on a similar case on Friday, February 1, 2002, you said:

The authorities are consistent about the need for clarity in our proceedings and about the need to ensure the integrity of the information provided by the government to the House. Furthermore, in this case, as hon. members have pointed out, integrity of information is of paramount importance...

Mr. Speaker, I therefore submit to you that there is a case before the House and before you where the minister has deliberately provided false information. Therefore, if the Chair so finds that there is a prima facie case of a breach of privilege, I am prepared to move the appropriate motion.

Hon. Tony Valeri (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to make a couple of points for your consideration as you consider what is before you. I think the one point that should be made very clear as I look at the transcripts here is that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration did not make a statement. What she did was ask a question. In her response, she said, "I guess I should have asked, did he work on the campaign?" The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration never said the person worked on the campaign, as the hon. member seems to indicate. In fact, the implication of her remark is that she did not know whether this person worked on the campaign.

While I do see that the hon. member is also making allegations of wrongdoing, in this House I might add, he too should wait for the Ethics Commissioner to report. I think the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration has already said that she would be prepared to make that report public. At that point, I think the House would have the fullness of information and be able to see whether there has been any wrongdoing.

I believe the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration would submit to you, Mr. Speaker, that there has been none.

The Speaker: I will take the matter under advisement in light of the comments made by the hon. member for Central Nova and by the government House leader, review the transcript of the proceedings on Friday in light of what has been said and get back to the House in due course.

[*Translation*]

The hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord on another question of privilege.

ADVERTISEMENT BY A FORMER MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, as you know, following the June 28 general election, the deputation in the House of Commons changed substantially. Out of the 308 members who are currently sitting here, 201 were re-elected, 101 were elected for the first time, and 6 made a return to federal politics.

Of course, it is easy to figure out that about 100 members who sat here during the 37th Parliament are no longer here. Whether they decided not to seek another term, were defeated during the nomination process or the general election, the fact remains that these former colleagues are no longer members of Parliament.

However, we were recently taken aback to learn that one of these former MPs, Liberal member Serge Marcil, who represented the riding of Beauharnois—Salaberry in the previous Parliament, does not seem to have taken note of the results of the last general election.

Despite the fact that the riding is now represented by a Bloc Québécois member, Mr. Marcil continues to use the title of member of Parliament and also the addresses of his old offices in the riding and in Ottawa, as shown in an advertisement that includes a picture and that is entitled "Serge Marcil, Member of Parliament for Beauharnois—Salaberry".

This advertisement was part of a booklet published following the last general election, which was distributed to us on November 12, four and a half months after the election. At the end of my question of privilege, I will seek the unanimous consent of the House to table this booklet.

If I may, I would like to draw the hon. members' attention to excerpts from Marleau and Montpetit's *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, dealing with a matter that is exactly the same as this one today.

In chapter 3, on privileges and immunities, under "Freedom from Obstruction, Interference, Intimidation and Molestation", reference is made to a decision made by one of your predecessors, Speaker Bosley, on May 6, 1985. For your information, the evidence on which this decision was based is the following.

On April 25, 1985, Andrew Witer, the member for Parkdale—High Park, rose on a question of privilege relating to an advertisement which appeared in a Toronto based newspaper. The ad in question identified Jesse Flis, the incumbent's predecessor, as member of Parliament for Parkdale—High Park, listing the address and phone number of Mr. Flis' former constituency office.

A motion by Mr. Witer to refer the matter to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections was then agreed to. In this matter, Speaker Bosley ruled, and I quote from Marleau and Montpetit:

—there was a prima facie question of privilege in a case where a newspaper advertisement identified another person as a Member of Parliament rather than the sitting Member.

Routine Proceedings

Moreover, in his decision, Speaker Bosley stated:

It should go without saying that a Member of Parliament needs to perform his functions effectively and that anything tending to cause confusion as to a Member's identity creates the possibility of an impediment to the fulfilment of that Member's functions. Any action which impedes or tends to impede a Member in the discharge of his duties is a breach of privilege. There are ample citations and precedents to bear this out.

That is what the quote from Speaker Bosley said.

Therefore, should you decide that my question is in order, I would put forward the appropriate motion, which I have drafted and have here in my hand. Also, I would seek the unanimous consent of the House to table the booklet.

•(1515)

The Speaker: Does the hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord have the unanimous consent of the House to table this booklet?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*English*]

Hon. Tony Valeri (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I really do not have anything to add. It is the first time that this has come to my attention. Therefore, with the consent to table, we would look at it, and look forward to adding something if required at a later date.

The Speaker: The Chair will also want to review the material that the hon. member has tabled.

[*Translation*]

After examining this issue and looking at what the hon. member said today and what others, if any, may have to say, I will get back to the House with a decision regarding this matter.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

•(1520)

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour pursuant to Standing Order 36(8) to table, in both official languages, the government's response to one petition.

* * *

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Mr. John Williams (Edmonton—St. Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts concerning the main estimates 2004-05, vote 20 under finance, referred to the committee on Friday, October 8, 2004.

PETITIONS

CANADIAN FORCES

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure for me to rise to present two petitions to the House. The first is one in a series of petitions that I continue to present on behalf of our military families.

The petitioners wish to draw to the attention of the House, and Canadians at large, that the Canadian Forces Housing Agency provides a valuable service by allowing families to live in a military community and have access to services to address their specific needs. However, many of those homes on our bases across the land are substandard to acceptable living conditions, and their rent keeps rising every year.

Therefore, the petitioners call upon Parliament to immediately suspend any future rent increases for accommodation provided by the Canadian Forces Housing Agency until such time as the Government of Canada makes substantive improvements to the living conditions of housing provided for our military families.

The petition comes from the citizens of Windsor.

AGE OF CONSENT

Mr. Jay Hill (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my second petition is from my riding of Prince George—Peace River. It is mainly from citizens of the city of Dawson Creek.

The petitioners wish to draw to the attention of the House to the fact that our children need protection from sexual exploitation. They therefore call upon Parliament to protect our children by taking all necessary steps to raise the age of consent for sexual interaction, from 14 years of age to 18 years of age.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the following questions will be answered today: Nos. 4 and 12

[*Text*]

Question No. 4—**Mrs. Carol Skelton:**

What public safety and emergency preparedness plans does the federal government have to safeguard the capacity of treated water reserves for cities with populations over 50,000?

Hon. Roy Cullen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government takes the protection of critical infrastructure of all kinds in this country very seriously. We are working with the provinces, such as Saskatchewan, and the private sector and sector associations, including the Canadian Water and Wastewater Association. A paper outlining the government's position on key elements of a Canadian strategy on critical infrastructure protection, CIP, was released on November 10, 2004 at http://www.ocipep.gc.ca/critical/nciap/positionpap_e.asp.

Routine Proceedings

The Government of Canada has taken important steps to respond to the increasingly complex and dangerous threat environment that exists since the horrific events of September 11, 2001. On December 12, 2003 the Prime Minister announced a series of organizational changes that contribute to more effective integration of security efforts including: the appointment of a Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, with a new department supporting the core functions of security and intelligence, border services, immigration enforcement and emergency management; and the appointment of a national security adviser to the Prime Minister to improve coordination and integration of security efforts among government departments.

In the past few years, the government has funded over \$8 billion in additional investments to address our key security gaps. More remains to be done. On April 27 of this year, Canada's first-ever comprehensive national security policy was issued. The policy articulates core national security interests and proposes a framework for addressing threats to Canadians. The framework will be supported by \$690 million of new money to address priority gaps in the Government's areas of responsibility.

The government is moving forward deliberately with this plan, but recognizes the seriousness of the challenge and the sustained nature of the effort required. A fully integrated security system ensures that we can more effectively respond to existing threats and quickly adapt to new ones. The system is to be fully connected to key partners such as provinces, territories, communities and the private sector. The system begins with a comprehensive threat assessment that provides both tactical and strategic information about risks to Canada. Consequently, the Government produces comprehensive threat reports, which are made available to those who require them.

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, PSEPC, supported by the national security adviser will ensure the development and implementation of the security system to ensure that Canada is prepared for and can respond to current and future threats.

PSEPC also has a role in research and development related to critical infrastructure protection. PSEPC's work includes a research report entitled "Water, Critical Infrastructure Protection and Emergency Management", see http://www.ocipep.gc.ca/research/resactivites/CI/2002-D016_e.asp. PSEPC also collaborates and assists the Canadian Water and Wastewater Association, or CWWA, <http://www.cwwa.ca>, and its members. For example, PSEPC funded the production of two guidebooks on best management practice for water systems and for wastewater systems respectively. PSEPC commends the CWWA membership for its initiatives in enhancing the security measures of its members' facilities.

With respect to a terrorist or vandalism threat, it is communities that are responsible for doing all possible to protect their facilities, based on current threat information. The federal role is to provide threat information in order that communities can make an informed decision on water protection. The federal government through PSEPC continually works to improve capacity in sharing threat related information with critical infrastructure owners and operators.

Finally, Infrastructure Canada also publishes a number of municipal infrastructure national guides, many of which relate to water safety. A listing of the many InfraGuides is available at http://www.infraguide.ca/bestPractices/PublishedBP_e.asp.

Subsequent to these federal measures, water protection in communities remains a provincial/municipal responsibility. In Saskatchewan, the province established the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority to manage and protect water quality and quantity. Its website is <http://www.swa.ca>. There are many federal agencies that share some form of responsibility for water safety in Saskatchewan including Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration, http://www.agr.gc.ca/pfra/water/intro_e.htm.

Question No. 12—**Mr. Bill Casey:**

With respect to the recent fire aboard Canada's submarine HMCS *Chicoutimi*: (a) what steps did the government take to retrieve both HMCS *Chicoutimi* and the crew, including a description of what personnel, equipment and assistance were deployed and/or offered to the British armed forces in support of the rescue operations; and (b) which tests were conducted on HMCS *Chicoutimi* prior to its departure for Halifax, Nova Scotia?

Hon. Bill Graham (Minister of National Defence, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in response to part (a), Canadian Forces personnel were involved in the rescue operation for HMCS *Chicoutimi* immediately after the fire was reported on October 5, 2004. After *Chicoutimi's* executive officer reported the incident, Maritime Forces Atlantic informed the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in Halifax, as well as Royal Navy headquarters in Northwood, U.K. In turn, the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre informed the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Clyde, U.K. After these initial actions, Canadian Forces personnel and departmental employees worked together in coordination with our allies to assist *Chicoutimi's* safe return to Scotland.

The chief of the maritime staff led this response that involved personnel from units across the country. Although the vast majority of personnel who deployed in support of this operation were from the navy, dedicated teams of staff were formed in both Halifax and Ottawa to help coordinate the response. In addition, the air force provided airlift resources to deploy personnel to the U.K. and Ireland.

Government Orders

As *Chicoutimi* belongs to the Atlantic fleet, the focus of the navy's response was coordinated by Maritime Forces Atlantic. Within 24 hours of the incident, technical staff were travelling to the scene of the incident to join HMS *Montrose*, the U.K. ship responsible for coordinating all the assets in the area that provided assistance to *Chicoutimi*. These technical experts were supported by additional technical personnel in the U.K., Ottawa, Esquimalt, Halifax and elsewhere. Within 48 hours, a second group departed Halifax and was followed by additional support personnel. For example, a command qualified submariner was embarked in HMS *Montrose* and a repair damage assessment team was sent to Scotland to estimate the nature of the repairs that *Chicoutimi* would require. Support personnel established a forward logistics site. HMCS *St. John's* was also deployed to the scene to provide support to *Chicoutimi*. In addition to personnel on HMCS *St. John's*, approximately 65 Canadian Forces personnel were in place to assist *Chicoutimi* when it arrived alongside in Faslane. Throughout this time period, the Canadian defence liaison staff, London, and our embassy in Ireland provided additional support.

In response to part (b), prior to departing for Halifax, *Chicoutimi* underwent pre-sea trial tests, harbour trials and at sea trials. In preparation for *Chicoutimi's* at sea trial, a series of pre-sea trial technical tests on engineering systems were performed. These tests included the submarine's navigation, communication, propulsion, and weapons systems. As well, the submarine's habitability, stores and firefighting equipment were inspected during this pre-sea trial phase.

Before the submarine was accepted into Canada's fleet, *Chicoutimi* undertook a series of separate harbour and at sea confidence checks and trials which were performed in a graduated fashion. As part of the harbour trials, the safe to dive certification, escape inspection, and final defect rectification were carried out. At sea trials themselves covered the full range of technical, procedural, and ship performance tests. Representatives of the Canadian Forces submarine project were involved in all of these tests and trials.

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[English]

QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURN

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if Questions Nos. 2 and 3 could be made orders for return, the returns would be tabled immediately.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Text]

Question No. 2—**Mr. David Chatters:**

What has the government paid out in the riding of Battle River in grants and contributions since fiscal year 1999-2000 broken down by recipient and, in each case, specifying: (a) the amount disbursed; (b) the government department involved; (c) the recipient organization or business; and (d) the location of the recipient organization or business?

(Return tabled)

Question No. 3—**Mr. David Chatters:**

With regard to the position of "creative manager" at the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission: (a) what have the job descriptions been; (b) what advertisements have been used to solicit applications; (c) how was the interview process conducted for all previous incumbents; (d) who approved the hiring; (e) how many applicants were interviewed; (f) when was the position created; (g) what were the expenses of the individual(s) filling this position; and (h) what curricula vitae or resumes have been submitted by any "creative manager"?

(Return tabled)

[English]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I ask, Mr. Speaker, that the remaining questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

**DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS
DEVELOPMENT ACT**

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-23, an act to establish the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development and to amend and repeal certain related acts, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before question period, I was on the point of discussing the issue of housing and homelessness among people with disabilities in the community. This issue has come up in the House today and in communities across the country. I wanted to cite a number of important statistics.

Almost half of the homeless population, which is growing, has a disability and one in seven persons with a disability has affordability problems with respect to housing. According to the 1986 census, more than half of the owned households where a person with a disability lived earned less than \$30,000 per year. Over 80% of rented households where a person with a disability lived earned less than this. In Toronto 37.5% of persons with disabilities live in poverty. Most shelters cannot accommodate individuals who need support with daily living, and the structural accessibility of shelters continues to be a barrier for persons with disabilities.

Government Orders

One in five persons with disabilities need housing adaptations of some kind. Cost is the most commonly cited barrier for adults with disabilities not acquiring needed adaptations. Persons with disabilities in rental accommodations and rooming and boarding houses are least likely to be satisfied with their accommodations. Cost has been cited by persons with disabilities across the country, who wish to move yet cannot, as the major barrier preventing relocation.

I raise these issues in the framework of Bill C-23 because we are not doing nearly enough to address the important needs of persons with disabilities. Much more can be done. We can ease the financial burden upon those with disabilities by making the disability and medical expense tax credits fully refundable. We can provide child care and respite care for families who look after children with disabilities. That should be instituted.

Many people with disabilities today have trouble accessing adequate long term home care, and often only receive this immediately after being in hospital. This is simply insufficient. Living standards should be improved for persons with disabilities.

We have looked at the issue of transport. There was a time in the past when Canada was seen as a world leader in improving accessibility to rail and air transportation for persons with disabilities. We now find that the government's decision to rely on voluntary codes of practice rather than federal regulations has halted further advancement in this area. Many people with disabilities across the country believe the situation has regressed.

Navigating the waters, which I have brought up in the House, is a national employment initiative of the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres. It has supported over 5,000 persons with disabilities by helping them upgrade their skills and find jobs, at a cost of only \$950,000 per year. As I mentioned, that program has been threatened with closure because of inadequate federal funding. This is shameful.

We have a situation where the lives of persons with disabilities could be dramatically improved, yet they have not been addressed. We hope, by studying the bill in committee, that it will help to start to address these important issues for people with disabilities.

[*Translation*]

It is tragic to see that disabled people account for 41% of those who must rely on food banks. It is also tragic that close to half of the homeless are disabled people. So, these last 10 years have been terrible and full of challenges for the disabled.

We are looking forward to discussing these issues in committee, in the weeks or months to come. We will ask disabled people to come and testify and to talk about their lives, in the hope that we can improve this legislation, and that we can also begin to improve their lot in Canadian society.

• (1525)

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Davenport.

I am very pleased to take part in this debate today on Bill C-23, which legally establishes the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

The new legislation will provide the necessary power and tools for the minister and the department to achieve their mandate and to contribute to the government's ultimate goal of strengthening our social foundations.

By splitting the former Human Resources Development Canada, the government has given itself a structure that will help it focus its efforts on further helping Canadians acquire the tools they need to develop and prosper in their workplace and community and on providing Canada with a highly skilled workforce that can meet the needs of the job market in the 21st century.

It is a tall order, we agree. Canada has many assets for competing on the global market, but it has to address the important issue of the disparity between emerging jobs and the skills of its workforce. Today fewer jobs do not require a high school diploma and in five years an estimated 70% of jobs will not be accessible to people without a high school diploma. Gone are the days when a young person could get a job in a factory for the rest of his life without a diploma.

Furthermore, technologies are advancing quickly and workers have to update their skills constantly. Just think about your computer: you buy the latest model and before it is even delivered a more powerful one comes out on the market.

Workers can expect to change jobs at least three times during their working life, and will often end up in fields that are very different from where they started. They have to adapt and be very flexible.

Canadians have proven time and again that they are able to adapt to change and we are sure they will stay above the fray in this new century. However, to do so it is important for citizens to be in a continuous learning environment in a country that is advanced in skills development.

Together with the other levels of government, including the provinces and territories, the business community and trade unions, the Government of Canada seeks to do just that, namely build a lifelong learning culture. It goes without saying that to build such a culture, the government is taking action and putting in place structures such as the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

Thanks to its many partnerships with the provinces, territories, private sector, trade unions, non-government and native organizations, the department delivers a wide range of programs to help students wishing to pursue post-secondary education, young people seeking work experience, people looking for work, businesses needing to hire and train workers, employers and unions striving to improve the work environment here in Canada.

Government Orders

I will now quickly list a few of the many programs delivered by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, in cooperation with its many partners. The Canada students loans program helps students with recognized needs access post-secondary education while the Canada education savings grants encourage parents to invest in their children's education. The Youth Employment Strategy is another component that helps young people get relevant information on careers and the job market to guide them in their choices regarding their future. It provides young people with practical work experience and learning opportunities that help them find and keep a job, and delivers programs and services to young people who have trouble finding work.

Another element is the EI benefits and support measures helping unemployed Canadians go back to work. The various sectors analyze the situation in their own areas and develop strategies accordingly.

• (1530)

The department is also taking a leadership role with other federal departments and agencies on numerous projects, including the recognition of foreign credentials.

As you can see, the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development has a impact on all Canadians at one point or another in their life. In 2003-04 for example, employment benefits and support measures alone have helped close to 700,000 Canadians. During the same period, and thanks to the department's programs, close to 56,000 Quebecers have re-entered the labour force.

Moreover, during the summer of 2003, more than 480,000 young Canadians benefited from the help of the 330 human resources centres for students in Canada. In short, many Canadians rely on Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

The minister obviously has an important role to play in the management of this important department. He can fortunately count on two colleagues, the Minister of State (Human Resources Development) and his colleague the Minister of Labour and Housing. Together, they manage one of the departments that has the greatest impact on the daily life of Canadians and on their common future. Together, they are working to build a lifelong learning culture to help meet the challenges of the 21st century and ensure Canada's prosperity.

• (1535)

[English]

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to be a part of ushering in the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Last December when the Prime Minister reorganized the former Human Resources Development Canada, steps were taken, pursuant to the Public Service Rearrangement and Transfer of Duties Act, to permit the creation of two new departments.

Today, with the legislation before the House, we are providing the department with the legal power and tools needed for the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development to fulfill his mandate, and what an important mandate it is. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, or HRSDC, plays a key role in meeting the Government of Canada's commitment to improve the social and economic well-being of all Canadians.

Through the department's efforts to support human capital development, enhance access to post-secondary education, promote workplace and skills development and foster a culture of lifelong learning, the quality of life for all Canadians, including the most disadvantaged, will be greatly improved.

If we, as a nation, are to participate fully in the 21st century economy and society, then we must have the means to ensure that all Canadians can pursue lifelong learning and skills development opportunities.

Starting with schooling, we are working with our provincial and territorial partners to enhance the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education. We want Canadians to have access to post-secondary education, but we also recognize the need for working-age Canadians to improve their skills and learn new ones. To help Canadians achieve this goal, HRSDC supports a variety of programs from basic literacy to apprenticeship to on-the-job training.

We all know that the best security is a job but the reality is that many Canadians need help getting started in their careers or returning to the workplace. That is why HRSDC directs substantial funds to employment insurance programs through active measures that are designed to assist unemployed workers participate in the workforce. Through such components as employment assistance services, job creation partnerships and labour market partnerships, the department has helped almost 700,000 Canadians in 2003-04.

As hon. members can tell from the names of these programs, partnership is key to ensuring the best outcomes for Canadians. It is for this reason that HRSDC is working with other levels of government, employers, unions and sector councils to develop a workplace skills strategy.

The workplace is increasingly important in a business environment characterized by rapid technological innovation. Under the workplace skills strategy, we have set three objectives: to help build a highly skilled, adaptable and resilient workforce; to see a labour market that is flexible, efficient and productive; and to work with employers to ensure that Canada's workplaces are productive and innovative.

The department is committed to looking at issues such as literacy training and essential skills upgrading for workers as well as encouraging apprenticeships in the skills trades. The workplace skills strategy will focus on the workplace for action because that is where workers' skills come into play.

In our last budget we kick-started the strategy by providing new resources for union-employer training centres. Over the next three years we will invest \$25 million in a pilot project to help replace outdated equipment for trades training. The Government of Canada will match employer and union investments in new machinery in selected training centres.

Government Orders

Right now we are working to increase Canadians' levels of education, but Canada is undergoing a shortage of skilled workers in some areas. If we couple this with the aging demographics of the population and the moving of the baby boom generation out of the labour force, it is clear that Canada needs workers.

A key element of the workplace skills strategy will therefore be the focus on foreign credential recognition. The fact that immigration is expected to account for all net labour force growth between 2011 and 2016 and the fact that many immigrants' skills are underutilized means that we must act promptly, and we have.

To address this challenge, the Government of Canada has created the foreign credentials recognition program. To implement this program the 2003 budget provided \$40 million over five years to improve the foreign credentials recognition process in Canada and followed up with an additional \$5 million per year over four years in the 2004 budget.

We know that health care is a number one priority with Canadians. With this in mind, we have reached an agreement with the provinces, territories and key medical stakeholders on improved procedures for licensing foreign trained doctors. Similar initiatives are underway for foreign trained nurses and other occupations related to the health field.

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada is helping newcomers to have their skills recognized; supporting families so that children get the best start in life; facilitating access to post-secondary education; and encouraging learning and skills development in the workplace.

We know how important it is to help Canadians prepare for, find and keep work, but we also recognize that there are times when all a person needs is temporary assistance to help bridge the gap between jobs. HRSDC administers employment insurance to provide relief for those temporarily unemployed.

• (1540)

The department is also responsible for the employment insurance compensation care benefit. This benefit helps ease the stress faced by Canadians who must choose between their jobs and caring for their gravely ill family members by providing six weeks of employment insurance benefits.

In my riding of Davenport and across the greater Toronto area, HRSDC provides funding and support to many programs that assist people to improve their lives.

The services and leadership offered by HRSDC directly impacts communities like mine all across the country. Whether it is work on foreign trained doctors or employment insurance benefits, these are the kinds of things that are important to people in Toronto and across Canada.

From the broad range of programs and services that Human Resources and Skills Development Canada offers, we can see just how crucial the department is to promoting Canada's social and economic well-being.

HRSDC has an ambitious and important agenda. This legislation gives the formal authority for the new department to pursue it.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand (Brant, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the House for the opportunity to speak about the importance of Bill C-23 to articulate in legislation the new mandate and responsibilities for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, HRSDC.

This legislation would ensure that the Minister and the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development will have the legal powers and tools needed to fulfill the minister's mandate. I can assure the House that HRSDC is working closely with officials from Social Development Canada to strengthen this country's social foundation.

This government believes in a strong Canada where every citizen has the opportunities and the tools to achieve his or her full potential to participate in the labour market and the community at large.

We believe that all Canadians should benefit from Canada's prosperity. We have a vision of a Canada where everyone has the right to learn and to keep learning throughout their lifetime. We are committed to fostering lifelong learning so that all Canadians can acquire the skills and experience required to participate fully in the workforce and in society.

As we move forward in the 21st century, Canada will require a more highly skilled workforce. The new economy calls for Canadians to become highly skilled and adaptable workers who not only embrace change but are prepared to drive it ahead.

I think most Canadians are aware that these days access to education and training is absolutely crucial to their job security and earning power. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, Canada's workers must have the opportunity to upgrade their skills, to improve their literacy, to learn on the job and to move onto the path of lifelong learning.

With this in mind, the Government of Canada is supporting learning and skills development at every stage of Canadians' lives. For instance, we are helping our youngest citizens through the Canadian education savings grants so that their parents can save for their children's education. The moment a child is born in Canada, its family and the government can begin to make contributions to finance their learning down the road. About 1.8 million Canadian children currently benefit from this innovative program.

Improvements have been made to support savings efforts made by low income and middle income families. All parents want the best for their children. That includes children achieving their full learning potential. The problem is that many families, particularly low income families, have trouble setting aside money for their children's education.

Government Orders

That is why the Government of Canada has introduced several new measures designed to encourage parents to start saving for their children's education right away. We recognize that our youth need education and training for challenging careers that will unleash their talents and bring them a bright future, but we must do more for families and students who feel challenged by the costs of post-secondary education today.

That is why we are working with our partners and key stakeholders to provide students with the financial assistance they require to pursue a post-secondary education. Through the Canada student loans program and a number of Canada study grants, we are doing much to help students cope with the rising costs of post-secondary education.

Over the last 40 years, the Canada student loans program has earned respect across the country by helping students meet the costs of a post-secondary education. About 350,000 Canadian students a year benefit from this program, which last year loaned \$1.6 billion to students in need. We also introduced a new grant worth up to \$3,000, which will help up to 20,000 students from low income families cover a portion of their first year tuition.

The Government of Canada supports post-secondary education in a variety of ways. A few examples are the Canada graduate scholarships, Canada study grants for students with dependents and for high needs students with permanent disabilities, as well as funding of higher education for aboriginal students and Industry Canada's support of distance education.

• (1545)

Members should be aware that Canada is the second biggest investor in the world in post-secondary education as a percentage of gross domestic product.

Our employment insurance program has continued to adapt to meet economic realities and will keep changing to meet the needs of Canadians. Canadians know they can count on employment insurance as a social safety net that is there when they need it, in times of job loss and economic downturns.

We are also giving unemployed Canadians new hope with special measures designed to help them get work experience, improve their job skills or start a new business. So far, more than 667,000 Canadians have been given these opportunities under the employment benefits and support measures of EI.

One of the pressure points of the new economy is finding enough workers with the right education and the right training. All new jobs require more education and skills than ever before. Roughly 70% of jobs now demand some form of post-secondary education. And on this front, as Canadians we certainly distinguish ourselves in the world, with the highest proportion of 24- to 65-year-olds with post-secondary education.

Despite this, we know that as many as 42% of working age Canadians already in the workforce lack the necessary literacy and other essential skills to meet these requirements. Too many good jobs are going begging in our country right now because we do not have people who match the right skill set.

There is a real disconnect in Canada between the need for a trained, skilled workforce and the opportunities available for workers to meet that need. We must close the skills gap if we are going to thrive and prosper as a nation in the 21st century. That is why we are committed to developing a new workplace skills strategy to ensure that Canada has the skilled, adaptable workforce it needs for the future.

We recognize that the workplace is where economic activity occurs. It is where Canadian workers' skills are put to the test as firms strive to become more innovative and more productive. As such, is an appropriate place for adult skills development. We intend to work with unions at their training sites and with businesses in the workplace through sector councils to develop this new workplace skills strategy, boosting literacy and other essential job skills for apprentices and workers.

I particularly wish to stress the important role I see unions playing in this process. Unions have resources and they have influence that will help in promoting more skills development. The workplace skills strategy will build on current federal programs and activities such as sector council initiatives, as well as apprenticeship programs, essential skills and workplace literacy initiatives, foreign credential recognition and labour mobility.

In all these activities we will collaborate with industry partners, employers and unions, as well as learning organizations and provincial and territorial governments, to promote the cost effective development of skills driven by the needs of the workplace. All these initiatives are part of the mandate of the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

We understand that Canada is a stronger country when all people are able to contribute their skills and talents to our labour market and to society. I am genuinely excited about the momentum that is beginning to build as people start to understand the enormous potential for Canada in the new global economy.

With this ambitious agenda, our government is working to build the workforce for the 21st century in Canada, robust and strong and able to compete with the best in the world.

• (1550)

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I took note of the member's comments about skills development and the EI program. The government likes to brag about its performance in so many areas, and economic indicators, but one area that I think is sadly lacking compared to our chief competitors is our unemployment rate.

The unemployment rate in this country is something like 7.3%. The unemployment rate in the United States is 5.3%. Also, the government should be taking a good hard look at the success story of Ireland. With the economic policies the Irish have there, the unemployment rate is something in the order of 4%.

Government Orders

If I understand it correctly, if we went from 7.3% unemployment to only 4% unemployment, we are talking about 500,000 to 600,000 people, the population of Winnipeg, Manitoba, a gigantic number of people.

I would like this member to try to explain to me how this government has had a real problem getting its unemployment rates down to the levels that we see in the United States and Ireland. Maybe he can explain what structural problems we have in this country such that we cannot get it lower.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Mr. Speaker, the government is committed to lowering the unemployment rate in this country. It is regrettable that a single person is unemployed. That is a reality, but the government is committed to reducing the level of unemployment in this country.

I would remind my hon. colleague across the floor, and I appreciate his question, that the government is handling the country's economy very effectively. The member likely does not need to be reminded that we have a surplus budget, that seven consecutive surplus budgets have been returned by the Liberal government, that the most significant national debt with which we were left in 1993 has been gradually reduced, and the crippling \$42 billion deficit of 1993 has been eradicated. On balance, this government is most effectively managing the finances of this nation.

• (1555)

Mr. Jim Gouk (British Columbia Southern Interior, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the hon. member talking about how wonderful the student loan program is. I would like to inform him that as a fourth term member of Parliament I have run into a lot of problems that young constituents have had with that program, two that I would like to share with him and ask him for comments on.

One problem is students who find themselves coming out of our education system, expensive as it is, with tremendous debt and then finding it very difficult to get a job. Consequently they have great difficulty in making the payments. As soon as they miss a payment, they go into default and they start getting hounded for payments. It actually was so bad in the case of a mentally disturbed person in my riding who received funding that it ended up being a contributing factor in her suicide.

What we have suggested is that loans should be income contingent. In other words, they should be repaid according to the salary the students are making. If they get a high salary, they pay it a little faster. If they have a very low salary, they pay a lower amount that is affordable. If they find themselves out of work for a period of time, payments and the clock under the loan basically should be stopped.

The second problem is that we have many students who have difficulty getting the loans. One of the impediments in their way is the means test for the parents. If the parents make over a certain income, students cannot get a loan from this program even though the parents may have no ability or no intention to provide funding for their children. Why should the children be penalized because of that? We would like to see the program change so that it is not contingent on the parental income, that is, so that it is based on the student needs. I would be interested in hearing the comments of the hon. member on those two items.

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Mr. Speaker, I am not standing on my feet suggesting that the program is perfect but obviously the government is doing something very well.

I will repeat what I said earlier. Canada has the highest proportion of 24 to 65 year olds in the world with post-secondary education. Clearly we are doing something very well and very effectively in graduating so many young adults out of university.

I would also point out for the member that it was this government that established the millennium scholarship fund.

With respect to student loans and the innuendo that they are crippling, it is my understanding that relief can be sought. It is my understanding that student loans can be repaid on a gradual or incremental basis when financial circumstances dictate that form of repayment.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to raise the issue of the employment insurance fund.

Over the course of the past 11 years, \$46 billion have been taken from workers. Eight hundred thousand Canadians who have paid into that fund are not able to qualify for basic employment insurance. We also know we have a growing number of poor children in this country, 1.4 million poor children. We know women are particularly vulnerable to the fact that they are paying into an insurance fund that is being syphoned off by the federal government in order to do, goodness knows what. It brought in a corporate tax cut at the beginning of this year but it certainly is not doing a heck of a lot for those in communities across the country.

Why has it taken so long for the government to act in any of these areas? We have mentioned housing, which is deplorable. We have mentioned the situation for persons with disabilities, which is catastrophic across the country. We have mentioned employment insurance, where in many communities people do not have access to basic employment insurance. We have seen the impact on communities. Why has the government not acted?

• (1600)

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Mr. Speaker, the government is acting. The employment insurance program does change to meet economic realities and will keep changing to meet the needs of Canadians.

I will certainly bring to the minister's attention the concerns raised by the member and a fuller answer will be forthcoming.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the member for Brant, further to the comments by the member for Burnaby—New Westminster.

Once again, concerning the employment insurance fund, the member says that it is adjusted according to the employment situation. Would it not be more accurate to say that the rules concerning the fund were adjusted based on the needs of the fund rather than on the needs of the unemployed?

Government Orders

I want to ask the member if he realizes that the rules have been changed and that now only 38% of the people who were entitled to employment insurance in 1995 are now eligible. There is a reduction. Presently, according to the rules that existed in 1995, less than 40% of the unemployed are now entitled to employment insurance benefits.

Does the member realize that? How can he explain that the bill disregards that and establishes a separate fund which will be managed by both parties?

[English]

Mr. Lloyd St. Amand: Mr. Speaker, the employment insurance program in Canada is, I dare say, the envy of many other countries. I am not suggesting that it is a perfect program but it has helped hundreds of thousands of individuals over many years. Are refinements required? No doubt. The government is committed to continuing to ensure fairness and equity in the program.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, with your permission, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Beauport—Limoilou.

This bill gives a definition of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development. Early in the bill, we read the following:

The powers, duties and functions of the Minister extend to and include all matters...over which Parliament has jurisdiction and which are not by law assigned to another Minister, department, board or agency of the Government of Canada.

Unfortunately, it is not specified that all these jurisdictions are provincial. In other words, this bill further entrenches the federal invasion of the areas of manpower development and education.

In the next few minutes, I will not come back to the employment insurance aspect, even though it is an important part of the new department. I believe that my colleague for Chambly—Borduas has very clearly explained the position of the Bloc Québécois in this respect.

Let me just recall a few facts. The employment insurance program became a federal jurisdiction when it was handed over by the provinces in the hard times of the second world war. Since then, the federal government, here as in a number of jurisdictions, has done as it pleased, completely ignoring Quebec and the provinces.

The current government can now demonstrate its good will by supporting Bills C-278 and C-280 as tabled by the Bloc Québécois. These two bills would implement necessary and efficient amendments to the Employment Insurance Act, the first in terms of procedure and benefits, the second concerning the EI Commission and its related fund.

Unfortunately, in my riding, EI is taking on growing importance, while the government does nothing to keep businesses in business. EI is and will continue to be very important for a great number of citizens in my riding. However, the current criteria are inadequate on both counts. Workers need a decent income to meet their needs. With all the federal programs that have been slashed for all age groups and for all workers, my riding is looking at a annual shortfall of \$23 million, which is an unbelievably large amount.

That being said, let me return to the current bill which, as I was saying, highlights the federal government's interference in provincial jurisdictions.

The mandate of the future Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development will be, among other duties, to strengthen the social foundations of Canada. However—I repeat—these social foundations, as it is clearly said, come under provincial jurisdiction.

The skills development portion of the new department is nothing less than an education department in disguise. The learning bonds are a case in point. The federal government must transfer the money to Quebec and the provinces, rather than establish programs in jurisdictions that do not belong to it. With the transfer to the provinces, the Government of Quebec could help students by limiting debts incurred due to their studies and by providing achievable dreams to our young people.

Bill C-23 stipulates that the new “Minister may enter into agreements with a province or a provincial public body...or bodies that the Minister considers appropriate”. I should hope so; this is obvious. The sectors of labour development and education come under provincial jurisdiction. Provinces and provincial bodies should be consulted, unless, again, the Liberal government acts in bad faith.

In the area of labour development, I will again refer to the bill. It says that the Minister contributes to the achievement of these objectives by supporting the development of human capital, by improving access to post-secondary education, by supporting skills improvement in the workplace and by encouraging Canadians to embark on a path of lifelong learning.

I will provide examples from my riding to demonstrate that the Liberal government has difficulty in managing programs and that it would be well-advised to leave them, with their funds, to Quebec and the provinces.

In the Compton—Stanstead riding, after the closure of the CookshireTex and Cordelli plants, which fell victim to Asian competition, several employees took steps to retrain themselves. They sought to find their way back onto the labour market by becoming specialists.

• (1605)

Instead of encouraging them, the staff at the local employment insurance office thoroughly demoralized them. The federal employees there were saying that the newly unemployed people had more than enough qualifications to get retrained. Those who did not have all the qualifications were told that employment insurance would not pay for seasonal or long-term training.

Government Orders

Is that a show of goodwill? Is that what we call support for the development of human capital, for professional training and for continuous learning? I think the liberal government is laughing in the face of our fellow citizens. Instead of giving such absurd answers, the federal government should address the fiscal imbalance so that Quebec would have the necessary resources to take care of workforce development by itself, without having to go to Ottawa cap in hand.

I am asking my colleagues in this House to stand against Bill C-23, but to be in favour of Bill C-278 and Bill C-280, which, as I said, modify the Employment Insurance Act in an efficient manner. The Bloc Québécois also thinks that the Minister of Labour's mandate, as described in Part II of Bill C-23, is consistent with Bill C-263 on replacement workers. The federal government should support the initiative put forward by the Bloc Québécois by voting in favour of said bill, and thus modify the Labour Code without shaking up the entire Human Resources Department.

• (1610)

Mr. Christian Simard (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, we are wondering how the bill before us will really improve the fate of our fellow citizens and how it will translate into improvements in the field. In this case, some duties are divided. In other areas such as regional development, a new department is created when we already had the Economic Development Agency.

In preparation for my speech, I looked at some notes. I can tell you that the organization charts for the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development we were given show some rather peculiar lines of authority between the Minister of Labour and Housing and the Minister of State (Human Resources Development). We think all that will not translate into operational efficiency.

We are wondering how this type of legislation will improve the fate of the unemployed, the homeless and workers.

This is why we, in the Bloc Québécois, do not support this bill which might create further encroachments and may not bring any new investment. As we know, the government has a \$9.1 billion surplus. It might end up being even larger. Members do realize that one of the functions of the Minister of Labour and Housing, as defined by the bill, is housing.

As a matter of fact, as you know, today the popular front for urban redevelopment, FRAPRU, organized a demonstration asking for immediate investments. The Minister of Labour and Housing is also responsible for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which does not appear in the new department organization chart. It does not augur well, I think.

I will agree that organizing a state such as this very centralizing federal state, is not that easy. But we know that any system can be improved and that it creates its own encroachments and management problems. But we do not see how this improves clarity.

Boileau said, "An idea well conceived presents itself clearly, and words to express it come readily".

That cannot be said of the background information on the new department. I will quote some of it and you will agree with me that

Boileau would probably roll over in his grave if he read or was made aware of the new department mission.

HRSDC's vision is to build a country where everyone has the opportunity to learn and to contribute to Canada's success by participating fully in a well-functioning and efficient labour market. HRSDC's mission is to improve the standard of living and quality of life of all Canadians by promoting a highly skilled and mobile labour force and an efficient and inclusive labour market. This means the department has a central role in helping build a 21st century economy for Canada and in strengthening Canada's social foundations.

The department contributes to meeting its vision and mission by supporting human capital development, enhancing access to post-secondary education, supporting workplace skills development, and encouraging lifelong learning for Canadians.

This is terribly wordy, without necessarily having any connection with the needs of Canadians: a job, and also a social safety net if they lose that job, one that guarantees enough to live on. I do not see where this new creation improves the situation.

Taking the homeless as an example, we know that there was a measure to help them, SCPI, but it is getting to the end of its days. The throne speech included a promise of new housing, which does not meet the needs of the homeless. This national homelessness initiative, and its related programs, including SCPI, the supporting communities partnership initiative, are programs that require investments.

So, before structures, or superstructures, of agencies and departments are built, it is necessary to have sufficient resources for them. During the election campaign, the Liberals announced \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion—though it was unclear—over five or six years. This promise is mixed up with the measures relating to housing, including new housing creation and measures to help the homeless.

• (1615)

When we look at \$1.5 billion, or one billion over six years, when the creation of new housing for families—affordable housing or social housing—and the SCPI is mixed in with resources for individuals and the creation of temporary shelters that the SCPI also supports, then we see that this will be a huge department, even after it has been split or reorganized, and that its actual resources will be limited. These resources are in great demand.

The government appears to be saying, "Why should we make it simple when we can make it complicated?" We say, "Why make it complicated when it could be simple?"

Thus, the need to have an independent employment insurance fund that is not just part of an enormous department where surpluses can get lost or misplaced has become painfully obvious in recent years. Now, accountability may be diminished and difficult to achieve.

In addition, we have been through this experiment with human resources in the past and I do not think it has fixed anything at all. It is like putting a poultice on a wooden leg.

In my humble opinion, I think that problems of efficiency and effectiveness cannot be corrected by this organization, whose ministerial accountability does not seem clear from its organization chart.

Government Orders

What the homeless need are human resources. What the housing sector needs, what the poorly housed families of Canada need, is resources. These resources should be transferred to the provinces and Quebec, which are better at delivering programs and providing solutions than are across the board federal departments or programs.

Therefore, this bill is a source of confusion and not a source of practical solutions for people. It may also be an intrusion into Quebec's jurisdiction. I do not believe it is the source of a better quality of life for Quebecers or for Canadians in the rest of Canada.

Mr. Marc Boulianne (Mégantic—L'Érable, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first I would like to congratulate my colleague from Compton—Stanstead, who gave us a scholarly presentation on Bill C-23 and focused mainly on skills. This is an important point. Before making my comment and asking my question, I also want to congratulate the member for Beauport—Limoilou and the member for Chambly, who are heading this file with great expertise.

First, here is my comment. I had the opportunity to intervene, last week, on Bill C-9 to establish the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec. There is an extremely important parallel and common point with Bill C-23, namely federal interference in Quebec's jurisdictions.

Sometimes, it is economic development that the government does not recognize. It says that it does not exist in the Constitution, despite sections 91 and 92, which provide for a division of powers, and despite tradition and precedents. It has increasingly the habit of saying that we do not have powers. Here it is on education. This is where we find the common point.

Last week, I had the opportunity to intervene with the minister responsible for economic development. He said the same thing. He is required to say that there is still an integrated federal strategy, whether on employment insurance or on the economy, despite the needs that Quebec might have.

I also think that we do not need this, because it will not work. There will always be something that does not work. There will always be problems.

I would like to put my question to my colleague from Beauport—Limoilou. The Bloc is proposing Bill C-280, which brings solutions, I think. I would like to ask him what the fundamental difference is between Bill C-23 and Bill C-280. Does Bill C-280 not correspond much more to Quebec's needs than Bill C-23?

• (1620)

Mr. Christian Simard: Mr. Speaker, in fact, what the Bloc's bill is proposing are simple things: equal and efficient structures.

I think that my colleague alluded to the contribution of unions and employers to the EI commission and fund. What we are proposing in this respect is something simple, efficient and transparent, as opposed to what we have now.

Take homelessness for example. With the Government of Canada, all we hear about are three-year temporary measures and the promise of arrangements with the provinces. Does the government have an integrated approach to fighting poverty? Does it take action to help the unemployed not give in to depression and stress because they are unable to put a roof over their heads or food on the table? That is

pretty basic; it is called Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It is a basic need to have a roof over one's head and food on the table in order to live in dignity and be able to find a new job.

In the case of the homeless, the most disadvantaged in our society, three-year measures are promised but in fact, compared to what was proposed in the Speech from the Throne or what could be expected, assistance will be reduced. In Quebec, it is estimated—and I believe I am accurate in saying this—that this will represent a budget cut of \$15 million, when some \$100 million would be necessary to respond to the needs. This is in fact a reduction, compared to what was promised.

What we are proposing are clear and transparent political and administrative structures designed truly ...or those in need, long-term structures, and not acute structures or enormous structures that interfere with working in the best interests of people.

[English]

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am a bit surprised by my colleague's remarks and his condemnation of the bill. I truly appreciate his interest in housing and in homelessness. However, we are discussing a bill which is designed to reform and I hope to improve the federal system.

In the standing committee, which studied the matter of the old department of HRDC, the Bloc voted in favour of the division of that department. That division is what the government has proceeded to do and that is what the House is seized with the present time. This was unanimously supported by the House of Commons, including the Bloc.

On the matter of homelessness, if that is where my colleague wants to focus his attention, first, does he not think this smaller and more focused entity would be more effective in the area of housing and homelessness than the cumbersome predecessor that the Bloc voted against the last time? Second, if that is not so, as Bloc members voted in favour of dividing the old HRDC, have they any suggestions as to the way it should have been divided?

• (1625)

[Translation]

Mr. Christian Simard: Mr. Speaker, I will not stoop to the government's specialty, which is to always look for ways to create new org charts. In private member's Bill C-280, we suggested straightforward structures to make government management more efficient. The Bloc Québécois is contributing through its own bills and motions.

Should we keep the old department the way it was or divide it in two as suggested here? The division is not a solution in itself. Having more departments or fewer, or dividing departments will not settle any problem.

I have some experience. I will soon turn 50. In my younger years, I used to be very much interested in politics. I was proud to know by heart the make-up of cabinets in Quebec City and Ottawa. I thought that once I knew them, I would know them forever, and that it would never change.

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Later on, when I was 15 or 16, I realized that it was not worth trying to remember the names of ministers and their departments, because they keep changing all the time when circumstances change and when mandarins feel like changing them.

I also know that this bill has been introduced because of problems in the management of this department. Would government management of the firearms registry have been better if there had been two registries instead of one? I doubt it. Splitting a department in two is neither good nor bad. What counts is the way it is done.

In Bill C-280, we suggest measures that are clearer, more simple, and more transparent for the public.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, Health; the hon. member for Quebec, Parental leave; the hon. member for Nepean—Carleton, The sponsorship program.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to Bill C-23, an act that will establish in legislation the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development which was created by a series of orders in council last December.

Today we have the opportunity to examine this legislation that establishes the department of HRSDC and sets out the powers, duties and functions of the minister and the minister's mandate. I would like to talk about that mandate and why it is important for our standard of living to promote a highly skilled and mobile workforce.

As the member of Parliament for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, I am keenly aware of the role this department will play in the lives of my constituents and my community. I am pleased that the minister visited my constituency during the summer to learn about our region and to announce some important new programs in the community. I welcome him back any time.

The name of the department is appropriate, Human Resources and Skills Development, because of the role it will play in working with partners to help Canadians create better opportunities for themselves. Increasingly, in the knowledge economy, that means Canadians are recognizing the importance of learning and skills development.

One way of influencing a better outcome for individuals is to ensure that they get a good start right from the beginning when they are children. Maternity and parental benefits under the employment insurance program make it easier now for parents to concentrate on the health and well-being of their babies.

At the same time, parents and grandparents can make a commitment to invest in a registered education savings plan for their child or grandchild knowing that they will receive additional support for that child from the Government of Canada through the Canada education savings grant.

In the last budget the government recently enhanced the Canada education savings grant for low income and middle income families. For those parents entitled to the national child benefit, the government will provide a Canada learning bond giving them a

further incentive to put aside some money for their children's further education.

Members will recall that 26% of children from families with incomes under \$25,000 do have savings for post-secondary education. However, only 8% of these have savings in RESPs where they could get matching funds from the government.

I hope fellow members recognize the policy drivers behind these programs. We are working with Canadian parents to give their children a good start so they are ready and able to learn in school, and looking ahead to training and educational possibilities after high school.

Studies tell us that children take post-secondary education more seriously if they feel their parents are committed to a long term learning plan. Our goal is to get young people thinking of the value of education and learning from an early age so they will be motivated when it most counts.

HRSDC will also support families in another way through its national literacy secretariat which funds projects across the country to support family literacy. Literacy and essential skills are the foundation of lifelong learning, and enable us to fully participate in the workplace and society. Higher literacy results in a better quality of life through reduced poverty, lower unemployment, decreased assistance, and in fact better health for Canadians. The best security of course is a job, and the most effective route to employment is through learning, and acquiring the literacy and foundational skills so necessary in all occupations.

HRSDC will come into play later on in the lives of young people. Canada's youth employment strategy is active on many fronts in communities across the country. From hire a student activities in the summer to skills link projects for young people who have left school or are unemployed, YES projects count on local partners to help young people gain work experience and either continue their education or enter the workforce. The backdrop to our success as a country is our work with partners in our communities to spark the abilities and the talents of young people.

Some people have heard and seen the ad campaign that is encouraging young people to consider the trades as a serious career option. Through HRSDC, \$12 million was provided to the Canadian apprenticeship forum and Skills/Compétences Canada to develop and launch this promotional campaign to attract more young people into trades. We are accomplishing two important objectives: expanding career opportunities for young people and renewing skilled trades. Like so much of the work at HRSDC the success of this campaign will depend on the apprenticeship stakeholders, business and labour groups, employers and educators.

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The campaign also underlines the skills challenge facing Canada. First, we have a slowing of the labour force growth. Our labour force grew by over 2% a year 25 years ago. By the end of this decade it will be down to 1% per year. That is one reason why this campaign is happening. Regional labour shortages are already evident in construction, aircraft mechanics, machinists and carpenters.

The second challenge facing us is the relentless rise in skill requirements across all industries. Three out of four jobs now need some post-secondary education, whether a trade certificate, a college diploma or a university degree. Recognizing the urgency of this situation, the Government of Canada has made skills development and lifelong learning a priority.

• (1630)

Since first balancing the books in 1997-98, about one-quarter of all new federal spending has been devoted to education and innovation. That adds up to more than \$36 billion. The Department of Human Resources and Skills Development is leading that charge. In the years ahead we will need to ensure that Canadians have the opportunity to gain the skills and the learning to succeed in an ever-changing labour market.

Very simply, our goal is to lay the foundation for promoting learning at every age and every stage of life. Part of this involves enhancing the accessibility and the affordability of post-secondary education so students can get a good education and skills.

Many students I have visited in my local schools are afraid that post-secondary education is beyond their reach. This is one of the reasons that I was interested in joining our party's post-secondary caucus and taking over the very distinguished leadership of the member for Peterborough. That is why our last budget improved the Canada student loans program and the Canada study grants to enhance access to high needs students, such as those with dependents, with disabilities or from low income families or those studying part time.

Helping students pursue post-secondary education is only part of the answer. Learning also occurs in and around the workplace. That is where workers' skills intersect with the current needs of the labour market, which also impacts on innovation and productivity.

We are working with other levels of government, business, unions, workers and sector councils to develop a workplace skills strategy. We are looking at issues such as literacy training and essential skills for upgrading of workers as well as encouraging apprenticeships in the skilled trades. Our goal is to allow workers greater opportunity to enhance and improve their skills for the workplace.

Under the workplace skills strategy we would like to first, help build a highly skilled, adaptable and resilient workforce; and second, see a flexible, efficient and productive labour market, and also respond to employers' needs for productive, innovative workplaces.

In our last budget we kick-started the strategy by providing new resources for union-employer training centres. Over the next three years we will invest \$25 million in a pilot project to help replace outdated equipment for trades training.

The last budget also committed a further \$5 million per year over four years to sector councils to help raise awareness of the need to better integrate skilled immigrants into the Canadian economy. In a time of skill and worker shortages, we need to work together to find solutions in assessing and recognizing the credentials of skilled immigrants. My own area of Atlantic Canada needs immigrants to grow our economy. We cannot afford to have skilled trained professionals who are unable to practise their profession.

The \$5 million builds on a total of \$40 million over five years announced in the 2003 budget to help create a foreign credential recognition program. HRSDC is spearheading the program by working with a number of partners, provincial and territorial governments, licensing and regulatory bodies, professional associations, employers and a variety of other stakeholders.

We have already reached an agreement on improved procedures for licensing foreign-trained doctors. Consultations will soon begin with allied health professionals such as pharmacists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and medical laboratory technicians.

As hon. members can see, the Human Resources Skills Development Department is busy on many fronts and in many communities across the country. The work accomplished by HRSDC staff, through its partners and stakeholders, is truly in the long term best interests of this country and will reflect the priorities of Canadians. Our human resources are our future and HRSDC is showing leadership to meet the critical needs of Canadians.

• (1635)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to my colleague. Things are somewhat disconnected from reality. When you look at the real situation, you see that government cuts have done a lot of damage in communities across the country, including cuts in employment programs like Surf the Wave, a program which helped more than 5,000 handicapped people across the country to find a job for a paltry \$950,000 a year. Nevertheless, the government announced, early this year, that it will cut this program. It will eliminate it at the end of the year.

Let us talk about education. Student debt across the country is rising; it is, in average, between \$20,000 and \$30,000 per person. In my community, in my riding, I meet dozens upon dozens of young Canadians who would like to make a contribution to our country but who are unable to do so, either because they cannot afford to have a debt, or because they already have one. They find this situation incredibly difficult.

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There has been a lot of talk about the housing issues and the employment insurance fund which denies some 800,000 unemployed Canadians the minimum they need to put food on the table and forge a decent life for themselves and for their families.

With all those cuts, even if my colleague made a very good presentation, I think his speech was disconnected from the reality that we see across this country and in our communities. I wanted to ask the hon. member if he understands how disconnected it is from the situation we have in Canada.

• (1640)

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, I have no doubt that my hon. colleague feels very passionately about the needs of Canadians but the simple fact is that not all Canadians have kept up with the overall success of the Canadian economy in the past 10 years.

We heard earlier that there are unemployed people in Canada. I think my colleague from Brant had mentioned that one person unemployed is too many. The fact is that we had an unemployment rate of I believe almost 12% just 10 years ago. A number of people had to make sacrifices as this country went from being virtually bankrupt to the point now where we are able to make investments in the most important resource we have, which is our people, particularly our children.

I would say that even in a time of significant economic distress, things like the Canada child tax credit was an innovation at a time when we were trying to, overall, get the economy under control. We have not slacked off in that need, even when the country did not have money.

Government is about making choices. We made it clear in the election and in the Speech from Throne that our priorities were health, homelessness, child care, reinvesting in our communities and reinvesting in our military. Homelessness is one that is very close to me and I am delighted that we have set aside \$1.8 billion for that over the next few years.

I think we are doing pretty well, all things considered. We can always do better and we will strive to do so.

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the point my NDP colleague made about the disconnect from reality concerns me.

I am as critical as anybody of the system of higher education that we have in Canada but we must never forget that we have the highest percentage of post-secondary graduates in the world. With all our problems, some things are being done right and, by the way, increasingly right.

He talked about cutbacks. I have been here longer than he has and it certainly was a very stressful time when we took out of the system, not any money that was there, but \$42 billion per year of borrowing. The government of day and governments of the previous 30 years had been spending roughly a quarter more than the money they had for years and years. It is easy to say that we made all these cuts but they were being paid for by borrowing \$42 billion. One can imagine if we had to borrow \$42 billion this year.

Earlier today I heard one of his colleagues talking about spending the so-called surpluses. We have a national debt accumulated in those years of about \$500 billion and we have a surplus of 5%. If we were to put all that so-called surplus on to the debt it would take us 50 years to pay it off if we had that much every single year to pay it off. I think the member should be careful about what he is saying and who is disconnected from reality.

I truly do share the concerns of my colleague for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, and, I suspect, in most areas, but I what I liked about my colleague's speech was his focus on what we now call lifelong learning. He mentioned lifelong learning and skills development but they are the same thing.

In lifelong learning we are talking about quality early childhood development, quality elementary and high school, quality college or the trades, quality university and, by the way, we are talking about childhood literacy and senior literacy and all of the things that are involved. Our purpose in debating today is to make the federal government more effective in dealing with those things.

I know my colleague is from the Halifax-Dartmouth area, which is an extraordinary centre of college and university life. The area has a range of colleges and universities which one would rarely see in such a small area. I know he has a particular interest in colleges. I wonder if he could comment on some of the developments he has seen and is watching in the Halifax-Dartmouth area with respect to the colleges and universities.

• (1645)

Mr. Michael Savage: Mr. Speaker, I would be delighted to talk about that. In spite of my great passion for the colleges and universities in my area, I do not think I can speak for as long as the question was but I will do my very best. It was a learned question with a significant preamble.

One of the most exciting things that is happening in my constituency of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour is that we are about to become the home of our first post-secondary institution, the home office of the Nova Scotia Community College, which has been so ably led by Ray Ivany, one of the true scholars in Canada. What that means to a community is a vibrancy, an innovation and the creativity that automatically comes with students. On behalf of the people of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, I want to thank Ray Ivany and the people at the community college, people like Robbie Shaw, for recognizing the possibility of coming across the harbour and setting that up.

Halifax is the home as well of Dalhousie University, St. Mary's University, Mount St. Vincent University, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design which is close to establishing a beachhead on the Dartmouth side of the water that comes complete with all the benefits of having artistically creative students in a downtown area. Nothing adds so much to the life of a community, from a cultural point of view, a learned point of view and a vibrancy point of view, than universities, which is why I am very pleased to be on the caucus committee for post-secondary education.

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My colleague who asked the question has established a reputation across the country as somebody who really sees the benefit of post-secondary education, the realities and challenges of post-secondary education and has been working to do something about it.

As the chair of our caucus committee on post-secondary education I look forward to following in his footsteps. I am delighted that my own community of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour is a great example of what universities and colleges can bring to a community.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great pleasure this afternoon to speak on a subject for which I feel strongly. I remember in the early seventies finishing university at Laurentian in Sudbury and getting a job at Sault College. I joined the staff at that institution who travelled the highways and the byways of the Sault Ste. Marie-Algoma area selling education out there like missionaries talking about lifelong learning, talking about bringing people together to look at what they might do to upgrade their skills, to shift from one job to another, to create something new in their community and to participate in the voluntary sector even. Education at that time seemed to be at a premium and everyone was excited and was participating in that.

I have to say though that in this place and over the last few years working as a member of a provincial parliament in Ontario I have found a distinct change in that atmosphere, a move from a priority on education to other things like deficit cutting and government reduction, I believe, to the detriment of communities and our young people particularly and our country.

It is an honour to rise in the House today on the bill to create the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development. On the surface it may be a housekeeping bill to give legislative framework for the new department that has been operating since last December. However the mandate of this department touches on very important issues for Canadians, including workplace strategy, apprenticeship programs, employment insurance and student assistance initiatives.

I appreciate the contributions in this debate by my colleagues from Ottawa Centre and Burnaby—New Westminster, noting the shameful record of the government on social housing, homeless people and persons with disabilities.

When we look at policy related to what makes our economy healthy and strong, we have some fundamental questions to answer. We have to get it right, whether we operate out of a mindset that says that the economy exists to serve human beings or whether we think human beings were created to serve the economy.

All social and fiscal policy flows from that primary understanding of the right relationship between people and the economy. Until we build an economy that honours human beings, that permits each and every Canadian to contribute fully and enjoy all the justice and wealth that flows now only to some, I believe we have failed in our work here.

First, as the elected member in the Ontario legislature for Sault Ste. Marie and now as the federal member, I have fought to protect the northern economy. Indeed, in coming here I have discovered, in talking to some of my colleagues, that it is not just the northern economy but it is the rural economy as well. Large communities

have done relatively well over the last few years, but those of us out in the far reaches, the heart of this country, who contribute in such a substantial way to the economy that has served us all so well have struggled in the last few years and continue to struggle.

I have been working to develop a comprehensive strategy to protect what we have and to attract new investment. The best and most sustainable economic development comes when natural assets within a community, primarily people, are identified and nurtured.

However, across my riding during the campaign I heard, and I still hear this today, that there are too few jobs or the jobs that are available are only poorly paid part-time positions. I hear about out-migration. My friend from Timmins—James Bay speaks here regularly and asks questions, and is in the media almost every other day talking about the phenomenon of out-migration in the northern parts of the country, in my riding in particular, in northern Ontario and I believe in rural Ontario. Out-migration, unfortunately, is too much a reality.

• (1650)

Our young people leave for the south to complete their schooling and too often find no full time positions when they attempt to return. They find contract work which leads only to contract after contract. They are effectively driven from the district in search of work. When the government does come up with a creative solution, a response in partnership usually with institutions and people who live and know their particular area, we find that one, two, three or four years down the road, the criteria has changed and they no longer qualify for the funding, so a good program disappears.

We heard from Northern College in Timmins. It runs a highly successful job creation program called GAP, the graduate assistance program, which addresses the huge out-migration problem of the north's young. This successful program is now told that it no longer meets HRSD criteria, despite successfully placing 75 graduates.

Subsidies increased dramatically due to the high level of jobs that our graduates obtained. A high percentage of clients averaged \$13 an hour. That may not be much to those who live in the city and make much better money, but in many places in the north that is not bad money. Sixteen clients earned over \$17 per hour. The program provided up to 52 weeks of funding for many employers who required more training time due to the complexity of the jobs they were offering.

Many grads returned home from college and university and expressed a real desire to stay in their small communities, so obviously GAP did fill the gap. The project received Human Resources Development Canada funding for the first four years of the program as part of youth strategies and then two years as a youth internship program. GAP is obviously expandable as a program. It could be expanded to North Bay, Sudbury or to my own community of Sault Ste. Marie where it could be introduced at Sault College in partnership with the colleges.

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In Sault Ste. Marie, in my own home community, we have concerns about the lack of internship support for workers aged 30 and older. There is lack of support for older workers generally and particularly women not qualifying for EI because of part time work. I believe that was due to a change in the criteria brought forward by the government.

Another issue is the difficulty in accommodating workers caught in the quit/ fired argument. It is very difficult to prove unjust firing, and a lot of people find themselves falling through the net without any help.

Another group that seems to be affected rather dramatically in our area is seniors in the fifties group. I had a group of people come to my office to say, for example, that they took early retirement to leave room for younger people to come in, get trained and have jobs. However, after a year or two of retirement at 50, they are finding, and rightfully so, that they still have something worthwhile to contribute. With the skills, experience and knowledge that they have, they could return to the workplace in some other capacity perhaps and contribute. It would make themselves feel better and they could do more for their community and country.

However, there is a significant and serious disconnect. There does not seem to be any support, assistance or training for them to get over that gap. They are a resource we need desperately as we try to compete in the world and improve our GDP, but we are unable to make the connection. There is a need for some focus and work with that group so we can get them back into productive and constructive contributions.

Regrettably there has been the dismantling of a cooperative approach to training. We need to have a serious examination of how to improve apprenticeship programs. There is a shortage of trades people in Canada and it will worsen in the next few years.

The Conference Board of Canada believes that Canada is not prepared to deal with the issue under the current apprenticeship program. It says that there is a real disconnect in Canada between the need for a trained, skilled workforce and the opportunities available for workers to meet that need. We have systematically dismantled a cooperative approach to training, with government, industry and labour organizations working together.

Funding has been reduced, shifting the burden and cost of training to the individual in the context of the market. Anywhere we look in the world today, particularly where economies are doing well, education and training is seen as a social investment that benefits everyone, including business and industry. One of the first and most important decisions by the Irish government, for example, when it moved to kick start the Celtic tiger, was to invest heavily in education for everyone.

• (1655)

Finland sees the availability of skilled trained workers as essential to any future growth in its economy. One of the major competitive advantages in the new world economy is a country's workforce. This is why European jurisdictions are changing their laws to allow for dual citizenship, to attract immigrants back with their education, training and experience.

In my own community of Sault Ste. Marie we have young people trying to enter the workforce, displaced older workers looking for training and middle age retirees looking to make a further contribution. There is no central facility or resources available to take these very willing and valuable workers from where they are to where they want to be and, in fact, to where we want them to be. There is a patchwork of short term, mostly dead end programs that simply move people from one situation of frustration or poverty to another.

We used to have a network of properly funded community colleges, offering programs easily accessed, affordable and connected to real work through partnerships with community and industry. Apprenticeship programs were very often a shared cost agreement between a workplace and a college. Canada, like most western countries, is beginning to experience major demographic changes that will result in fewer workers. Meanwhile, the demand for high level skills will continue to increase in all sectors.

Given these trends, competition for high skilled workers will intensify within Canada and between Canada and other countries. Recent surveys suggest that Canadian industry is set to lose approximately one-third of its skilled workforce in the next five to ten years in many of Canada's economic growth sectors.

To address these forecasted shortfalls, a great deal of effort on developing efficient and effective training strategies in the trade skills and on replacing its current workforce will be required. One very successful approach has been developed and tested by CSTEC, the Canadian Steel Trade and Employment Congress, in partnership with Mohawk College, Dofasco, Lake Erie Steel and the United Steelworkers of America.

This program is a co-op based apprenticeship program which integrates a college technician diploma program with a 16 month segment of trade school paid apprenticeship training. The Mohawk, Dofasco, Lake Erie, Steelworker pilot approach has been applied successfully to the electrical and mechanical disciplines. One worker says, "In the plant where I was an apprentice there were 400 apprentices in the early eighties. Now there are two. And the small numbers of apprentices, less than one per cent of Canada's workforce, are among the dwindling number of Canadians receiving any employer support for workplace training".

Whether we are talking about the old economy or the so-called new economy of highly skilled workers, Canadian workers are well aware that access to education and training is absolutely crucial to their job security and earning power. There is overwhelming evidence showing that everybody wins when every worker has access to skills training.

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Investment in education makes sense for the employer, the worker and for society. We cannot allow education training and skill development to become simply another commodity in the marketplace. Nor can we leave it to the whim of a benevolent employer. It is the very underpinning of a civilized, intelligent and caring society and should be treated as a right or entitlement. Citizens should be encouraged and supported in their efforts to contribute to their communities to the best of their ability and have access without fear of cost to the best training and education possible to that end.

These are the social democratic principles we New Democrats in this House will be bringing to the policy debate in our country here in this legislature.

I visit Ireland quite regularly because that is the country of my birth. I came to Canada in 1960, the oldest of 12 kids, with my father who came to work in the mines of northern Ontario. When I go back to that country the thing that impresses me most is not what we hear or read in the editorial pages, such as the *National Post* where it is suggested that Ireland's good economy is because it has a more competitive corporate tax structure or it is giving away things to businesses to come to that country. It is doing some of that, but we all are.

● (1700)

The member from Dartmouth who spoke a short while ago will understand this because he has family in Ireland. As a matter of fact, we may be related. My mother's name is Savage. She is watching me tonight. We come from the same part of that wonderful country.

If we look at the experience of people in Ireland, back in the seventies when they decided they wanted to make a change and improve their economy, the first thing they did was invest big time in the education infrastructure.

In that country if students want to get a post-secondary education, if they have the capacity to succeed that education and if they sit the tests, which are quite stringent, and get through them, their education is free. Ireland understands that a post-secondary education, whether it is skills training or at the university level, is an investment in people and in their communities. When those people come back, they will participate and contribute not only as paid employees in the workplace, but they will contribute to the overall well-being of their communities in a million different ways, such as a volunteers. They become very positive community assets. They will contribute to society and to industry in a major way, with these new skills and training.

Ireland, as opposed to what happens in Canada, decided that post-secondary education was something it should collectively put money into to ensure that no young person who had the ability, the will and the capacity to go to school, learn and then come back and contribute would be stopped from doing that. Not only is post-secondary education free, but if students have to leave home to participate in that and if they are financially challenged in some way, such as housing, or the ability to feed oneself or to provide those supports to be successful in college or university, they will be provided with grants, not loans like we have here.

Why can we not get our heads around that in Canada? As I mentioned earlier, Finlanders say that the only limit to their growth

will be the availability of a skill trained workforce in the future. Why can we not see that? We belong to the same world? We compete in the same global economic context as the Fins and the Irish, yet we cannot find it within ourselves, politically, to invest the kind of money necessary to ensure that all individuals, whether young or old, have access to skills training or to universities and colleges to improve themselves so they can participate in the new economy and in their communities in the way that we know they have the potential to do. Why can we not find a way to make it affordable to them?

The challenge to all of us, as we move forward with this new ministry, is to ensure that it becomes a vehicle to make that connect, if those folks, those communities and our country are to prosper.

● (1705)

Mr. Jim Gouk (British Columbia Southern Interior, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I actually enjoyed the comments of my colleague from the NDP. There are a couple of points coming from his party that I am very interested in. I just wanted to clarify them and see if I have indeed heard right.

One was that he endorsed generally the Irish system, which gives free post-secondary education based on one's skills and ability to learn. It is not free for everyone. It is free for those who have the aptitude and the capacity to learn and the will to do that. If indeed that is what the NDP is supporting as opposed to free education for all, it would be a switch in its policy.

Second was that there would be free boarding and/or free food, or at least grants towards that, and it would be based essentially on a means test. It would not be free for everyone; it would be free for those who need it. Frankly, I am very much in agreement with that.

The third thing is the advocating of free post-secondary education. He went on quite eloquently about it, explaining how the community benefits when these people come back into the community and the benefits they would provide to their communities, their regions and indeed the country. However, the problem we would have with this is that we already find that we are pretty heavily hit by campaigners and recruiters from the United States industry. What would we do if we provided free education for our students and the benefits then indeed went down to the United States in answering one of these recruiters?

Could he clarify those first two things, that they are indeed what he and his party are supporting, and on the third one, how we would deal with Canada providing free education and the United States, among other countries, getting all the economic benefit from it?

Mr. Tony Martin: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his participation in this debate this afternoon. I will remind him of a time when he went to university, perhaps, as I did, a time when people applied for it if they did not have the means, but in Canada one still has to qualify.

I do not know about him, but I have four children at home, two in university now. They had to achieve a certain level of marks in the last year of high school in order to qualify for the programs they are in, so that is already here in this country. We already ask of our students that they achieve certain marks in school so they can move on and be accepted into university.

Government Orders

I do not know if he has any children who in the last few years have tried to get into certain universities, but it is quite competitive. As a matter of fact, it is very competitive. I have no difficulty with that. My problem, though, is the fact that there are a lot of young people who have the ability and have shown that they can participate and be successful, but they are not moving on because of the phenomenal financial circumstances they would find themselves in.

When I was going to university, as I started to say, we could apply for loans and grants. We got a certain amount in loan and a certain amount in grant. That grant normally went to help with those ancillary things one needs while at university.

I would have no difficulty with some of what the member has suggested. I would suggest that our party would not have any difficulty with it either. I think we need to enter into a very lively and constructive discussion around some of those things so that we can in fact make sure that this new ministry, as it considers that, puts this in place.

I think that education is only one part of a larger industrial strategy that we need to be talking about for this country, which would put in place those job opportunities for our young people so they do not have to go to the United States or to other countries out there that are in fact competing for their skills now. They would stay in Canada and work in those industries, which I think we have the potential to grow and to support in being successful in this country.

• (1710)

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a brief question for my newly discovered cousin from Ireland. I have met him recently, but I know from my brother his real passion and commitment to social causes. I commend him for that and I share that.

I have a specific question. Earlier we heard a member from the Bloc suggest that the best way to achieve some of our social goals was for the federal government to give money to the provinces and have it administered through the provinces. Homelessness, I think, was the example he cited. As we know, post-secondary education and education in general are provincial responsibilities.

Notwithstanding his comments and how he feels about the money that the federal government has put into things like post-secondary education and in particular homelessness, how do we ensure that the provinces will have an equal standard across the country and that the money gets used? Because there is great inequity.

My own Province of Nova Scotia has money sitting in a fund that it has refused to match or do anything with for homelessness. I believe it is in the order of \$13 million to \$15 million in Nova Scotia, which is significant. Also, now that we have hundreds of millions of dollars going to the province of Nova Scotia in the health accord and equalization and this offshore accord that offers my province 100% of offshore royalties shielded from equalization, now that we have money going to provinces for things like that, how do we ensure that the provinces will have an equal standard across the country in ensuring that the money gets used? There is great inequity. In Nova Scotia, for example, we have the highest tuition.

My question is very sincere. I would like to hear if he has any ideas. How do we ensure that the provinces are willing partners on these programs?

Mr. Tony Martin: Mr. Speaker, I think we would do it in a way similar to what we have done in health care, where we put in place a legislative framework which insists that if the provinces get this money they in fact spend it in the places it is supposed to be spent. For example, on the national child care program, we are asking the Minister of Social Development to make sure there is a legislative framework in place such that the provinces, when they get this money, have to spend it on child care.

I would say the same thing for education. The federal government has to play a stronger role. It has to put in place those vehicles necessary to insist and to make sure that the governments spend the money where they said they would spend it when they got it in the first place.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the member for Sault Ste. Marie for his eloquence and also for his vision. After the last 20 years of what we have seen, first, in the 10 years of the Mulroney Conservatives, with the record cutbacks, budget deficits and financial mismanagement, and then in the last 10 years of the Liberal government, where we have seen consistent cuts putting the corporate sector ahead of the community, I found the hon. member's vision very positive and enlightening. At the beginning of this year, for example, record corporate tax cuts were brought in rather than funding adequately the communities that we know are impacted across the country. After all of that, I found the hon. member's vision very positive and enlightening.

He did mention GAP. He mentioned the disconnect between what happens here in Ottawa and what is happening in communities. He mentioned the GAP program in his area of northern Ontario. Earlier in my speech I mentioned Navigating the Waters, a wonderful employment program for persons with disabilities. It has been slashed and will end at the end of this year.

Basically we are seeing the country turned upside down. I want to ask the hon. member about this. In his opinion, how do we turn from the last 20 years, with the country being turned upside down and the devastating impact in communities, to turning this country right side up so that Canadians can finally start to benefit from an improved quality of life and we can start to address these important social issues?

• (1715)

Mr. Tony Martin: Mr. Speaker, certainly the program the hon. member mentions in his area is not dissimilar from the program that is being offered now or had been offered in northern colleges. It is an example of the sort of short term thinking that has been taking place over the last number of years in training and skills development. I think we have to get into more longer term planning. Significant money has to be targeted at some of these initiatives in order for them to have the potential to be as successful as we know they can be.

Government Orders

Let us get away from the short term, one-time, pots of money kind of planning to some longer term investments that people can count on and build and grow so that they will in fact work for all of us.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): There are 30 seconds left on the clock, so we will have a very quick question from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development.

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it will be a comment, then, if that is all the time I have. I do want to caution the member when he is talking about Ireland and Finland, which I think he mentioned, because we have considerably more in post-secondary education than either of those two countries. We also have a significantly higher percentage of the workforce engaged in the workforce, or in other words, a potential workforce engaged, than either of those two countries. I am extremely wary of tests of the type that he describes. I think there are better ways of doing that, and in particular, better ways from the point of view of students from disadvantaged families.

Mr. Tony Martin: Mr. Speaker, of course I disagree with the member in terms of his view of which has more employment than the other. Ireland is reaching into eastern Europe now to find people to fill some of the jobs that are available there because all of its people are trained and working. That is not the case in Canada. In northern and rural Canada—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Marcel Proulx): Resuming debate, the hon. member for Gatineau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, I want to begin by quoting the Prime Minister who said:

We want a Canada where every child arrives at school ready to learn; a Canada where everyone has the opportunity for post-secondary education regardless of geography or means; a Canada where universal literacy and lifelong learning are part of the national fabric.

Full of wisdom and vision, these words summarize entirely the purpose of the bill that is before us today in this House.

In December 2003, the government established the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development through a series of orders in council.

Today, by means of a legislation, we are specifying the mandate and responsibilities of this new department. By the same token, this legislation will formalize the division of Human Resources Development Canada, that is HRDC, into two separate entities.

The goal is not to make economies of scale or reduce the operating expenses. The resources of the previous department, that is Human Resources Development Canada, are rather divided in two in order to obtain better strategic results. That does not mean that we should prepare a negative report on the performance of HRDC for the last decade. On the contrary, this department has rendered valuable services to Canadians, both on the social and economic fronts.

I am thinking of the improved and extended parental benefits plan that allowed thousands of families to fully enjoy their newborn. I am thinking of the implementation of the Canada child tax benefit, deemed the most progressive social action since the universal health

care plan. I am also thinking of the youth employment strategy that allowed thousands of young people to regain confidence and to realize that there was a future for them in this country. I am thinking of the transition from unemployment insurance to employment insurance that steered our society toward employability.

In 2003-04, more than 700,000 Canadians received help from the department through the employment benefits paid under the Employment Insurance Act. In Quebec, more than 50,000 people re-entering the labour force received assistance.

I am also thinking of all the measures put forward to ensure that certain groups facing specific difficulties, like native Canadians, handicapped people, older and seasonal workers, can fulfill their dream.

All these measures, programs and initiatives are a testimony to the considerable efforts made by HRDC to strengthen the social fabric of Canadian life.

With this bill today, we are proposing to start writing a new chapter, without erasing the previous ones of course. In short, this bill gives the Human Resources and Skills Development minister and department the mandate, legal powers and tools to ensure that the labour market and the skills development programs, including support programs for students, work properly.

If we create this department, it is mainly because our government wants to pay more attention to some important issues, like giving workers more opportunities to develop and increase their expertise in the workforce. We are studying a few issues, including the promotion of training opportunities in skilled trade, literacy training and the enhancement of skills for workers.

This is why we are working with the provinces and the territories, businesses, unions, workers and the sector councils to develop a skills development strategy in the workplace.

Such a strategy would help to develop a highly qualified and dynamic workforce and a flexible and productive labour market, while meeting the needs of employers who want to create productive and innovative workplaces.

In this changing world where new technologies are redefining complete areas of our society, we have a duty to give all of our citizens, young or not so young, the means to educate themselves, to create and to innovate.

The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development spent a good part of his career in education. I am convinced that he will be an important ally in our efforts to ensure that all Canadians can learn and develop at all stages of their lives.

Government Orders

Having worked a lot in the area of labour relations and in numerous businesses before being elected to this House, I can assure you that the successful ones are the ones who emphasize in-house training, the ones that are not just marking time, but who decide to go forward and ensure that their human resources will always keep up with cutting edge technology or with the environment in which they are operating.

● (1720)

Thanks to the new department, we will have the opportunity to intensify our efforts to assure that every youth in this country will be able to get a post-secondary education if he or she wishes so. It is estimated that, in the future, 70% of all new jobs in this country will require post-secondary studies. Moreover, only 6% of jobs will be open to people without a high school diploma. These figures are revealing.

As a country, we can't allow young people gifted with talent and potential to miss the boat of the information age because they lack the financial means to afford an education and to get on board. As a government, we must make sure that they can not only get on board, but take the helm, as soon as possible.

To this end, last month, the minister of Human Resources and Skills Development tabled Bill C-5, aiming among other things, to help lower-income families to save money to eventually pay for post-secondary studies for their children. The bill will also allow such families to take greater advantage of the registered education savings plans and the related subventions.

As you can see, that department will help us to promote access to higher education, but it is clear that its mandate will be extensive and far-reaching. It will help us to face other emerging challenges.

Estimates show that by the year 2011, our workforce will not be able to grow without immigration; by 2020, there will be a shortage of one million workers in Canada; and by 2025, our population growth will depend exclusively on new arrivals. This means that over the next two decades, we will have to ensure that our immigration policies are as effective as possible and allow a total and complete integration of immigrants. If we do not meet this challenge, our ability to ensure an harmonious future to our children and our grandchildren will be broadly questioned, as well as Canada's competitiveness at the international level.

This new department's mandate will be, *inter alia*, to cooperate with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, other federal departments, provincial and territorial governments, professional licensing bodies, sectoral councils, employers and a large number of other organizations on the important issue of recognizing foreign credentials, in order to facilitate the integration of immigrants in the labour market and in society.

May I digress for a brief moment to talk about the extremely important issue of the recognition of foreign credentials. No later than a week or a week and a half ago, in Gatineau, there was a symposium held by the Conseil interculturel de l'Outaouais, which I am sure you know as well as I do, Mr. Speaker. The theme of that symposium was indeed the recognition of foreign credentials. Having spent the afternoon with them and having had dinner with them, I can tell you that I was absolutely flabbergasted.

One does indeed hear about it. One does hear stories about medical doctors waiting to be recognized and so on. I tried to draw a very dramatic parallel between that problem and our shortage of doctors and nurses, and our shortages of all kinds of skilled people in the Outaouais, among other places. I was looking at that skilled labour which is there, which exists, just waiting to be recognized by Quebec and Canada who were supposed to welcome them with open arms. That really flabbergasted me.

I heard horror stories from people who showed up that day, for example, a dentist from Colombia, a physician from another country, people that Canada will not even have to train in any way, because they are ready to practice. Nevertheless, we must be very realistic; there is always the issue of protecting the public. On the other hand, we must be careful not to hide behind this notion of protecting the public, what I call the closed shop mentality of a number of professional bodies.

As I told the participants that day, on the other hand, we must carefully respect jurisdictions. In this respect, Quebec has obligations. No doubt we will have to work with the Government of Quebec. If we can help it, that will certainly be very much appreciated. I have talked to a few of my colleagues in the Government of Quebec, and they have told us how much this concerns them as well.

On the other hand, what came out of this symposium, which was attended by very diverse cultural communities in the Ottawa valley, and the following symposium, is that it is indeed the professional bodies that are making the admission process difficult, that are complicating the process and that are making it prohibitively expensive to get these qualifications recognized.

● (1725)

We let these people in and, then, we have a dentist who works on the cleaning staff of a hospital instead of working for the community.

I met a pharmacist. There is a terrible shortage of pharmacists in Quebec. These people are there, they are ready, they can be tested, but not one test after another at a cost of \$2,000, \$2,500 or \$3,000. What my friend the dentist from Colombia explained to me that day is that the cost of these tests was close to \$10,000.

This is the challenge we will probably face. We should offer our assistance to our friends in the provinces to ensure that we meet the needs of the people who elect us. Apart from the issues of jurisdiction, I believe that by working together we will find the solutions. Indeed, it was on that day that I realized that it was not just a few isolated cases.

I had a case in my practice. Without revealing any identities, I met a doctor and saw how complicated it was. There was a hospital, in this region, that was ready to accept the individual.

Unfortunately, because of the decisions of some professional bodies and their lack of openness to people from abroad, qualified people cannot practice their profession or sometimes end up on welfare, or they move to other provinces.

We can tell we really have a problem when a physician comes to Quebec and cannot work there, and he or she is accepted as a practitioner in a New Brunswick hospital.

Government Orders

Like the Colombian dentist said, Colombians and Canadians must have very similar teeth. And the rest of their bodies must be very similar too.

That was just an aside. The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development minister has said that he intends to work very hard on a new Canadian strategy to recognize the credentials of immigrants. That is great.

In Quebec, as I said earlier, it will be most important to get certain professional bodies to understand how important this is for Canada, so that it can function properly, particularly given the shortages we are experiencing in certain professions. These shortages are sometimes acute in some provinces, including Quebec.

This strategy will focus particularly on crucial sectors—so much the better—like medicine, nursing, where we are already feeling the first effects of the manpower shortage.

Briefly then, these are the mandate and objectives of the new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, a department that will have a free hand in helping us tackle the challenges of the knowledge economy, a department that will focus on the development of human resources and the acquisition of skills.

Our government is in minority, but certainly does not intend to tread water. For us, the status quo is not a viable option nor is living constantly in the past, going back 10 or 15 years and looking at what has been done or not. This is 2004; we must move forward. The needs are huge and we must respond to them.

This new department that we want to create will allow us to pursue the efforts of recent years. However, first and foremost, it is further irrefutable proof that we are still innovating to ensure an even better future for our children, our youth, our retirees, our communities and our businesses.

Our government wants to make Canada a land of ever wider horizons, where each citizen will be able to benefit from the new economy. I was talking earlier about cultural communities that come here, to Canada, believing that they will find a land that welcomes immigrants and that they will be able to lead a productive life; they cannot wait to do so.

● (1730)

Words alone will not do. We will have to help them and ensure that these people feel totally integrated into the Canadian society.

I know, because I was told during the seminar to which I alluded earlier and which took place last week. I congratulated them, because this was one of the first times that I saw a variety of cultural communities sitting in the same room and not arguing with each other, but working towards a common goal and trying to find sustainable solutions, not only for cultural communities, but for the whole country.

Among other initiatives—and surely everyone heard about this, but I will mention it just in case—they are preparing a petition and they are preparing to sign it. Therefore, while the House is sitting, I urge hon. members who live close to my riding to sign this petition, which will be tabled at the Quebec national assembly. I made a

commitment to do the same by adapting it for the Canadian Parliament.

This area and this issue concern us all. In all fairness, we have to get moving and ensure that we find solutions.

In conclusion, as our Prime Minister so aptly said it when he took charge of this country, “The world is not waiting for us, it is evolving, changing. So we must be ready to meet new challenges with new solutions, new ideas. I am not talking about changes that will be required 10 years from now; I am talking about today, about now”.

Today, I invite hon. members to support this bill, which shows our will to act now to help Canadians, and which builds the foundations of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development. As I like to say, if it is good for Canada, it is also good for Quebec and for the riding of Gatineau.

● (1735)

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am glad that my colleague, the member for Gatineau, is able to put things into perspective by identifying two different entities as far as political culture is concerned when she speaks about Quebec or Canada. She has a clear understanding of things by doing so.

However, she does not have a clear grasp of things, because she found out only last week that people of various ethnocultural backgrounds could end up in the same room and discuss.

I worked for 30 years in labour relations. I have been dealing for 30 years with different ethnic communities, cultural diversity, labour relations and all work-related issues, including of course the employment insurance fund and everything that derives from it. This is the first finding. I am surprised by it. I am glad that it came out last week. It is one phase. Nonetheless, cultural diversity has existed in Quebec for a long time.

The second thing she must also realize, before I ask her my question, is that this situation also exists in Quebec when we compare the assessment of the qualifications necessary for members of ethnic groups to be able to get a job or pursue a vocation with the credentials they gained in their home country. The difference is that there is legislation in place to make sure that not just anyone can practice. That is also something she ought to realize.

However, the hon. member and I agree on the concerns regarding professional training. We all agree on that. Fighting will not solve anything, but neither will saying offensive things such as I just heard.

Third, and this brings me to my question, I wonder if the hon. member is aware that, beyond professional training—since she sang her government's praises in connection with the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development—no one thinks that the employment insurance fund is working. Is she aware that everybody is criticizing the Employment Insurance Commission and saying that the people in charge have complete power over its management, especially considering that the people paying money into it are not even there to manage it?

Government Orders

I will stop here, because I want to hear my colleague from Gatineau react to the second part of my intervention. As for the first part, she need not worry; we all understood quite well her thought process regarding ethnic groups. I would like to hear her thoughts on the part regarding the understanding of the bill that is before us today.

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Madam Speaker, I understand that my colleague might not be interested in hearing what I have to say on the first part, but I think that I will still repeat a few little things that he does not seem to have understood.

I was not talking about his own experience. Good for him. He is very lucky. However, in Gatineau, at the end of this well coordinated day organized by professor Roger Blanchette who is probably well known by my friends opposite, we came to a conclusion. It was very interesting to see all those communities in Gatineau gather in one room and work toward the same objective.

I did not discover anything new. I just had an opportunity to observe that various cultural communities can work together. It is something that I wanted to see in my region for a long time already. I think it important to make that point because I would not want to give my colleagues opposite false or misleading information.

With respect to the regulation, I agree with my colleague. I said so earlier in my digression on the issue of professional backgrounds and recognition of professional credentials. Protecting the public is very important, no doubt about that. If we want to let somebody practise law, we have to ensure that this person will be able to act as a lawyer. The situation is the same for a doctor and so forth.

However, all of us here and in the provinces will have to ensure that the professional bodies will not invoke this sacrosanct principle to avoid integrating cultural communities into their organization. We have seen so many cases that we could make a pile right across Parliament.

When people talk to me about the employment insurance fund, of course, we heard a lot about that in recent years, at different levels. I would simply say to my colleague across the way that it is all right. We have, for that matter, agreed to review our processes. Looking at different aspects of what we call the employment insurance fund, such as the way it works or who will make certain decisions or who will participate, that is part of the debates of the House of Commons or in committee, which will come back to us later. That is fine.

I believe it is significant when we agree to examine something another time. We said ourselves, during the election campaign, that many aspects of the employment insurance had to be reviewed.

Where I am offended, it is when big bad words are used to scare people. Our job is to find solutions, and we will try to do it.

● (1740)

[English]

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Madam Speaker, earlier an NDP member made the point that we are dealing with a patchwork of things in the federal system. He is quite right.

It seems to me that we are trying to focus far more and have much less of a patchwork than we have had in the past.

I enjoyed what my friend for Gatineau had to say. Even though I support the legislation and I hope it will streamline many of these areas, one of the difficulties is it is an incredibly complex area. The member for Gatineau really brought this out.

For example, in the matter of employment, our colleagues from the Bloc mentioned unemployment particularly, but unemployment is related for example to the quality of education people received. People can be unemployed perhaps because as very young children they did not receive the appropriate care and when they became adults, they were unable to find continuous employment.

Unemployment and lifelong learning, which the member was talking about, are linked. We cannot predict what is going to happen in the workforce. There are changes in technology. People need to be retrained. The facilities are not there at that time. These are very often unpredictable things.

Literacy is a key feature of employment. The provisions for literacy in this new department and in all other federal departments and in all provincial departments are extremely important in terms of employment.

The member mentioned foreign credentials. English and French as first and second languages are extremely important. There are people in the trades and professions who are superbly qualified but lack one of the official languages. The teaching of English and French is an aspect of employment and is a factor in unemployment.

Very often these things are unpredictable. We simply do not know in 10 years' time what is going to cause a certain person to be employed or unemployed, or what sort of work the person might be doing. Years ago these things were much more predictable.

It is my hope that we are setting up a flexible, but still focused, department which would be better able not only to do things we know should be done now, but better able to adapt to the work and lifelong learning environment of the future.

I wonder if the member would care to comment on that aspect of the new department.

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Madam Speaker, my esteemed colleague has hit it right on. I worked for close to 20 years, and actually it would have been 20 years in two days, in the fantastic and always changing world of labour relations. It is a complex area.

We are dealing with people. We always say wherever we go, and we have heard it so many times in the House, how the civil service, just to use as an example, is such an important part of this whole system of Parliament because it is the people. If we do not have the people, the trained resources, we are nothing. It is so true.

● (1745)

[Translation]

If a system does not work, it is quite often because we are unable to ensure that our human resources appropriate the system itself. When the member is telling us about unpredictability, it is also true. We do not know exactly what the needs will be.

Government Orders

All this to say that I think we must move toward flexibility. The key word here is “flexibility”. It is the key word that we hear in this government, with regard to our federal-provincial relations—we are talking about flexible federalism—but also with regard to this bill.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House today to speak to Bill C-23.

This bill wants to divide in two the former Department of Human Resources Development, which will become the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, and also to create another department that will be called the Department of Social Development.

We will oppose Bill C-23. Why? Because it shows that the federal government wants to invade provincial jurisdictions. It wants to put in place an increasing number of programs that will often go against Quebec's social development. We will have to negotiate once again, year after year, the renewal of certain sums that the government had promised, but it will not keep its promises, at least not at the level of its commitments.

Concerning manpower development and education, we know very well that education is a provincial jurisdiction. As for manpower development, we know very well that we would like to have complete jurisdiction in this sector. There was an agreement with Quebec, but we know very well that the government kept an element with regard to manpower development.

The second reason why we will oppose this bill has to do with their vision of the Employment Insurance Commission. We do not share it. I would also like to point out in this House that I am the vice-chair of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. The Bloc and all opposition parties had proposed a motion expressing their support for the Speech from the Throne. Without that, the government could have been toppled and we could have found ourselves in an election campaign again.

However, the subamendment proposed following an agreement among all opposition parties was brought forward in the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. The goal was, indeed, to set up a subcommittee to review the employment insurance fund. Much to our bewilderment, who voted against the proposed subcommittee? It would have been in a position to do an assessment and then to submit recommendations to us, Parliamentarians, on the way money in the employment insurance fund should be distributed. It was the Liberals who voted against the creation of a sub-committee on human resources development in relation to the employment insurance fund.

So I was very much disappointed because they had promised, in the election, to bring changes to the employment insurance fund.

They say they want to strengthen social foundations and reach social goals. I do not believe that. I rather think they want to interfere in areas of provincial jurisdiction.

They say they want to improve management. If they really wanted to do so, at least in terms of employment insurance jurisdiction, we could at least have voted to create a subcommittee to study the issue.

The report by all members of Parliament, including the Liberals was unanimous.

So, they in fact voted against what they had proposed themselves. This often raises doubts about the government's good intentions. What it really wants is to score some political points.

They now try to show they have a big heart by establishing an expanded Human Resources and Skills Development Department. They want to interfere in areas of provincial jurisdiction. It may be worth nothing that provinces were hard hit with the Canada social transfer. Quebec, incidentally, paid a large part of it. As a matter of fact, for years it forced us to have a zero deficit target.

I would like to remind this House what former Prime Minister Chrétien said: “They will bring in cuts but provinces will see that we will support the social security net and protect social programs in Canada”.

This was a very hard experience for all provinces but especially for Quebec. As a matter of fact, what Quebec has been implementing is probably going too fast for the Government of Canada. Quebec wants social development that meets the expectations of Quebecers.

• (1750)

As a result, I have considerable doubts about the tangent the Liberal government is going off on, after promising during the election campaign that it was going to take a new tack. In my opinion, they are attacking the problems raised during the election campaign in the wrong way.

Concretely, what the government wants to create is a new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development; to promote a labour market that it feels is working well, along with the system of lifelong education, including for students; and, in conjunction with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, to address a very important issue. The hon. member for Gatineau has raised that issue: recognition of qualifications and skills of newcomers, that is those who have chosen to live in Quebec or in Canada.

So we will get back to the creation of the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development tomorrow, since the bill will be debated here in this House then. We will then have all possible latitude to discuss the harmful objectives of this department: federal interference, creation of a social economy project, study grants for students. So we will be able to see how the federal government is creating piecemeal family and child policy. This is not one integrated policy, but a policy of bits and pieces, and we are opposed to the approach the Liberal government is taking.

Government Orders

I would also like to address just what the programs of this new Department of Human Resources and Skills Development comprise. They encompass: the whole employment insurance delivery program, employability, the workplace, on-the-job training, work, and two objectives relating to homelessness and support for service and benefit delivery. I would like to say more on the latter two later on.

There is also a very critical analysis of Bill C-23 with respect to four sectors of activity. With respect to employment insurance, we know very well it is nothing but an empty shell. We know very well that they did not want to examine it closely. They did not want to examine the unanimous recommendations of all members now sitting on the subcommittee on the employment insurance funds. Had it not been for the opposition parties, the Liberals would not have stopped to look at them.

As for the work done on the issue of replacement workers—the Bloc Québécois members have been working on that for years, of course—the anti-scab legislation is back on the rails. The hon. member who will follow me will speak to that, since it is one of his responsibilities.

Apprenticeship, skills development and the homeless are clear examples of institutionalized interference by the federal government. We know very well that the federal government—just like that—has decided to do something about the homeless, and appears with a project to spend a few billion dollars for all of Canada. For Quebec, that will mean \$56 million, which is very small compared to Quebec's goals to improve its people's security.

We have met with groups in Quebec. We make recommendations every time the finance minister unveils a budget. We invite all social, economic and political stakeholders to come and tell us what they recommend and how they wish the government to enact measures that affect them.

As a result, we met, in fact, with a group concerned with homelessness in Quebec City, the Regroupement pour l'aide aux itinérantes et itinérants de Québec. They would like this budget to include not \$56 million over 3 years but \$100 million to meet community needs in Quebec.

• (1755)

We had to work hard to get the government to consider Quebec's approach. We know this is a first plan for the homeless. The government wanted to build a place where they could add beds to welcome homeless people who have nowhere to go. I agree that this is a commendable goal. However, in Quebec we had our own way of doing things. For many years we have been setting up facilities with beds. All we were urgently asking for was to take into account training and human resources support in this sector.

We had to really fight to make the federal government understand how we thought the homelessness problem should be handled in Quebec. They ended up understanding and set up an issue table called the Regroupement pour l'aide aux itinérants et itinérantes de Québec. This table has a committee that evaluates the various demands of the sector. It was just a waste of time and it provided very little money for truly achieving Quebec's goals with respect to homelessness.

Bill C-23 is bad. It will raise the federal government's profile. There are very clear electoral goals in this bill. We are against this bill.

On another note, the second objection to Bill C-23 is that it inadequately defines the Employment Insurance Commission, its structure, its function and its role. Clause 20 of Bill C-23 states that the Canada Employment Insurance Commission is continued. That means nothing is changing. The clause continues:

The Canada Employment Insurance Commission, consisting of four commissioners to be appointed by the Governor in Council, is continued.

(2) The four commissioners shall be (a) the Deputy Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, who shall be the Chairperson of the Commission; (b) an Associate Deputy Minister, who shall be the Vice-Chairperson of the Commission; (c) a person appointed after consultation with organizations representative of workers; and (d) a person appointed after consultation with organizations representative of employers.

We see how transparent this government is in all this. It promises us in every election that it will be more transparent, but it loves to control the game.

The Bloc Québécois says no to that. It is totally opposed to such a structure. Rather, it proposes that the employment insurance commission consist of the following: a chairperson, two deputy ministers or associate deputy ministers from the Department of Human Resources, seven representatives for employers and seven representatives for employees. We are not opposed to the government having a seat at the table, but there needs to be greater input from the groups concerned, including employers and employees.

This is why the candidate for the position of chair of the commission should be proposed by the minister and approved by the House of Commons. We want this appointment to be endorsed by the House of Commons and to be the object of a consultation with employers' and employees' representatives. We do not want the reverse to happen, namely that the commissioners be appointed by the minister in office.

This process is much more thorough, it is more transparent and it is a more accurate reflection of the reality. Should the need arise, the chairperson has a casting vote. This is also something that we want. Employers' and employees' representatives are appointed by the government, from a list of names suggested by representative associations. It is rather obvious that the government did not want to make a move; it prefers the status quo, as usual. However, this is not what the Liberals had promised.

This approach reflects not only the Bloc Québécois' wishes, but also those of the employers and employees, to the effect that the fund be monitored by those who contribute to it. But the government is systematically ignoring that approach. Perhaps this is why it did not want a subcommittee to make recommendations on the employment insurance fund.

Government Orders

We know full well that \$45 billion were put in the consolidated fund to, perhaps, pay off part of the debt, but also fund some of the programs that the Liberals are boasting about. They are bragging and claiming that they now want to help Quebec and Quebeckers. I do not think they understood the signal that we sent to them during the last election.

• (1800)

To show you again what the Bloc is asking for, I will give you yet another quote. Only a few days ago, Mr. Hassan Yusef, senior economist with the Canadian Labour Congress, testified before the Subcommittee on the Employment Insurance Funds of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. He was once more recommending to the subcommittee that this employment commission be independent. He said, “—at arm's length to the government with independence to oversee and report to the public”.

We know that the government is not putting any more money in the employment insurance fund. It manages that fund and decides where the money goes. A new entrant on the labour market has to work 910 hours before qualifying for EI. Very often, he or she does not qualify and cannot receive any money. This is just another example.

There is also the issue of seasonal work, of people who work in an economic sector that is not operating all year round. We all know that there is a black hole before the activities resume.

We are thus completely against the status quo concerning the EI commission.

Finally, M. Yusef said:

Right now essentially you have a worker and an employer commission that has very little power in regard to its responsibility.

One can imagine sitting with a deputy minister and two officials who are also controlled by the minister. How can the employees feel free to say what they think or what pressure they could bring to bear on the government?

At this same meeting of the subcommittee, René Roy, the secretary general of the FTQ, added:

We wanted it to be just employers and employees.

He went on to say:

However, it would be fair for the federal government to join us.

So, they saved a place for the federal government, but just a place. They want to play a much greater part among those who are not well served by the EI fund. They are neglected by the system.

The government talks about one big management, about wanting to be fair and having a big heart. I guess we can think about it, because I do not believe a word it said.

I would also like to address the whole nature of this national homelessness initiative. This initiative has two objectives. The first objective is to develop support services to help homeless Canadians leave homelessness behind. The second one is to ensure that communities develop lasting capabilities to deal with homelessness by promoting leadership and that non-profit public and private sectors take a more active part in the fight against homelessness.

We know very well that homelessness is a societal problem requiring long-term rather than short-term managed action. What the government is proposing in this initiative is more along the lines of an arrangement with Quebec and the provinces, which could be renewed every three years.

What will happen? We saw what happened in other areas. Social housing, for instance, is a very good example. The Liberal government said it wanted to help the community. It threw money at the problem but, often, when a few million dollars are divided between ten provinces and two territories, that means very little money for each community.

When the federal government decides to stop investing, communities suffer. Structures that were created can no longer be offered to the people. This puts enormous pressure on the governments of provinces, namely Quebec.

Why, for example, not give provinces their just share in relation to the fiscal imbalance? Do you know how many billions of dollars the federal government has spent in provincial fields of jurisdiction? It has spent \$66 billion. Do you know how much it has spent in relation to its own fields of jurisdiction? It has spent \$60 billion. There is an imbalance. The federal government does not take care of its own fields of jurisdiction. And I would like to say something on this subject, if I have enough time.

• (1805)

Before concluding, I would like to talk about the time it takes to review Old Age Security applications. This is federal jurisdiction. I heard that it takes six months to process these applications. Before, it was only two to three months. Can the federal government at least properly administer what comes under its jurisdiction?

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I want to ask my hon. colleague a question for various reasons.

But first, I suppose that my hon. colleague made a mistake when she said that the Liberal members voted against the formation of the Subcommittee on the Employment Insurance Funds. As far as I know, Liberal members voted in favour of forming this subcommittee. We had a disagreement about a particular amendment, but not about the existence of the subcommittee itself. We will see what the hon. member says about this. In my view, it is important to set the record straight on this matter.

One thing must be clear, and this is where I am getting to my question. One must not think that the situation with employment insurance is limited to Quebec. In New Brunswick and in many other provinces and ridings of this country, there are problems with employment insurance. In fact, we can say there is a will to improve things.

There is one thing my hon. colleague will be able to say. In my case, as a member of this committee, I work extremely hard to make sure that we can work on improving the situation with employment insurance, seasonal work, and so forth.

Government Orders

I would like the hon. member to explain to us why, when the formation of the Subcommittee on the Employment Insurance Funds was being discussed, they did not agree that the whole Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities should discuss this issue?

I thought it was extremely important to talk about employment insurance because my riding is in a critical situation. Why is the hon. member suggesting today that we voted against the formation of the subcommittee?

Also, does she perhaps not remember that she did not want all the members of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities to discuss this issue? She decided that it should be discussed by a few members only, one member per party, and she worked hard with the opposition to have her position prevail.

I thought it was very important to talk about the EI program, and I did not get the opportunity. But I was very lucky to be named to the Subcommittee on the Employment Insurance Funds. Otherwise, I would not have been able to say a single word on this issue. I would like the hon. member to explain that to me.

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Madam Speaker, what bad faith on the part of the colleague who sits on the same committee as I do.

He knows perfectly well that I was not against the committee members sitting together. I too would have liked that.

However, why did we come to this solution? It is because we had work to do within the larger committee. On the political agenda of the work of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development, Skills Development, Social Development and Status of Persons with Disabilities, we could not work on the recommendations regarding the employment insurance fund.

Consequently, we had to come to an agreement. I would have liked to mention the name of the riding of the NDP colleague who also sits on the committee, but I do not recall it. However, I can tell you that they finally voted, but they did everything to stop it. This is what happened. There is a whole procedure.

In the end, they saw the truth. They were all alone on their side. What I mean—

• (1810)

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Adams: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I think that the member should be asked to withdraw some of those remarks.

I agree and my colleague agrees that it was a good idea from the Bloc. First, her statement that the Liberal members voted against it is untrue. I do not say that lightly in the House. Second, she implied that we tried to stop it. We did not. As I recall, and I could be wrong on this, the amendment that we were discussing was that the subcommittee should report by December 17, or some date. Our feeling was that it perhaps should have longer.

I believe the member made a mistake. She was wrong when she said the Liberal members voted against this subcommittee. We did

not. It is true that we voted against a previous subamendment of the Bloc. We did that in good faith because we wanted to make the subcommittee as strong as possible.

The Acting Speaker (Hon. Jean Augustine): With due respect to the member for Peterborough, he made some excellent points, but they were really points of debate.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Madam Speaker, I thank my colleague. There was indeed quite a battle, the goal of which was to be able to obtain the support of all members.

One has to acknowledge that we have been very nimble about this file. I can recall giving a hand to NDP colleagues so that we could see to the drafting of recommendations. We do not need to go into all the details, but we came close to losing the vote. Amendments to the amendments were necessary. The goal was to form a subcommittee. It is well known that within the standing committee, there was a desire to delay the creation of this subcommittee until after Christmas. On our side, we were saying that there was an obligation to the public to consider this file on a priority basis. We mentioned the urgency of the debate.

Thus, there are some little subtleties, but, at the end of the day, we can say that the opposition parties worked very hard towards the emergence of a subcommittee. We are all happy about it today. We impatiently await all of the recommendations. I thank my colleague for these additional explanations.

The colleague who asked me the question said there was a concern about the whole employment insurance system, namely that it did not necessarily meet the concerns of voters in his riding. On the other hand, if one wants to be candid with the unemployment insurance monies, taking into account restrictions, the exclusion of some recipients for all kinds of reasons, the limit of funds granted and, also, the duration of benefits, we must all work on it so that we will be able to meet the expectations of the public. Those \$45 billion belong to those who contributed to the fund, to the workers as well as to companies.

Government Orders

We will remember that the Bloc Québécois has fought some epic battles on the EI fund, and the way all those who lost their jobs but did not qualify for benefits were treated. I remember the numerous speeches made by my hon. colleague from Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup on this subject. I sat on the committee myself. This is nothing new; it has been an issue ever since we came to this place in 1993. Since then, we have fought epic battles to make the government realize that it was on the wrong track. They laughed at us, saying it was not so, that we were fantasizing, that the situation was not that urgent. Even today, the minister's answers seem to indicate that all is well and under control. We have heard about our skilled workforce and ability to meet needs. Earlier, I listened to the hon. member for Gatineau, who sounded like she was living in a wonderful world.

At the same time, we can see the problems encountered by those who lose their jobs in certain regions in terms of support. Needs are not being met either in the whole file of atypical jobs through measures relating to the EI fund.

I must state very seriously that I have been here since 1993 and can say that the Bloc Québécois has worked very diligently on this issue. Colleagues over the way ought to at least acknowledge that: we have never backed off. We could have thrown in the towel, but we have persevered. Certain groups have come to see us. We have set up files on EI horror stories. Now today we are being told how the Liberals are setting an example, how they want to have better administration. They want to see the manpower development and educational sectors made more efficient. Fine, but let them also recognize provincial jurisdiction.

We in Quebec feel very vulnerable when the federal government keeps too much money in its coffers, whether in general revenues or the foundations it sets up. We are well aware that Quebec's desire to make social advancement, to advance as a society, is a lost cause. One need just look at the emphasis put on health during the election and then look at the post-election situation. There is always consensus, not just among the Bloc Québécois, but also with hundreds of Quebec leaders who have come here. Then we get accused often of petty politics, when I feel instead that what we are doing is looking after Quebec issues. That is why we were elected and why we were given such a strong mandate. Our goal, first and foremost, is to look after the issues of concern to Quebeckers.

If Canada wants to develop in a different direction, and if some communities want to adopt the objectives of Quebec—

• (1815)

The Acting Speaker (Hon. Jean Augustine): I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member for Québec. The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health.

Hon. Robert Thibault (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, Lib.): Madam Speaker, it is a great pleasure for me to speak to this bill which concerns a department of great importance to all Canadians, the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

One of the responsibilities of this department is the literacy initiative. If people can write the name of this department, they are

already doing quite well. Perhaps it could have been given a simpler name, but we must recognize nonetheless that the department provides services of importance to all Canadians from infancy to adulthood, including child care, joining the labour force, going to university, and other stages. All through our lives, we need this department. In all communities large and small, the department plays an important role. The flexibility and the presence of people from the department in each community are very important.

In Nova Scotia a short while ago, people were leaving rural communities and moving to urban centres, and right away we noticed the absence of these people to help take part in the programs of all the other departments, Canadian Heritage, or ACOA, FedNor, CED or Western Economic Diversification Canada. All of these agencies work in partnership with this department on site in the communities, municipalities, cities, and with individuals. This department plays an extremely important role in many sectors, including education, economic development, and all aspects of life. It has a very important role to play.

Reorganizing this department at this time is a very good idea. It is also a good idea to create a department that is responsible for the social aspect, early childhood, child care and all that, under the direction of a competent minister.

Today we are providing the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development with all the legal powers and tools it will need to fulfil its mandate. This is just the beginning. The mandate of the new department is to provide all Canadians with the tools they need to thrive and prosper in the workplace and community.

[*English*]

We speak quite a bit in the House and in Canada about unemployment but the wider problem is under-employment. People who perhaps are not achieving their level of capability are not finding the type of work that best meets their skill sets or their training. This department, working with unions and with other federal departments, provincial governments and communities, can help. It has a great role to play in retraining and refocusing on the continuing education of people so they can reach their full potential.

When people in my father's day had a grade 12 education they went out into the workforce, got a job and stayed there forever. That has changed. People in our my time need more skills. They need a university degree, or community college certificate or trade school certificate. It is quite normal nowadays for people to continually change jobs. In the future it will be even faster.

People of the age of our pages see a different world. In my community 100 years ago there were blacksmith shops every 10 miles. They disappeared. In my day there were video stores every 10 miles. They are now being replaced by the Internet where people can buy videos directly from the Internet. Computer stores are now being replaced with the Internet.

There are changes and it is necessary for communities, big and small, to address those changes and for the workforce to adjust. I heard statistics indicating that the average person can now look forward to seven careers in his or her adult life. That is a lot.

Government Orders

● (1820)

[*Translation*]

Employment is the most important form of security. This is why Human Resources and Skills Development Canada works in your community.

In 2003-04, the department helped more than 667,500 Canadians through active employment measures set forth in the Employment Insurance Act. We help unemployed Canadians re-enter the labour force. We also help young people gain experience on the job market, pursue their education or enter the job market through the Youth Employment Strategy.

These are essential and very difficult issues which require much discussion. I am pleased that the committee is studying these issues and that we are discussing them. We can see the problems in the communities.

In communities with seasonal employment, like my community, some people have a great deal of difficulty finding work twelve months a year. These people are not necessarily good candidates for skill development. They might well be prisoners of these jobs. Sometimes, they are older people, single mothers or fathers, and they are caught in the circle of seasonal work.

My riding has known periods of incredibly strong economic development, but it does not help these people. It puts them at a disadvantage, for as the employment insurance rate goes down in my riding, they must work more weeks to be eligible and they receive fewer unemployment benefits. This is a good system, but not for them.

We need changes. I am happy that the members of this House are studying this issue.

I would like to talk now about education and training. Nowadays, the cost of university education is very high.

[*English*]

It is very difficult for many young Canadians to attend university if their families cannot help a lot or if the family has more than one child going to university. The costs of attending university are high and those young adults accumulate huge debt before they start in the workforce. I always encourage them by telling them that within 10 years of graduation they will pay more for a car than the debt they accumulate in university. It is true that university graduates get better employment.

However it does not mean that we should not be doing more to help every young Canadian afford the type of education for which he or she has the capacity and that they do not limit their choices in accordance to the cost. All forms of education are good, from trade schools to community colleges to universities to post-graduate studies and so on. I want young Canadians to develop their capabilities according to their capacity and not in accordance with their financial abilities. We must work more in those areas.

We have had advances in the last few budgets but I do not think we can stop there. We have to continue looking at where it is.

One last element I would like to discuss quickly on these points is the famous question of the employment insurance fund.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to talk about the employment insurance fund, which members of the Bloc Québécois often refer to. Actually, that fund does not exist and it is unfair to talk about a fund to Canadians.

What we have is an employment insurance program. We pay a part of our salary as a contribution to that program. Employers and employees both contribute. That contribution is given to the federal government and it is put into the Government of Canada's consolidated revenue fund, so that when we are in need, we have access to a program and revenues.

Should we modify the accessibility or the revenues? Obviously, we should in several cases, for instance with seasonal jobs, as I was saying. In the southwest part of Nova Scotia, it is important to do so. I hear the same thing in other areas of the country, be it in agriculture, fisheries, tourism or other areas.

Now, we cannot talk about a fund, say that this is workers' money and that it is not being given back to them. If we now have a surplus in that program, which has more revenues than expenses, it is because we had a good government. We will not always have a Liberal government, and we may then find ourselves with a deficit.

Without a Liberal government, unemployment will rise. And the government will have to pay. It will have to make sure it wipes out the deficit of the program. You cannot tell Canadians that the last dollar was paid out last week and that no one will receive money to buy food and pay their rent.

The fact is, in the last four years, we have reduced taxpayers' contributions to this program.

● (1825)

[*English*]

I do not remember if it is three, four or five years, but every year the amount of money that we have to pay is reduced, so to say that it is a fund I think is being dishonest with Canadians. It is a program. We can always modify it and improve it but I do not think that we should fool Canadians.

Some programs that we were able to—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Boulianne: Madam Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The hon. member has used the word "dishonest" three times now. I think it is an unparliamentary word. I would like him to withdraw his remarks.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Hon. Jean Augustine): If the word is not directed to an individual, it is not a word that could be classified as unparliamentary.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Boulianne: Madam Speaker, some looks are deliberate. He was looking directly at the Bloc Québécois when he said three times that it is dishonest to say such things. I think he was directing his comments at the Bloc without naming names.

Adjournment Proceedings

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Hon. Jean Augustine): The parliamentary secretary may continue.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Madam Speaker, on a further point, if we look at what this department has been able to achieve across the country, I think it is very impressive. I regret that at some points we have perhaps succumbed to public pressures and changed programs that were very good.

In my part of the country, the Canadian jobs strategy helped rural economic development immensely in small communities by giving the people a leg up for their first job and by giving them the confidence to get out into the workforce. The municipalities were able to create a program, put some money into it and manage it. Businesses were part of it and HRDC, with very good management in western Nova Scotia, was able to participate with a bit of funding.

Sometimes projects worth \$70,000 or \$80,000 would bring in 10 workers who would get 20 weeks work during the first year. These were people who were perhaps reintegrating into the job market after a marital breakdown or sometimes they were young people on their first jobs.

However we have eliminated that program, which is unfortunate. I would like Parliament to reconsider reinstating programs like that, where we can have better flexibility in working with the communities.

[Translation]

The answer is in the communities. There is no use in going to the regions in Canada to tell people what they should do; they will tell us. We could offer them a little help rather than being confessors who listen to the community's problems. We are financial partners who can provide 20%, 25% or 30% of the funding for a product. Sometimes this can be the leverage that makes the difference between moving forward with a project or not.

In our communities this department has helped people with very good ideas—workers or tradespeople—become entrepreneurs. If they have a product they can manufacture, they can open a small factory or a plant. To do so they go to the department, and we help them with their salary for the first year. We remove the risk so they can continue to pay their mortgage and live. We support these types of projects because after seven or eight years they provide jobs for 10, 15 or 20 families. Some go broke, but that is the nature of entrepreneurship. Such is the risk of being an entrepreneur. Not all entrepreneurs are successful, but we need people to take risks for the good of Canada.

I want to congratulate the government on this initiative of putting more emphasis on literacy and training, early childhood, child care and on the entire social aspect the federal government has been working on in partnership with the communities and the provinces.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

● (1830)

[English]

HEALTH

Mrs. Carol Skelton (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to rise today as a follow-up to my oral question on October 15 regarding the hepatitis C compensation restrictions. At that point in time, the Liberal government reiterated its desire to keep thousands of hepatitis C victims from receiving compensation. Why? Simply because they did not get infected on the right day.

This policy was beyond simple discrimination. It was a blatant example of political indifference toward those who are often too sick to fight for themselves. When members of this House voted against extending the compensation to all victims, some members of the Liberal Party shed crocodile tears in an attempt to show some sort of sympathy for the thousands of innocent victims.

Instead, all they did was show how cold-hearted and spineless they were when it came to standing up for their constituents and their convictions. Their hunger to remain in control of Parliament to feed the Liberal appetite for power proved to be the key to their integrity. Amazingly, many of them looked their electorate in the eye and told them they did the right thing. Unfortunately, many voters mistakenly believed them.

Nonetheless, several years later we find ourselves at today.

A few weeks ago, the health committee, dominated by opposition members, discussed having the matter raised again. The health committee again brought this to the floor of the House of Commons. The Liberals once again stalled at making the right decision. Now, to deflect criticism, they are starting another consultation with victims. This is not because they suddenly got a heart transplant themselves, but more because of the fact that they have not used the compensation money that was set aside.

We know there is enough money in the original compensation fund to compensate all victims. Failure to do so before now is inexcusable. All the delay has done is deny compensation to thousands of victims who died before today.

This government will likely take another few months to do the right thing and in the meantime more will die. Yes, they will die. Hepatitis C kills and this government tried to pretend that it does not. It failed to protect the national blood supply, which killed Canadians.

Today we have a much safer blood supply, but a lack of vigilance over the safety of the system could cause problems again. This government has shown a preference to protect itself before it protects the general public. Canadians need to be made aware of this before they trust the Liberals to oversee their safety.

Adjournment Proceedings

We in the Conservative Party have been calling for fair and complete compensation for all innocent victims of the tainted blood scandal. We have always said that those unknowingly infected with hepatitis C should not have to suffer anymore than they have already.

Today the health minister indicated that he will discuss compensation for the excluded group of victims. Last time the lawyers got involved, it cost \$60 million. I am sure the same will be true this time too. I hope the minister will make sure the victims get the compensation they deserve and I hope he makes sure this does not become a financial boost for the legal community.

If the minister can find a way to minimize legal costs and delays and get compensation to all those who deserve it, I will applaud his efforts. If he does not, I will not hesitate to tell every hepatitis C victim that the Liberals still care more about their party's survival than their survival.

On a final note, I would like to thank my Conservative colleagues and those from the other opposition parties for continuing to stand up for what is right. A special thank goes to Dr. Grant Hill, a former—

• (1835)

The Acting Speaker (Hon. Jean Augustine): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health.

Hon. Robert Thibault (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I failed to find a question in the venomous history lesson that we heard, one-sided and often less than completely factual. I am watching my language to stop you from having to rule on a point of order.

To say that there would be risk taken, that the federal government is protecting itself rather than protecting Canadians, the assumption of which is of no surprise, is disingenuous. We have the best blood supply in the world. We do the utmost. We work with all provinces and everybody involved to ensure that we have the best.

When was this problem? I was not in the House when the problem occurred. This party formed the government in 1993. The problem with the blood supply was probably before or around that time. The party, for which she only has the courage to use half the name, was probably involved at the time. I do not say that it was protecting itself rather than the public. I think it did the best it could with the information it had at the time. I do not believe that one member of the House, now or past, would put Canadians at risk in such a way.

Now the fund is an interesting concept. The fund does not belong to the federal government. The federal government does not have the power. It is a trust fund administered by the court and handled by a trustee. It probably has an actuarial surplus. I was a member of the committee, like the member. We unanimously voted, in light of a probable surplus in the fund, that we consider widening the scope of compensation.

She says that the government has done nothing. We have spent over \$525 million providing services to people outside of the 1986-90 window. We made sure that the provinces had the capability. We made sure that the research was being done to avoid the problem. We made sure the communities were there. Luckily there has been some improvement in medicine and improvement in the way these people are being treated and surviving. There have been fewer victims than was forecasted at the time.

The minister agrees with the committee, as he agrees with the members of caucus and the Prime Minister. He said during his campaign that we must review that situation. He announced today, with our full support, that he was looking at the options for compensation. I am quite confident that we will see that in the short term.

Mrs. Carol Skelton: Madam Speaker, as someone who used to work for the Canadian blood system, I look at his answer in faith that he will ensure that the system is properly funded so we can properly protect Canadians. I know there is a concern in certain areas about how the funding will go to that.

I want to say to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health that I feel all victims should have been compensated with the money that was put in the trust fund. It belongs to them. It should be given to all victims of this. It has been overwhelmingly stated in the House over and over that the money should go to the deserving people and it should be done now. It should not be allowed to sit there any longer.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Madam Speaker, first, as a concerned Canadian and a member of Parliament, and through you to a former employee who participated in the blood system, if anybody has any information to suggest that there might be questions about the security of the blood system, it is of utmost interest to the Canadian government, to the Department of Health and I am sure to the public health officer.

The government has named the first public health officer in the country. We want to ensure and we believe to the best of our understanding that we have a very safe blood supply. It is the responsibility of anybody who thinks there might be problems to report them so we can investigate and, if necessary, correct them.

[*Translation*]

PARENTAL LEAVE

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak about parental leave. I asked questions of the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development on several occasions, but his answers are not informative enough.

When asked about parental leave and negotiations with Quebec, he keeps repeating, "We are negotiating. I have had discussions with my colleagues, and you should not worry, because everything is going along fine".

But we would like things to move much further. This agreement was signed on May 21, 2004. It was supposed to be a historical agreement. The figures were the only remaining point to settle. That is why we thought the agreement would be signed right after the election.

Adjournment Proceedings

The Liberals made a big deal about that agreement during the campaign. Just before the campaign, they announced they had reached an agreement in principle, and figures were the only thing that was not settled. Where are the agreement and the figures? We know a decision of the Quebec court of appeal on January 27, 2004 was referred to the Supreme Court of Canada. That was after the election.

There is thus a threat hanging over the Quebec government's intentions of going forward with a parental leave better adapted to Quebec's own needs and realities. Consequently, we would have liked the minister to be a little more clear and precise. In Quebec, we would like to have parental leave that reflects the realities of Quebec.

I would like to give you a few examples of the realities of Quebec. With respect to the part of the EI fund that will be used to finance parental leave—because this is where the money will come from—we would like to ensure that the atypical workers will be taken into consideration. We all know that there are people who do not qualify for EI benefits because they do not contribute to the fund. These workers are also part of those people for whom Quebec would like to see actions taken.

Parental leave in Quebec reflects reality: a maximum insurable period of 50 weeks, \$52,500. This is Option A, which means 70% of the wages for the first 25 weeks and 55% for the last 25 weeks. We all know that Ottawa wants to spread the benefits over 50 weeks, \$39,000, or 50% of the wages.

Why should we have that kind of variation? This is because, often, the parental leave is not taken in full. Indeed, who can afford a whole year of parental leave? We wanted this to better reflect the circumstances experienced by Quebec families.

Again, will the parental leave take into account circumstances in Quebec? The debate is not over and there is no proposal on the table. As we know, this is a project with Canada-wide goals, once again, and there also is, in the qualifying period, an approach that differs from the one that Quebec favours.

We would not want to see a qualifying period, that is a two-week penalty, before one receives parental leave benefits. The federal government, in its project, proposes a two-week qualifying period. For example, when a family needs employment insurance benefits, because of the lost wages owing to a pregnancy, why should there be a two-week penalty for someone to be entitled to parental leave?

This is an important debate. The stakes are high. However, we feel that the federal government is dragging its feet about this great historic promise that was announced.

I remember the foreign affairs minister saying, during the election campaign, "I hope this will help us in the election". We should stop making this an election issue. It is now time to work hard on this proposal that Quebec is waiting for. The very reason for our presence here is to remind this government of its duties, following its promises in the election campaign.

• (1840)

[English]

Hon. Peter Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Lib.): Madam

Speaker, as the member knows, federal and provincial officials continue to meet and discuss Quebec's proposed parental insurance plan. While neither the member opposite nor I play a part in these discussions, I am sure that she could appreciate the details that need to be worked out between the two governments.

I am sure she will recognize, for example, that the agreement requires a financial mechanism for reducing EI premiums for employees and employers in Quebec so as to reflect the savings from no longer providing parental and maternity benefits in the province of Quebec. The Government of Canada has put in place a national system for maternity and parental benefits, and has been providing maternity benefits for more than 30 years and parental benefits for more than a decade.

There is a level of technical expertise that simply cannot be acquired by signing an agreement. That is why both the Canadian and Quebec governments agreed to a realistic timeline of February 2005 to finalize the agreement in principle. It also bears mentioning that the Government of Quebec has targeted the beginning of 2006 for the implementation of its provincial parental benefits program.

Finally, and I know the member is aware of this, the minister has shared with the House that he met with his counterpart in the Quebec government only a few weeks ago. They were both pleased with the progress of their discussion.

• (1845)

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Madam Speaker, I do not believe we were told during the election campaign that the program would only be in place in 2006. It was to be implemented in the very near future. We only had to agree on the numbers and that was not supposed to take long.

I would like to remind the member who just spoke and sits with me on the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities that it is a good example. Setting up a Canada-wide program is no easy task.

In the meantime we are lagging behind in the social development and support area, particularly in Quebec. Quebec has long wanted to put in place parental leave. But we have to wait. Two years is a long time in the life of a family. In the meantime many parents cannot receive the parental benefits that would more adequately meet their needs.

I would like to remind the House that in Quebec we are starting to really understand what fiscal imbalance is all about. It means forever having to ask the federal government for help. Quebec does not have the money to—

The Acting Speaker (Hon. Jean Augustine): The hon. parliamentary secretary.

[English]

Hon. Peter Adams: Madam Speaker, as I mentioned, it is the Government of Quebec that is proposing that the program start in the year 2006, not the federal government.

Adjournment Proceedings

The extension of parental benefits is about investing in our future. These benefits allow working parents to spend time with their child during the critical first year of life, when parental involvement is so important. Since January 2001 parents have had the flexibility they need to stay home with their baby for up to one year. We are pleased that our efforts to improve support to working Canadian parents are making a difference.

As we committed in the Speech from the Throne, the Government of Canada will continue to review the employment insurance program to ensure that it remains well suited for the needs of all of Canada's workforce.

SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Nepean—Carleton, CPC): Madam Speaker, I rose in the House of Commons some days ago to pose a question to the government with respect to the Prime Minister's direct involvement in the sponsorship scandal. It is now clear, with the evidence that has come out, that the Prime Minister was intimately involved in securing contracts and other rewards for his very close friends and supporters. The evidence is just astounding. It is ongoing. I have page after page that indicates the Prime Minister was clearly implicated in this program.

When I asked that question, the public works minister stood in the House and told us that he could not answer any questions because the Gomery commission was looking into it. The last time I checked, there was no such rule indicating that the Prime Minister could not reveal his involvement in awarding contracts to his friends merely because a commission happened to be studying the question at the very same time. As a result, I submitted an application for an intervention during adjournment proceedings.

The problem is that the government engages in a degree of secrecy that is really unprecedented in Canadian history. I can give another example. Located in my constituency is a major building that would be well suited, according to former ministers in the Liberal government, to house the Department of National Defence. It is the JDS Uniphase building which is largely vacated by that company. The idea of moving DND to that location was discussed and supported by numerous members on that side of the House of Commons before the last election. It was a promise, effectively, that the Liberals made to the constituents in my area.

I asked the Minister of Public Works of the status of that very issue in committee the other day. He refused to answer what his government's plan was with respect to the future location of the Department of National Defence. This is the ongoing secrecy that we see on the other side of the floor.

I have been advocating that the JDS Uniphase building would be a perfect location to consolidate the disparate groups that form the Department of National Defence here in the National Capital Region. It is only fair that we get clear answers on where those deliberations are, and what studies have been done to ascertain the overall effectiveness of such a move both in cost and practicality, but also in security.

These are important questions that the government has failed time and time again to answer. Just as with the sponsorship scandal,

Liberals have resorted to their old tactics of secrecy and a failure to be transparent with the voting and tax paying public.

I wonder if the hon. Minister of Public Works would stand and answer my question directly, or perhaps he will call on one of his subordinates to do so for him, and tell us clearly right here and now, have there been any cost effectiveness studies on the concept of moving the Department of National Defence to the JDS Uniphase building in south Nepean?

• (1850)

Hon. Walt Lastewka (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to respond to the member for Nepean—Carleton. It is important that members of the House and Canadians as a whole understand how determined the Prime Minister and the government are to get to the bottom of the matter.

I want to remind everyone of the countless actions the government has taken, especially on the sponsorship program.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: There were many actions, that is true.

Hon. Walt Lastewka: Madam Speaker, I wonder if the new member is finished or not. As a new member he is very quick to respond while someone else is speaking. I am surprised and disappointed in his actions.

Let me remind the House that the Prime Minister's first act when he was first appointed last December was to cancel the sponsorship program. Please understand that. He cancelled the sponsorship program.

Minutes after the Auditor General tabled her report, the Prime Minister set up a number of actions to ensure that they went into play and that a quick response was being taken.

Some of the measures included an independent commission of inquiry headed by Justice Gomery. I realize that sometimes the opposition does not want to let the Gomery commission do its work, but it has to do its work. It has to hear all the evidence.

The special counsel for financial recovery is well underway. We should be hearing more about it in the next number of months. There is the whistleblower legislation, measures to strengthen the audit committees for crown corporations, possible extension of the access to information for crown corporations, and reviews on changes to the governance of crown corporations. These are some of the actions that were taken immediately.

Let me remind the House that the RCMP continues to look into various matters. Charges have been laid and the RCMP will follow every lead, wherever it may lead. Last February, following the tabling of the Auditor General's report, parliamentary committees had yet to be struck.

The public accounts committee was struck immediately before the rest of the committees and the government cooperated fully with the committee's work. In fact, testimony filled documents more than three and a half feet in height. There were cabinet documents dating back 10 years. Does that look like we were trying to hide information and not being transparent? All that was available to the committee, for those who wanted to read it.

Adjournment Proceedings

The Information Commissioner, in his recent report to Parliament, lauded the Prime Minister for early moves to boost transparency. The Prime Minister is working hard to ensure things are transparent. The commissioner stated that there were early and positive signs that the government would be sufficiently self-confident, courageous and honest enough to confront head-on the attitude of secrecy.

I understand that Canadians are outraged and so are we. The Gomery commission will, I am sure, get to the bottom of things. There were 178 calls in the House by members opposite for a public inquiry. This was done. The Gomery commission will get to the bottom of everything that was brought forward. If the member has any additional information, he should forward it to the Gomery commission.

• (1855)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Madam Chair, what an astounding example of a failure to address the question posed to the member. In fact, he was stuck on the last scandal. I was talking about the next scandal which is the government's refusal to come clean on its plans with respect to the location of the Department of National Defence.

Instead of answering that question, the member went straight into a pre-written document clearly prepared for him by backroom Liberal strategists, whose job it is to defend the reputation and enhance the political interests of the Liberal Party.

I return to the question that I posed. What studies have been done to assess the financial liability, the strategic security, and the overall practicality of moving the Department of National Defence or any other government department to the JDS Uniphase building in south Nepean?

Hon. Walt Lastewka: Madam Speaker, the Department of Public Works and Government Services addresses the marketplace on an ongoing basis. There are studies going on all the time. In fact, there are studies going on right now concerning members in the West Block and how to make changes there and move people into new areas. Those market studies are going on all the time. The member wants to blow up the studies to a bigger, inaccurate thing. He is not stating the facts.

The Minister of Public Works and Government Services expressed to him very clearly on previous questions exactly what public works does to study the marketplace. It studies the marketplace in both Ontario and Quebec to make sure that we have people on a 75:25 ratio. Those studies are going on all the time. The member should learn that those studies are going on all the time.

The Acting Speaker (Hon. Jean Augustine): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:58 p.m.)

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