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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

CONTENTS

(Table of Contents appears at back of this issue.)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

The House met at 2 p.m.

Prayers

• (1405)

[*English*]

The Speaker: It being Wednesday, we will now have the singing of the national anthem led by the hon. member for Kelowna—Lake Country.

[*Members sang the national anthem*]

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

CANADIAN FORCES PERSONNEL SUPPORT AGENCY

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's mission to help the Afghan people is the focus of much of my work here.

My staff feels the same way. Some weeks ago, one of them asked if I minded if she went to Afghanistan as part of the Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency. Yesterday we received a phone call in the office: she was accepted to go to Kandahar to help support the Canadian Forces.

The Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency employs civilians to support the supply chain, deliver programs and services for the troops and perform other important roles. These civilians are among the unsung heroes who represent the best that Canada has to offer the world.

For the next six months, our mission in Afghanistan will be lucky to have her. Over the past year that she has been in my office, Jane Houser has been a wonderful staffer. I hate to lose her, even for a little while, but it makes me very proud to have such courageous, honourable staff who are willing to make such a commitment to help our servicemen and servicewomen and the Afghan people. She is an example of the Canadian spirit: generous, courageous, and helping others despite the sacrifice it entails.

We wish Jane the best of luck on her new adventure. We will miss her and await her safe return.

WIND ENERGY INSTITUTE

Hon. Joe McGuire (Egmont, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Department of Natural Resources is getting out of its meagre financial support for wind energy research in Canada.

Last Friday, the minister for ACOA announced that the cut to the operating budget for the Wind Energy Institute of Canada would be partly restored, to get through the election period, I presume.

Half of the restored cut would come from the regional development agency, so in reality NRCan is restoring one-third of its obligation to the institute. The institute must cut one-third of its operating costs immediately to meet the demands of the federal government.

Why must ACOA take responsibility for a line department's commitment? Where is the 10 year commitment we were led to believe was going to be put in place? Why is the government continuing to fund R and D in the oil sands and carbon sequestration while R and D for wind energy is cut?

In this time of climate change, the government's priorities are upside down.

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[*Translation*]

MDF PLANT IN LA BAIE

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, last Monday employees at the MDF plant in La Baie, which specializes in manufacturing waferboard, protested in front of their company in order to receive a response to their concerns.

The company halted production on February 4 and has since been transporting raw materials to other plants. In recent weeks, employees have seen more than 90% of managers leave the plant and major pieces of equipment transferred elsewhere.

Employees at the MDF plant do not want to go through the same stresses as workers at the Port-Alfred Abitibi-Consol plant in La Baie, which had its production halted several times and was permanently closed in 2005.

Statements by Members

I ask that Uniboard Canada's management be up front in their dealings with employees. These employees are worried about their future and have the right to straight answers about what is going on.

* * *

[English]

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Inter-Parliamentary Union met recently in South Africa, where delegates from 135 countries adopted, without a single dissenting vote, the Governing Council's "Report of the Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians", which expressed "deep concern at the suspension of" Afghan parliamentarian Malalai Joya's "parliamentary mandate".

I have raised Ms. Joya's suspension directly with the Prime Minister and with five cabinet ministers before the foreign affairs committee. To this day, the government remains silent while a woman parliamentarian, elected directly by her people, remains expelled from the Afghan parliament for her outspoken criticism of warlords and high level corruption.

It is reported that MPs called for her to be raped and even killed. She has been called a whore and a prostitute and pelted with water bottles while speaking, yet only Malalai Joya has been suspended from parliament and her passport and security detail revoked.

The government must support the IPU's recommendations and express its concern over the treatment of Malalai Joya and the suspension of her parliamentary mandate.

* * *

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during this National Volunteer Week, I am proud to honour two great Canadians. Ms. Grandbois of Burlington, Ontario, and Dr. Yang of Surrey, British Columbia, are the recipients of the 2008 Thérèse Casgrain Volunteer Award.

As the member of Parliament for Burlington, I would like to congratulate Ms. Elizabeth Grandbois for her efforts in increasing awareness of ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. She herself was diagnosed with ALS in 1997.

Ms. Grandbois created the Elizabeth's Concert of Hope Foundation. It began as a one-time fundraising concert and it grew into a nationwide benefit concert tour. Her efforts have helped to raise over \$2.5 million for people with ALS.

Both Ms. Grandbois and Dr. Yang have made valuable contributions to their communities and to Canada, helping improve the quality of life for many Canadians.

To mark National Volunteer Week, I am pleased to emphasize the government's appreciation of the invaluable work of all Canadian volunteers.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in the coming weeks, first nations communities in my riding will be celebrating their Treaty Days. These days are to commemorate the signing of the treaties between the first nations people and the Government of Canada.

These treaties outline the federal government's commitments to first nations people, both practically and in spirit, but this year there is little to celebrate. The federal government has forgotten or has chosen to abandon these treaty agreements, as demonstrated by the lack of attention given to the deplorable living conditions of first nations people in Canada.

Let us take Cat Lake as an example, where the school burned down in 2006. With the community in desperate need of a new school, the government assured Cat Lake that construction would begin this year. However, like so many other communities, Cat Lake recently was told that this project would be put off for years.

Cat Lake needs a new school. First nations people deserve to have their needs made a priority by the Conservatives, who should stop the delays, stop the cancellations and start living up to their commitments to first nations peoples.

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● (1410)

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the floods in New Brunswick have led to the evacuation of certain regions and the Fredericton area is at risk of being flooded.

[English]

Our government is keeping a close eye on the situation. Yesterday the Minister of Public Safety spoke with New Brunswick's public safety minister regarding this issue, and federal Public Safety officials remain in continual communication with their provincial counterparts.

The minister reiterated our willingness to assist with any request from the province and reminded our provincial counterparts that, should the criteria be met, the federal DFAA program is available to assist with the costs of disaster response and recovery.

[Translation]

Furthermore, the Department of National Defence is monitoring the situation and the Canadian Forces are ready to provide heavy equipment and other emergency services as necessary.

[English]

I urge all New Brunswick residents to keep a close eye on the situation, stay informed and heed the advice of emergency officials.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

THE GREAT BUILDERS GALA

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the 8th Gala des grands bâtisseurs was held a few weeks ago with the theme "400 years of great builders". This gala honours five Quebecers who have contributed to the development of Quebec.

This year's recipients stand out in their respective fields for their determination, their enterprising spirit and their creativity in fashioning a better and united Quebec. The winners are: Ms. Françoise Mercure, president of l'Office du tourisme de Québec; Mr. Jean-Guy Gagné, manager of business development for Desjardins; Mr. Germain Prince, senior advisor with Raymond Chabot Human Resources Inc.; Mr. Alain Girard, vice-president and managing director at Cogires and training evaluator; and Mr. Michel Gervais, CEO of the Centre hospitalier Robert-Giffard. They are following in the footsteps of those who, over the course of 400 years, have forged the Quebec nation.

My Bloc Québécois colleagues and I wish to thank these builders who are devoted to promoting the Quebec nation.

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[English]

TAXATION

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the government, Canadians are feeling less pain as they are filing their income tax returns today. Canadians are benefiting from nearly \$200 billion in tax relief over this and the next five years. Nearly 700,000 Canadians will be removed altogether from the tax rolls by 2009.

Since coming to office, we have reduced the bottom personal income tax rate, ended the marriage penalty, increased the basic personal amount, raised the low income age credit for seniors, introduced tax-free savings accounts, implemented the working income tax benefit, brought in the public transit tax credit, launched the children's fitness tax credit, and cut the GST from 7% to 6% to 5%.

These are tangible benefits that keep more money in the pockets of hard-working Canadians.

The empty rhetoric and broken promises of the previous Liberal governments are history. Our government is getting things done and is producing real results for Canadians, whether it is getting tough on crime—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca.

* * *

ZIMBABWE

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the UN Security Council was informed that Zimbabwe is in the midst of its worst humanitarian crisis since independence.

A month after the elections, with no presidential results yet released, Zimbabwe's president, Robert Mugabe, is supplying his

thugs and child soldiers with weapons to brutalize voters to ensure that he wins a possible runoff in the next presidential election.

So far, 15 members of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change have been killed. Thousands have been displaced. New reports of human rights abuses, murder, torture, rape and beatings are coming in from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The UN Security Council is once again paralyzed while Zimbabweans are being brutalized by their government. Canada cannot remain silent any longer. We must ask the UN Security Council for a military force to be sent in to quell the state-sponsored violence and ensure that the democratic will of the Zimbabwean people prevails.

We have a responsibility to protect. Let us engage our obligation to act.

* * *

[Translation]

ECONOMY

Mr. Denis Lebel (Roberval—Lac-Saint-Jean, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there are times in the life of nations when the word leadership should mean something. Three budgets and two economic updates later, Canadians now know what this government is made of.

While other countries are experiencing economic problems, our Prime Minister and our government are the epitome of responsible management.

Canadians were convinced of this last week in Laval. In a speech that was a model of clarity, the Prime Minister emphasized the balanced approach of the government's fiscal policy and explained how a responsible government must address economic challenges and plan for long-term prosperity for the entire country.

The Liberals have promised spending that would be irresponsible and would increase Canada's debt, while the Bloc Québécois recognizes that the economy is their albatross.

With a Conservative government, Canadians are confident that their affairs are in the right hands.

* * *

● (1415)

[English]

PRICE MONITORING

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Londoners are paying record prices at gas pumps for gas while big oil and gas companies are raking in windfall profits.

Individuals and families are suffering not just because of the price of gas, but the price of food is increasing because of the energy costs for production and transportation.

The manufacturing crisis in Ontario has meant thousands of job losses for London. Now, on top of this crisis, Londoners are being forced to pay more for gas and food while the government subsidizes the record profits of oil companies.

Statements by Members

The Conservatives and the Liberals have always supported the big corporations, be they banks, big polluters, or in this case, the oil companies. It is time to put money back into consumers' pocket-books. Oil companies and energy producers should have to justify and defend cost increases.

Londoners want fairness. When will the government set up an independent watchdog to monitor prices and help protect against all gas gouging?

* * *

RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on Saturday, April 13, I attended a very special rally in Toronto.

Many of my constituents and many people from across the GTA and Ontario gathered to call for peace in Iraq. We came together to call for the end of persecution of Christians in Iraq. We prayed together for an immediate end to the killing of Christian religious leaders in Iraq. The air at the rally was filled with children singing "peace for Iraq, no more killings".

Religious persecution is an international crisis affecting many religious groups in countless countries of the world.

I am calling on the federal government to develop automatic interventions that may be imposed by Canada against foreign governments, such as Iraq, when they support religious persecution or fail to prevent it, and to improve measures for refugees who have suffered religious persecution.

* * *

[*Translation*]

CARBON NEUTRAL CERTIFICATION

Mr. Marcel Lussier (Brossard—La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to announce that my colleague from the riding of Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, the Bloc Québécois environment critic, will receive carbon neutral certification through Tree Canada's Carbon Neutral Companies and Organizations program.

Not only has he consistently worked to reduce his carbon emissions, but our colleague has also committed to planting 77 trees in his riding, which will completely offset his carbon footprint.

Michael Rosen, the president of Tree Canada, acknowledged the commitment of the member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, saying that he has demonstrated environmental leadership.

The member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie has shown that small actions can have a big impact. Our colleague and the Montreal Canadiens players, who are participating in the NHL Carbon Neutral Challenge, are showing that it is high time to take our future in our own hands. I suggest that the government do the same.

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CONSERVATIVE PARTY AND THE RCMP

Mr. Jean-Claude D'Amours (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the *Globe and Mail* is reporting that senior members of the Conservative Party are attacking RCMP officers who are just doing their job.

These attacks, which we believe are from Doug Findlay, are completely unacceptable for a party in power that claims to respect all members of the RCMP.

[*English*]

Mr. Findlay attacked the RCMP officers who conducted the raid on Conservative Party headquarters. He accused them of forcing entry into the Conservative Party's offices, terrorizing the staff, and of overkill in executing the search warrant.

[*Translation*]

He even criticized the fact that RCMP officers wore their bulletproof vests while they worked. It is incredible that those who are the object of a search warrant feel they can criticize how the RCMP does its job.

[*English*]

Like an accused criminal, they are crying police brutality. That this attack on the RCMP comes from the top level of the Conservative Party is disgusting.

[*Translation*]

The fact that the Minister of Public Safety refuses to defend the RCMP officers against this kind of base attack by the Conservatives leads us to think that he is either complicit—

● (1420)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Peterborough.

* * *

[*English*]

PETERBOROUGH

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last Thursday, the embattled Liberal leader paid a visit to Peterborough. Flip-flopping his way through a number of issues, the Liberal leader now says he supports Toronto-Peterborough commuter rail service, stating he would be pleased to have a lot of light trains, including from Peterborough.

Additionally, the Liberal leader during his visit appeared to come to the realization that there is a waterway that runs through Peterborough. While he was part of a long line of environment ministers that starved the historic Trent-Severn Waterway of funding for more than a decade, I am sure he is happy to learn that our environment minister announced \$63 million in new funding on Monday.

Under our government and the leadership of this Prime Minister, the electric city is shining brighter than ever, and our future prospects are strong. The people of Peterborough have no interest in empty Liberal rhetoric when they have a government of action.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

ELECTIONS CANADA

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): First, Mr. Speaker, I want to wish the Prime Minister a happy birthday, and as a gift, I have a very simple question for him.

[Translation]

When exactly was he made aware of the Conservative's advertising scheme for the last election, and did he approve this scheme?

[English]

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his kind wishes. I am 49 years old today and I intend to remain at that age for several years to come.

The Conservative Party has followed the rules that have been in place for years, practices that have been done by all parties of the House for years. Elections Canada has attempted to change its interpretation of the rules after the election campaign. We obviously do not think that is correct and that is why we are in court with it.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, now that the Prime Minister is older, he may start to answer questions. I will try again.

When did he know about the Conservative Party's election advertising scheme and did he approve it?

[Translation]

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, I would encourage the Leader of the Opposition to listen to the answers. The Conservative Party has followed the same practices for a long time now, and they are the same practices followed by all parties in the House. Elections Canada attempted to change its interpretation after the last election. That is not correct. That is why we are in court with it.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister cannot ignore his obligation to answer this question. I will ask it again. Canadians have a right to hear his response.

When exactly was the Prime Minister told about the Conservative's advertising scheme for the last election, and did he approve it? Canadians have a right to know.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the practices have been the same for years. The same question could be asked of the Leader of the Opposition about members of his party taking Elections Canada to court to have funds transferred to candidates in the leadership race—hundreds of thousands of dollars were transferred. The Leader of the Opposition benefited from this money.

[English]

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a curious spectacle. It is a very simple question. It is easy to answer, so let me try.

Oral Questions

I ask the Prime Minister, when did he know about the Conservative Party's election advertising scheme and did he approve it?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the director general of the Liberal Party of Canada in Alberta wrote local Liberal campaigns saying, "During the past election campaign, the Liberal Party of Canada in Alberta transferred funds and/or paid for services in kind directly to the candidate...". This included an ad in the *Edmonton Journal*. Only the national party dealt with the media outlet. Elections Canada has no evidence that the local campaigns approved these ads, but they were booked as local expenses, helping the Liberal Party pad its taxpayer rebates.

When did the deputy leader know about that?

•(1425)

[Translation]

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, that was not the question, and we are still waiting for a clear answer to a clear question.

When did the Prime Minister find out about this Conservative election advertising scheme? Did he approve it? How about some respect for our institutions, please.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the woman the hon. member replaced as deputy leader of his party, Anne McLellan, is implicated in the Liberals' own in and out process.

[English]

This was a scheme in which the Liberal Party headquarters organized the ad, dealt with all the invoices, ran the ad, without apparently even the knowledge of the local official agents, and then it was booked locally so Liberals could pad their taxpayer rebates and stay under their national limit.

When did the deputy leader of the Liberal Party know?

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, a few days before the January 2006 election, in an attempt to convince Canadians to elect him, the Prime Minister stated that his party would never have absolute power because public servants, judges and democratic institutions would always be there to serve as a counterweight. But since he came to power, what has the Prime Minister done? He has appointed judges who share his ideology, gotten rid of senior officials who do not think the same way he does and discredited democratic institutions like Elections Canada.

Does the Prime Minister have a problem with democracy?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our lawsuit against Elections Canada is not the first of its kind. This is not the first time a party has had a legal dispute with Elections Canada.

Oral Questions

In fact, in 2002, the Bloc Québécois went against the will of Elections Canada and took legal action against one of its own candidates, Jean-Paul Marchand, to force him to take part in an in and out scheme.

If forced in and out schemes are legal, then voluntary in and out schemes are as well.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is legal to transfer money, just as it is legal to withdraw money from the bank. However, it is illegal to do so by putting a gun to someone's head. The method used is important.

This is the first time a government has attacked the credibility of one of its own democratic institutions. Elections Canada is often called on to act as an observer during elections in other countries.

If the Prime Minister no longer has confidence in Elections Canada, how are countries that ask this institution to make sure their general elections are conducted properly supposed to have confidence in Elections Canada?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the first time I saw the expression “in and out” was in a lawsuit launched by the Bloc Québécois when the current leader was leading the party. The Bloc had gone against the wishes of Elections Canada in that case. The Bloc won the case, which had to do with a forced in and out scheme involving Bloc candidates.

The leader of the Bloc Québécois originated the in and out method.

* * *

ELECTION EXPENSES

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Prime Minister has reached the heights of grandstanding in this House.

Yesterday, answering a question concerning allegations by Ms. Dixon from Retail Media, the Prime Minister said, “it is not necessary to deny it because that is not what she said. The leader of the Bloc should be truthful.”

I am now calling on the Prime Minister to be honest and answer me if he can. Can he reaffirm—

• (1430)

The Speaker: The question took too long.

However, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board has a response.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Bloc is the true father of in and out and that member is the son of in and out.

In a December 2003 National Post article, Andrew McIntosh wrote, “Bloc brass then advised all Bloc candidates, organizers and volunteers to use a system called ‘La Methode In & Out’ to inflate campaign spending to meet targets.”

It is their method.

Mr. Michel Guimond (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord has the floor. We need to have some quiet in this House, please.

Mr. Michel Guimond: It is extraordinary, Mr. Speaker, to hear the Conservatives tell us that a sovereignist party received preferential treatment from Elections Canada. Come on. What a joke. According to the Prime Minister, either Ms. Dixon lied to the Elections Canada investigator, or the investigator made a false statement in the affidavit. I would like the Prime Minister to say that outside this House.

Will the Prime Minister admit that his theory is being completely rejected by Elections Canada and by his own advertising agency?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it seems ironic that a sovereignist party gets most of its campaigns funded by Canadian taxpayers. According to Elizabeth Thompson, they used the term in and out, “to describe a lucrative arrangement cooked up by the Bloc to take advantage of a loophole in election financing laws to extract the maximum amount of taxpayer-funded refunds from Elections Canada.”

* * *

[English]

THE ECONOMY

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians have lost over 55,000 jobs since the beginning of this year alone. Statistics Canada has now made it official that the Canadian economy is in decline. Canadians have known this and they have witnessed it themselves: gasoline at \$1.20 a litre, food prices going up every day, Ontario on the brink of have not status, and the fiscal cupboard is bare.

Why does the Prime Minister keep going to the boardroom tables of the country with more corporate tax cuts when he cannot help out the working families at their kitchen tables trying to figure out how to pay the bills?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first, the leader of the NDP should get his facts straight. So far this year alone, the Canadian economy has created, net, over 100,000 jobs.

We do recognize cost pressures. That is why we lowered the GST. That is why we lowered the lowest personal rate of taxation. That is why we raised the basic exemption. The NDP voted against those breaks for working people.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, here is what Statistics Canada says today, “Economic activity declined 0.2% in February”. That is called an economy in decline.

The priorities of the government are wrong.

[Translation]

Today there was an announcement about the World Food Programme, but it was not enough. We are giving billions of dollars to big oil companies and crumbs to those who have nothing.

Why is the Prime Minister not taking the world food crisis or the crises facing families right here in our own country seriously?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with the Minister of International Cooperation's announcement, Canada has now given more than its share to expand the World Food Programme. Canada is the second-largest donor to the program.

And we have brought in major tax cuts for families and individuals. That includes cutting the GST, raising the personal exemption, and reducing personal income tax for families. The New Democrats should support these cuts for families and individuals.

* * *

● (1435)

ELECTIONS CANADA

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when did the Prime Minister find out about the existence of the Conservative election advertising scheme? Did he approve it?

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Beauséjour across the way, along with the New Brunswick Liberals, joined in an advertising transfer scheme in the 2006 election, organized by the national party.

A copy of the cheque provided to Elections Canada from the local official agent is made out not to the newspapers in which the ad ran, but rather to the Liberal Party of Canada. The ads in content were national except for a small tag line.

This is the method of in and out that we see on the Liberal side. When did that member know this went on?

[Translation]

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister did not answer the question, so I will ask it again.

When did the Prime Minister find out about the existence of the Conservative election advertising scheme, and did he approve it?

[English]

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the advertisement said that the member for Beauséjour and his campaign had locally paid for it. In fact, none of his returns showed that payment had been made. Either it was false advertising and he did not actually pay for the ad that he claimed he had, or he failed to report some of his election expenses to Elections Canada.

When did the Liberal Party know about these very strange in and out transactions in the New Brunswick Liberal Party?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let us try it again. When did the Prime Minister know about the Conservative election advertising scheme and did he approve it?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister and this entire party have known for many years that it is perfectly legal

for parties to transfer money from the national to the local. In fact, we know the Liberal Party did just that, to the tune of \$1.5 million. Interestingly, those local campaigns then transferred back about \$1.3 million to the national Liberal Party.

The member is not willing to explain any of his personal behaviour. Could he tell us more about those million dollar transfers between local and national Liberals?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, eight times we have given the Prime Minister the opportunity to answer a simple question. Let me jog his memory.

The former Conservative candidate in Berthier—Maskinongé, Ann Julie Fortier, said she confronted him personally before the last election, saying that Conservative organizers tried to force her to pass off \$28,000 of national expenses as their own. Is this why the Prime Minister will not answer the simple question?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): How disappointing, Mr. Speaker. The member has been asked four times to explain his very unusual financial transactions from the last election, during which a group of New Brunswick Liberals got together, organized by the national party, paid for out of the account of the national party, with no interaction between those local candidates and the newspaper in which the advertisement ran. After all that, he did not even report on his election return that he had picked up those expenses.

When will he explain to Canadians his failure to come clean?

* * *

[Translation]

GASOLINE PRICES

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, curiously, the price of gas starts going up every year as soon as vacation time approaches. Yet we could have an instrument in place this summer to better monitor the petroleum industry, if the government would only cooperate with Parliament for once, as it expressed its unanimous support on Monday for our bill, Bill C-454, which strengthens the Competition Act and gives greater powers to its commissioner.

Will the government agree to pass our bill at all stages, so it may be in full force by this summer?

● (1440)

[English]

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-454 is at committee and will be dealt with at committee in accordance with the industry committee procedure. It will be studied and analyzed. A number of interesting provisions are in the bill and it will, in due course, form part of the discussions.

[Translation]

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, integrated oil companies control more than 90% of the market and rake in huge profits, while independent companies are struggling to get by. Far from competing with one another, they get along so well that they share the market and provide each other with refined gasoline.

Oral Questions

Given the soaring price of gas, does the minister recognize the urgent need to give the Competition Bureau the power to conduct a real investigation and force oil companies to justify their practices? [English]

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member is fully aware, the Competition Bureau has extensive authority and how that authority might be changed has been the subject of discussion here in Parliament for some time.

The Bloc has put forward a bill that is now before the industry committee for analysis. I would point out for the hon. member that some time ago, well in advance of that, a panel was struck, the so-called Red Wilson panel. That panel will be investigating this and reporting back to Canadians in June of this year. We will take action at that time.

* * *

[Translation]

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, Quebec and Ontario manufacturing industries have been hard hit by the economic slowdown. The turmoil is not over. The European Union is looking ever more seriously at imposing a carbon tax on goods imported from countries that did not sign the Kyoto protocol or that do not respect its rules, such as Canada under the Conservative government.

Will the minister admit that his government, by favouring the oil industry and not respecting Kyoto, is harming Quebec and Ontario manufacturing industries?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government quickly took action to stimulate the economy. We reduced the GST, cut income taxes and also provided tax relief for businesses in order to create jobs. It worked. Our economy is more robust than that of the United States. We are creating jobs, whereas the number of jobs is decreasing in the United States.

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the government has told us that its economic policy is based on respecting market forces. However, its decisions show otherwise. By not respecting Kyoto, by giving tax incentives to oil companies, the government is directing market forces in favour of the oil companies.

Will the Minister of Finance admit that the government favours economic laissez-faire only for the manufacturing industry?

[English]

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what the government will continue to do is to build solid fundamentals. This government will not retreat behind Bloc protectionism, nor will it use isolationism, nor will it do what the Liberals proposed we should do, which is to have higher corporate taxes, higher personal taxes, higher consumption taxes, less competition and fewer economic investments in respect of infrastructure. That will not sustain the economy. That is not where Canadians are going. That is where the Liberals would take Canada, not the Conservative government.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' laissez-faire, I do not care attitude is dragging Canada's economic heartland into a recession.

The fact is that since January 2007, Canada has lost 165,000 manufacturing jobs. Other governments are taking action.

Why on earth has the government stubbornly refused to present any meaningful plan to help Canadian manufacturers or provide any real hope to Canadian manufacturing workers?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should be fair to the facts. Over the last 12 months 325,000 net new jobs have been created in Canada.

My friend speaks about laissez-faire. That is code among Liberals for actually raising taxes. It is code for tax and spend liberalism, raising consumer taxes, raising corporate taxes and putting a drag on the economy so that we cannot actually be competitive.

We will not go there. We will continue to defend the interests of the country.

• (1445)

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, two years ago, the Conservative government inherited the best economic and fiscal situation of any incoming government in Canadian history.

Today, Canada is teetering on the edge of deficit and we are hemorrhaging manufacturing jobs.

Why is there no real manufacturing plan? Is it because bad Conservative fiscal policies have eliminated any capacity to help or invest in manufacturing or is it because the Conservatives simply do not care?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my friend misrepresents the facts in the circumstances. Our economy is stronger than the U.S. economy. We continue to create jobs at a greater rate than the American economy.

What has the leader of the Liberal Party put forward as an alternative? He wants massive increases in gas taxes. How will that help anybody get a job or be an advantage to industry in Canada?

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while the finance minister is busy handing out \$100,000 jobs to his Conservative cronies, hard-working Ontarians everywhere are losing their jobs on a daily basis: Belleville, Kapuskasing and Oshawa, 900 jobs lost; Listowel, 500 jobs lost; Ottawa, 1,100 lost; Brampton, 1,200 jobs lost; and that list continues to grow.

When will the finance minister show some leadership and take some action to actually help, instead of insulting Ontarians?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there the member goes badmouthing the Canadian economy and wishing ill on the Canadian economy.

Oral Questions

We took a dramatic stimulus in the month of October by reducing business taxes dramatically. And, guess what? Members of the Liberal Party supported that. No wonder they supported it. Their leader, when he was in Toronto at the economic club in October, said that business tax cuts were the way to go. Not only did they support it in this House, the leader opposite said it.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the leader and this party supports Ontarians and the province of Ontario. The bottom line is that actions speak louder than words. There has been no plan of action for the auto sector, no help for laid-off workers and only insults for Ontarians.

The finance minister has emptied the cupboard bare. Why is he forcing Canadians to make a choice between filling up their gas tank, filling their fridge or filling their prescriptions?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the stimulus that we took in October, supported by the Liberal Party opposite and advocated by the Liberal Party opposite, was reviewed by the IMF.

Here is what the international community said in the IMF World Economic Outlook:

A package of tax cuts has provided a timely fiscal stimulus....

...the [Canadian] government structural policy agenda should help increase competitiveness and productivity growth to underpin longer-term prospects.

If Canadians want to pay a lot more at the gas pumps, they can elect the Liberals who want to bring in a massive tax increase on gasoline in Canada.

* * *

ELECTIONS CANADA

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at the time of the last election, the most recent guidelines to candidates issued by Elections Canada specifically provided that advertising costs incurred by a local candidate that promoted either the candidate or the party was an allowable expense of the candidate. Now it appears that Elections Canada has changed the rules after the fact.

Could the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board please inform the House of the discrepancies between the 2005 and 2007 election manuals provided to official agents?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the 2005 election handbook for candidates states:

Election advertising means the transmission to the public by any means during an election period of an advertising message that promotes or opposes a registered party or the election of a candidate....

In other words, local ads can focus on the candidate or the party. However, after the election was over, Elections Canada suddenly changed the rules to delete “registered party” ensuring that only advertising focused on the local candidate would be allowed to be expensed locally. It cannot change the rules after the game is over.

• (1450)

OFFICERS OF PARLIAMENT

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while meeting with the public accounts committee yesterday, Auditor General Sheila Fraser told us that she and other independent officers of Parliament were ordered to have their communications material and media releases vetted by the government. This is an unprecedented attempt to violate the autonomy of these independent officers.

Will the Prime Minister today withdraw this order and acknowledge that the independence of officers of Parliament must be respected and protected?

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the House that this government respects the independence of each and every officer of the House.

I might add that I was having quite a wonderful time listening to the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board explain about the problems of the Liberal Party. I hope the members ask more questions in that respect.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General, the Ethics Commissioner, the Chief Electoral Officer, the Privacy and Information Commissioner and others are independent officers. This should be an easy concept to grasp. Demanding that they vet their work through PCO is an attack on their independence.

The Auditor General said yesterday, “My communications strategies aren't going to PCO”. It appears we have a standoff.

Does the Prime Minister of Canada really want to pick a fight with the Auditor General of Canada?

Hon. Vic Toews (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure you that we respect the independence of the officers of Parliament and this government would not do anything inconsistent with the independent role of those officers.

* * *

THE ECONOMY

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday's TD Bank report said that the Ontario economy faced challenges but the report made it crystal clear that the reasons for this were entirely outside Ontario's control, things like the slumping U.S. economy.

What is a minister called when he kicks his own province in the teeth when that province is struggling with tough economic conditions? He is called a goon.

Will the minister stop sucker-punching his own province?

The Speaker: I did not hear all of the reference but I hope that the term was not being applied to the minister, that it was applied to somebody outside.

The hon. Minister of Finance has the floor.

Oral Questions

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would be more concerned if the member opposite actually believed a word that he was saying. Then I would be alarmed by the language used. However, I know he does not because that is not what he says in other places when he advocates corporate tax reductions and when he supports what we did in October with the dramatic stimulus.

I hear the braying of the member for Wascana. I hear it every day. It is over, Ralph.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: The minister is right. It is over. The hon. member for Markham—Unionville has the floor.

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if the minister believed a word he said and went beyond PMO speaking points on the IMF comments, he would know that the IMF also said that the nature of this tax cut was the worst possible tax cut. I wonder if he believes anything he says.

In terms of attacking Ontario, is it the minister's extreme neo-conservative ideology that drives him to this or does he delight in sucker-punching his own province and his own people at a time of hemorrhaging jobs?

• (1455)

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): None of the above, of course, Mr. Speaker.

Here is what the member for Markham—Unionville says in other places. He says that corporate tax cuts are one of the best strategies to attract investment and help manufacturers battered by the high Canadian dollar.

We did that in Ottawa but Ontario has not followed, unlike many other provinces in Canada. If the member for Markham—Unionville and his cohorts want to help Ontario, they should encourage the Liberal Premier of Ontario to reduce those business taxes, because, after all, that is what he really believes.

* * *

[Translation]

FORESTRY AND MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is all so simple. What did the forestry industry in the Outaouais get? Nothing.

What did Domtar workers in Hull get? Nothing.

What did garment and textile workers in Montreal get?

Some hon. members: Nothing.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: What did Quebec export manufacturers get?

Some hon. members: Nothing.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: Numbers are not his strong suit, so I will gladly help out. Nothing plus nothing equals:

Some hon. members: Nothing.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: So how can he look our workers in the eye and tell them, “I know that you are suffering, and I know that you need help, so here is what I have to offer you: nothing”?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have created over 300,000 new jobs in Canada this year. Look at Quebec's economy. It is very strong. For example, I went to the Peerless factory in Montreal. I also went to the grand opening of the Thales research centre and to aerospace plants. Industry in Quebec is very strong.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a downtown in his riding got \$2.1 million from CED for revitalization, but what did forestry industry workers in the Outaouais get?

Some hon. members: Nothing.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: An airport, also in his riding, got \$2.2 million from CED, but what did airports in Trois-Rivières and Saint-Hubert get?

Some hon. members: Nothing.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: The cruise industry in his region and in his riding got millions of dollars, but what did businesses in Mauricie, Montérégie and the Eastern Townships get?

Some hon. members: Nothing.

Mr. Pablo Rodriguez: When it comes to getting help from the government, do we now have two categories of Quebeckers—those who voted for the Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec and those who did not, and those who did not can take care of themselves?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member forgot to mention that we also gave a billion dollars to support the manufacturing and forestry industries, \$217 million of which went to Quebec.

We also set up advisory committees and we are in the process of developing—and have even begun to announce—our strategic plan for 2008-2011, which contains, among other things, a new tool that we are calling Major Economic and Tourism Facilities. We have allocated \$67 million over three years to help the regions of Quebec.

* * *

OMAR KHADR

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, before a parliamentary committee, the officer who is defending Omar Khadr criticized the American military tribunal process, which is designed to ensure convictions. This statement was not made by a member of the Taliban, but by a military lawyer who is a lieutenant-commander of the United States army.

Now that he knows that young Mr. Khadr will not have a fair and equitable trial, what is the Minister of Foreign Affairs waiting for to bring him back to Canada?

Oral Questions

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my hon. Bloc Québécois colleague should know that any questions regarding whether the Government of Canada will ask for Omar Khadr's release are premature, given that the legal proceedings and appeals are still underway and not all courses of action have been exhausted. One thing, however, is certain. We have been assured by the American government that Mr. Khadr has been treated humanely.

Mrs. Vivian Barbot (Papineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, as with Kyoto, here is another example of how Canada refuses to honour its word. The first to sign the UN convention on child soldiers, Canada now refuses to help Omar Khadr, whose status as a child soldier is indisputable, according to experts.

Has renegeing on its word become Canada's trademark?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, representatives from my department have visited Mr. Khadr on several occasions, and we will continue to visit him and ensure his well being. I would also remind the House that Mr. Khadr is facing very serious charges and those charges remain outstanding.

• (1500)

[English]

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the human rights subcommittee heard testimony from Omar Khadr's lawyer that under the current U.S. military commission, Omar will be sentenced to life in prison even if he is acquitted.

Given the fact that his detention under the military commission act is a violation of international humanitarian law, and given that he is the only Canadian and the only child soldier of a western country still at Guantanamo Bay, will the government once and for all commit to having him returned to this country?

[Translation]

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Khadr is facing serious charges. However, I would remind my hon. colleague that the current policy of the Government of Canada is one that has been in place since 2002. We are following a policy that was created by the previous government. We are making sure that justice takes its course. In the meantime, we cannot comment on the case.

* * *

[English]

INTERNATIONAL AID

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are a charitable and giving people, and yet they were continuously disappointed with the previous Liberal government's complete lack of responsibility toward the world's most vulnerable. In four out of their last six years in government, the Liberals could not fulfill their international commitment, let alone do more for food aid. The world is now facing a food crisis.

Can the Minister of International Cooperation tell the House how our Conservative government is responding to the world food programme's appeal for additional support?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today Canadians can be proud that this government

announced a 28% increase to its contribution for food aid to the World Food Programme. This will keep Canada as the second largest donor to the World Food Programme. The program includes \$5 million to the Canada Food Grains Bank and \$10 million earmarked for Haiti. I also announced that Canada will now untie 100% of its food aid. This means that Canadian dollars will go farther and be more effectively used.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Sudanese authorities intended to release Canadian citizen Abousfian Abdelrazik as early as 2003, but kept him at the request of the Canadian government. This is a breach of Mr. Abdelrazik's rights.

If the government has any reason to detain him, it must do so legally in Canada, not through an extraordinary rendition in a foreign country. As a Canadian citizen, he is entitled to return to Canada and to due process. When will Mr. Abdelrazik be back in Canada?

[Translation]

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are currently examining Mr. Abdelrazik's case. I can say that we have offered the necessary consular services, and are providing all the assistance we can. We provide him with humanitarian and medical assistance, and we are also helping him communicate with his family in Montreal and with his lawyers.

Furthermore, we have provided Mr. Abdelrazik with temporary shelter at the embassy in Khartoum.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Mr. Abdelrazik took refuge at the embassy because Sudan is not safe. Two governments and four foreign affairs ministers have refused to bring him back to Canada. Mr. Abdelrazik has rights. It is not fair to him or to his family. This is not reassuring to Canadians in light of what happened with the Arar case.

When will Mr. Abdelrazik return to Canada?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague should know that Mr. Abdelrazik is currently not able to return to Canada on his own because he is on the United Nations' list of suspected terrorists, suspected of being affiliated with al Qaeda, the Taliban or Osama bin Laden.

[English]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a question on the same subject. I wonder if the minister has considered the fact that Mr. Abdelrazik is a Canadian citizen. He has not been charged with anything and while CSIS has expressed concerns about him, any Canadian citizen who has a concern about CSIS has rights as well with respect to applying to the Security Intelligence Review Committee.

I wonder why the minister would not bring Mr. Abdelrazik back to Canada and allow the Security Intelligence Review Committee to do its work and to review whatever evidence or information CSIS may or may not have with respect to his status.

Routine Proceedings

● (1505)

[Translation]

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, we are examining Mr. Abdelrazik's case and providing consular assistance, as we do for all Canadians in similar situations.

Furthermore, I must note that this individual is currently on the United Nations' list of suspected terrorists affiliated with al Qaeda, the Taliban or Osama bin Laden.

* * *

*[English]***EQUALIZATION PAYMENTS**

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Liberal opposition members talk about supporting Ontario, but when it comes to my home province, we have nothing to learn from them. The Liberal Party, when in power, denied Ontario's request for more transfer support. It even sent the member for Markham—Unionville to suggest that its provincial cousins were supporting separatists for even raising the issue in 2005.

Talk about a kick in the teeth. They are the party of the member for Toronto Centre who, as premier, ruined Ontario's finances and plunged it into a massive deficit.

Can the Minister of Finance tell this House what we are doing to support Ontario through our transfer payments?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am certainly happy to report to the House the increased support to the people of Ontario since the government changed more than two years ago. As a result of our government there is almost \$75 billion in tax support for relief for individuals and businesses in Ontario, and then on transfers, an increase of almost 25%. Even the member for Ottawa South should know this. He could tell his brother. Unprecedented levels of transfer support totalling \$13.9 billion, an increase that—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques.

* * *

*[Translation]***WORLD FOOD CRISIS**

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, speculation, the use of food sources to produce biofuels, and our irresponsible energy consumption have contributed to the world food crisis.

Increasing our financial aid by \$50 million is not enough, although it may ease our conscience. We have to help populations in crisis to produce their own food. The government's international energy assistance policy must take this reality into account.

What is the Conservative government waiting for to take action, to develop a comprehensive strategy and become a partner in global fairness?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can certainly tell the member opposite of the good work that my colleague, the Minister of International Cooperation, has done. Canada, as she said, is the second highest donor to the UN food agency.

In Canada, we also believe in new age biofuels where we can use agricultural waste and waste products to produce biofuels. It is an important part of the solution to address energy security and the environment.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS*[English]***CANADA-U.S. DEFENCE TREATY**

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I wish to seek the permission of the House to lay upon the table, in both official languages, a treaty entitled, "Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America Relating to the Establishment of Integrated Lines of Communication to Ensure Logistic Support for the Canadian Armed Forces and the Armed Forces of the United States of America".

An explanatory memorandum is enclosed with this treaty.

* * *

ELECTIONS CANADA

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I mentioned earlier in the House of Commons today that Elections Canada has attempted to change the rules around what qualifies for a local advertisement.

I quoted the old rules that were contained in the 2005 "Election Handbook for Candidates, Their Official Agents and Auditors", which I concluded—and I would like to table—

The Speaker: I think the parliamentary secretary should get on with the tabling or we are going to have more difficulties.

● (1510)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, to that end, I would like to support the case made in the House of Commons by tabling, in both official languages, Elections Canada's handbook for candidates, the version that was written in 2005, and the version that was subsequently altered by Elections Canada in 2007 after this recent dispute with the Conservative Party came to light.

* * *

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8) I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's response to six petitions.

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 14th report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

I am pleased to report that the committee has considered vote 15 under Finance—Auditor General in the main estimates for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2009, and reports the same.

* * *

PETITIONS

SOUTH OKANAGAN-SIMILKAMEEN NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

Mr. Alex Atamanenko (British Columbia Southern Interior, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are approximately 15,000 names from all over British Columbia on a petition to establish a South Okanagan-Similkameen national park reserve.

The petitioners call upon the Government of Canada to commit to the establishment of a sizeable national park reserve in the South Okanagan and Similkameen valleys that upholds the standard of protection afforded by the National Parks Act; that includes a \$50 million parks acquisition fund to purchase private lands for protection, to buy out grazing leases on Crown lands, and to provide conservation financing for local first nations; and that protects at least 100,000 hectares of land in total, including significant tracts of currently unprotected Crown lands in the grasslands and forests of the region.

IMMIGRATION

Hon. Gurbax Malhi (Bramalea—Gore—Malton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present a petition signed by concerned residents of my riding of Bramalea—Gore—Malton and many others from across Ontario.

In light of the ongoing lack of security in Guyana, the petitioners call upon the government to immediately stop all removals of Guyanese refugee claimants, review the cases of unsuccessful claimants and allow all claimants to remain in Canada on humanitarian and compassionate or other grounds.

CLUSTER BOMBS

Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present this petition on behalf of hundreds of Canadians who recognize the importance of the Oslo process. These petitioners call on the Government of Canada to recognize the grave inhumanitarian consequences of cluster munitions and their effects on innocent civilian populations.

They call for the Government of Canada to continue its leadership role in the Oslo process, an international ban on cluster munitions that pose unacceptable humanitarian consequences; to adopt and ratify a legally binding international instrument that prohibits the use, transfer and stockpiling of cluster munitions that cause unacceptable harm to civilians; and to secure adequate provisions of care and rehabilitation to survivors and clearance of contaminated areas.

Routine Proceedings

MISSING PERSONS

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am presenting a petition signed by hundreds of people from my riding of Nanaimo—Cowichan, all across B.C. and other parts of Canada. The petition is about missing adult children.

The petitioners request that parliamentarians pass a bill to provide funding to establish a national clearing house for missing, at-risk or endangered adults, similar to the MCSC. This centre would assist law enforcement and families in cases of missing at-risk and/or endangered persons over the age of 17. The centre would only take up cases that are determined by law enforcement to be foul play and would not help locate adults who are trying to disappear.

I particularly want to thank Patricia Cowan for all of her work on this petition.

● (1515)

STUDENT LOANS

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition signed by hundreds of students in my riding. They are quite worried about their tuition fees. They note that as a share of a typical family's income, tuition fees are higher today than at any point in the last 60 years, that more than 345,000 students are forced to borrow from the Canada student loans program, and that the average student debt for an undergraduate degree ranges from \$21,000 to \$28,000, depending on the province. They also note that Canada's student loan debt is increasing by more than \$1.5 million each year and has ballooned to more than \$12 billion, which is more than the debt of some of the provincial governments.

The petitioners are asking the Government of Canada to invest heavily in a needs based grant through the Canada student loans program for students at public universities and colleges.

EMERGENCY SERVICE VOLUNTEERS

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is my honour to present to this House a petition for emergency volunteers who risk life and limb to provide security and emergency services in the smaller communities. It is certainly an essential service for rural Canada. There is no remuneration for them. Personal expenses are incurred by emergency volunteers with no compensation. This inequity should be corrected immediately.

Therefore, the petitioners call upon Parliament to enact Bill C-219, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act, to permit a tax deduction for emergency service volunteers.

SECURITY AND PROSPERITY PARTNERSHIP

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise again today to present a petition on the security and prosperity partnership of North America.

Government Orders

The petitioners say that these negotiations encompass wide-ranging initiatives, many of which reduce protection in such areas as pesticide use, food safety, air safety and the environment down to the lowest common denominator. They point out that Canada will lose control over resources and national standards, including energy and water. The petitioners also worry about merging security policies and practices with those of the U.S. They also say that Canada will possess less and less ability to adopt autonomous and sustainable economic, social, cultural and environmental policies, including programs like universal health care.

The petitioners call upon the government to stop further implementation of the SPP until there is a democratic mandate from the people of Canada and parliamentary oversight. They urge the Government of Canada to conduct a transparent and accountable public debate of the SPP process, involving meaningful public consultations, a full legislative review and a full debate and vote in Parliament.

INCOME TRUSTS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present this income trust broken promise petition provided to me by a large number of constituents from Kelowna, B.C. and Quesnel, B.C.

The petitioners remind the Prime Minister that he boasted about his apparent commitment to accountability when he said that the greatest fraud is a promise not kept. The petitioners remind the Prime Minister that he promised never to tax income trusts, but he recklessly broke that promise by imposing a 31.5% punitive tax, which permanently wiped out over \$25 billion of the hard-earned retirement savings of over two million Canadians, particularly seniors.

The petitioners therefore call upon the Conservative minority government to admit that the decision to tax income trusts was based on flawed methodology and incorrect assumptions, as was demonstrated in the finance committee; to apologize to those who were unfairly harmed by this broken promise; and to repeal the punitive 31.5% tax on income trusts.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

MOTIONS FOR PAPERS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all notices of motions for the production of papers be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1520)

[English]

FOOD AND DRUGS ACT

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Health and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC) moved that Bill C-51, An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act and to make consequential amendments to other Acts, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for the opportunity to speak to Bill C-51.

Overseeing food and health product safety is one of the most fundamental roles the federal government plays in Canadian society. Today there are so many health products available already and so many more are coming to market. We are in a time when Canadians are taking a deep interest in the safety of the foods they eat and the products they use. We are most certainly in a time when Canadians want to know that their government is taking safety seriously.

[Translation]

We know that the trust of Canadians needs to be won daily. Past performance is not enough.

That is why, in the Speech from the Throne last October, the government committed to introduce “measures on food and product safety to ensure that families have confidence in the quality and safety of what they buy.”

[English]

In December the measures started taking form as the Prime Minister announced Canada's new food and consumer safety action plan. Its goal is to modernize and strengthen Canada's safety system for food, health and consumer products. To support this goal, budget 2008 has invested \$113 million for the next two years alone.

The next step is to update our legislation to give us the tools we need to better protect Canadians. This is why Bill C-51 is before the House today. The Food and Drugs Act is 50 years old and many of its provisions no longer reflect today's reality. Bill C-51 seeks to modernize it through a new approach updated for the global economy. This new approach is based on preventing problems in the first place, targeting the highest risks and responding rapidly to problems as they arise.

Government Orders

Let me take a few moments to describe some key elements of Bill C-51. This bill enhances our legal framework to protect and promote the health and safety of Canadians in the areas of health products and food. While it covers many activities in a very diverse field, among the most important is the fact that Bill C-51 seeks to change much of how health product licensing takes place in Canada.

Currently under Canadian law, no one can simply start to manufacture or sell the kinds of health products covered by this bill. No one can simply start a clinical trial designed to test a new health product. A Government of Canada licence is needed, which is only issued after important conditions are met. When it comes to health products, the basic test for licensing is this: Do the product's potential benefits outweigh the potential risks?

The problem with the old approach under the Food and Drugs Act is that once a company has that licence, there are few measures to require ongoing confirmation that a drug or some other product meets this safety test, even if new or greater risks become known. As a result, Canadian requirements for companies to track the safety of their marketed therapeutic products are out of step with other leading regulators.

Of course, the vast majority of companies live up their obligations to consumers, but the absence of a framework that compels them to does not meet the expectations of Canadians or of this government. Bill C-51 addresses that gap between what we have and what we want.

[*Translation*]

Our rigorous approach to health product licensing will continue. However, the bill aims to provide the government with the tools that will allow it to require ongoing assurances that health products meet standards once they are on the market. These tools will also allow the government to intervene and order a recall, if necessary.

● (1525)

[*English*]

It establishes what we call a life cycle approach, a continuous system for monitoring the safety, the efficacy and the quality of drugs and other therapeutic products. It starts with the clinical trials that a company has to conduct before being permitted to bring its product into Canada's market. That stage normally provides information needed to spot and prevent possible safety issues.

At every step of the way, throughout the entire life cycle of a product, our government's scientists will use the latest evidence to assess whether the product's benefits continue to outweigh its potential risks.

By taking this life cycle approach, our oversight will target the highest risks and give us the information we need to respond rapidly as soon as we identify a problem. The constant flow of information will make it more likely that threats to safety and to health are identified promptly and acted on much more effectively.

The proposed bill also advances safety by authorizing the development of regulations to require more reporting of adverse drug reactions. It paves the way to work with the provinces and territories to make it mandatory for hospitals to report these adverse drug reactions. That step will generate more information for

improved drug safety. As a result, problems can be caught earlier and responded to faster to better protect Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Similarly, Bill C-51 seeks to ensure that Canadians will generally have easier access to pertinent information about health products.

This bill contains provisions that will make the regulatory system more open and more transparent so that Canadians can obtain the information they need about the risks and benefits associated with products and make informed choices.

[*English*]

Industry generally takes consumer safety very seriously and cooperates with governments to address consumer safety concerns when they arise. However, for those few suppliers that do not cooperate, the proposed legislation includes measures to help ensure that corrective action is taken.

This includes the ability to order the recall of a health product from the Canadian market, when appropriate, to protect the health and safety of Canadians. We need this power if we are to respond as rapidly as possible to problems as soon as we learn about them to better safeguard the health of Canadians.

Under the bill, those few companies that are insufficiently concerned with the health and safety of the people who use their products would also experience significantly higher penalties for their actions.

For a very long time the maximum fine for health products under the Food and Drugs Act had been just \$5,000. The bill proposes stiffer fines of up to \$5 million for serious contraventions and will leave the ceiling open to the court's discretion when a supplier is found to act wilfully or recklessly. With greater deterrents in place, manufacturers will have even greater incentive to prevent problems from happening in the first place.

Together, the bill, and all of the work under the food and consumer safety action plan, sends an important message to Canadians and to the organizations that produce, import, distribute, and use the health products covered by the legislation.

The Government of Canada is taking consumer protection seriously and we are taking action. We are doing so in part through modernizing the Food and Drugs Act to prevent as many problems as possible, to target the highest risks and to ensure rapid response to problems as they arise. We are doing that by taking a health and food products safety system, which works well now, and making improvements so it works much better for Canadians.

Government Orders

[Translation]

I urge all parties to support Bill C-51 so that we can offer Canadians the system they want and need in order to ensure the safety of food and health products.

• (1530)

[English]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-51 is a long bill of some 75 clauses and it affects a number of other acts.

Members are already receiving correspondence from their constituents concerning natural therapeutic products. It will be a very significant issue for the government and Parliament to address with regard to the implications of the bill to these natural therapeutic products.

One of my constituents specifically wrote about her son who suffers from Lyme disease and requires certain drugs. It is not that these drugs would cure the problem, but they help in terms of quality of life or in the ability to control the effects of the disease. It is a very serious situation, and I know the minister is aware of that.

At the outset, there must be a declaration of the government that the implications of Bill C-51 will not be draconian in regard to the pricing or availability of natural therapeutic products so those who believe that those products are necessary for themselves or their family members will continue to have reasonable and appropriate access with appropriate health safeguards.

Hon. Tony Clement: Mr. Speaker, I am happy to address the member's comments at this time. I state categorically and for the record, there is nothing targeted to the natural health products industry in the bill. There is nothing that is draconian in terms of the effects of pricing and availability in the bill. Indeed, we seek to ensure that natural health products are available to Canadians.

Of course we are always concerned about safety and efficacy, particularly safety. Natural health products, just as prescription drugs and certain other therapeutic products, have to be available in a safe way to Canadians.

I would say for a purveyor or manufacturer of a natural health product, if what is on the label is accurate and if what is claimed about the natural health product is accurate, there is nothing to fear from the legislation. Indeed, our government and our caucus want more natural health products on the marketplace for more choice for Canadians, but we will not stand by if there is a dangerous product.

I issue warnings practically every week about this or that dangerous product, some of which are natural health products, which can have an impact on cardiac arrest, strokes or liver damage. Things can have this kind of impact. We do not want those products available. We want Canadians to be warned and we want them to be safe.

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have a few questions for the minister about Bills C-51 and C-52. We know that the bill will require more human resources and also a training budget. We are all anxious to see how the minister will meet expectations in implementing his bill.

In 2006, the Auditor General noted the lack of human resources, especially in the areas of training and the safety of therapeutic products, foods and cosmetics. There is a shortage of resources.

The minister mentioned natural products. He is certainly aware that there are delays in granting authorizations to sell natural products. That is my first question.

As for my second question, the minister knows that these two bills rely on regulations. Since the regulations do not yet exist, we will have a bill but will not know what sort of regulations will be made. These regulations could give us an idea of how the bill will be interpreted. Can the minister tell me when the regulations will be ready—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. Minister of Health.

Hon. Tony Clement: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

First, with regard to funding and human resources, it is important to invest in these areas so that these bills can provide a solution. As I said, budget 2008 includes more than \$100 million for the next two years and more than \$500 million for the next five years for human resources and the other obligations arising from these bills.

Second, the regulations are also very important, of course. There will be many opportunities in future to discuss the regulations. It is important that these bills act as an umbrella. It is important for Parliament to discuss the regulations.

• (1535)

[English]

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary for Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think many Canadians would be surprised that the federal government in the past has not had the power to recall items. Could the minister give us a couple of day to day examples of what the bill would do to empower the government to have that?

Could the minister also elaborate on what has been called the life cycle approach. I think that is a concept with which many Canadians may not be familiar. Could he explain how that will affect a product, not today but two years, five years, fifty years down the road?

Hon. Tony Clement: Mr. Speaker, I think many Canadians would be surprised to learn that the Minister of Health and the Government of Canada do not have the power of recall under the Food and Drugs Act presently, except for food, but for other products, therapeutic products, for instance, that is not the case.

Therefore, we are left in the situation where if Health Canada believes there is a dangerous product on the shelves, whether it be a prescription drug, or a natural health product or some other therapeutic product, we presently have to negotiate with the manufacturer and the distributor to get the product off the shelves. We are left with merely issuing warnings on websites and various media outlets not to take this product because it has a deleterious effect.

Government Orders

Therefore, that is a problem. In the last resort, at the very least, we want to have the ability to recall.

In respect to the member's question on the life cycle approach, in a nutshell, we would have the same standards available for approving, let us say, a prescription drug at the beginning of the process, but we would still concern ourselves with any additional studies, or information or evidence of adverse reactions that occur as a drug is distributed throughout the country as a medicinal product.

Therefore, we do not stop our concern just as the product is licensed. We continue our concern throughout the life of that product.

Mr. Paul Szabo: Mr. Speaker, I forgot to raise a further issue with the minister.

In the communications I have received from a number of the groups, they have asked whether they can get some assurance that they will be able to appear before committee and that the government will support their appearance before committee to ask questions, if necessary, and to provide information which would help the committee assess whether any appropriate amendments could be made to Bill C-51 to make it even a better bill.

Could the minister give the assurance that the government will support these groups being able to come before the Standing Committee on Health?

Hon. Tony Clement: Mr. Speaker, I do not chair the committee, but it would strike me as reasonable that this approach be seriously considered by the committee chair.

What I can tell the hon. member is we have engaged in numerous discussions with various stakeholders in the natural health products area. We continue to have those discussions. There is a lot of misinformation out there. Quite frankly, there has been some scaremongering about the intent and the effect of the bill. We are trying to have a reasoned conversation with people to ensure they realize that this is not an attack on the industry. This is not designed to shut down the availability of their products.

This is designed to protect the health and safety of Canadians and there are certain things found in the bill that will apply the proper balance between the right to commerce on the one hand, but our rights to safety as Canadians on the other. I think that is appropriate.

• (1540)

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions between the parties, and I think if you were to seek it you would find unanimous consent that I be permitted to share my time with the member for Malpeque.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to split his time?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Speaker, I thank all members of the House.

I do not want to shock the minister while he is still present in the House, but it will come as very difficult news to him that for two days in a row we have to find some level of agreement with the bill that he proposes to the House of Commons. I am looking forward to

this bill being at committee and to having the opportunity to further explore it.

I am pleased with the answer he gave to the member for Mississauga South. It is consistent with the discussion I had with the parliamentary secretary as to the fears out there about natural health products and natural therapeutic products not being targeted by this bill. I think that fear was out there, so I think this will be necessary. As I understand it, we can be assured of the government's cooperation if modifications have to be made in the definitions or in the bill so that this can be clearly drawn out.

That leaves one area of concern that I have been receiving as critic and which members undoubtedly will hear about. It is the question of direct to consumer advertising. While I understand from the bureaucrats or the minister's officials that there is no intention in this bill to permit direct to consumer advertising, it does somewhat change the way it is dealt with.

In the past it was directly in the bill. The bill said that the only advertising on prescription products would be the name, quantity and price. They were the only things that could be advertised. In this case, my understanding of it is that this gives the governor in council the potential to write regulations concerning advertising.

My understanding is that it is not the intent to open up the advertising, but it does take it out of the hands of Parliament and of the committee. That would cause some concern, so I hope that the government, at committee level, will be willing to look at some modifications to the bill, some amendments that might clarify this.

It could be done in one of two ways. One is that we could do the process that we have used in certain elements of the Health Act, which is to bring the regulations to committee for approval. We could limit it to those regulations concerning advertising, because it does not have to be all the regulations permitted under the act, or an amendment straight to the act. I will give some time for the government to consider those amendments before it comes to the committee. Hopefully, they will be negotiated amendments. If not, I am sure we will have some present.

That being said, I think the principles of this bill are quite good. This is not a bill that has been dreamt up in the last few weeks by the government. This bill is a result of a process of discussions and consultations that has been going on since 2003. These are part of the process that was known at the time as the smart regulations process. We were looking at regulatory reforms to the Government of Canada acts that necessitated those regulations to see if there was not a better way to do it, to be competitive internationally and domestically, and to at the same time protect Canadians.

One of the elements that comes in here is drug safety. The assurance of drug safety is very difficult. As the minister pointed out, the test on permitting or licensing of pharmaceutical products is whether the potential benefits outweigh the potential risks. We do not necessarily know when that first evaluation is done what the use of that pharmaceutical product will be in time, whether it will evolve from when the original clinical trials were done, and whether other drugs or therapies will come on stream that might interact with it. We do not know that.

Government Orders

Here we are going with the principle that has been known as progressive licensing and is now termed life cycle approvals or a life cycle approach. I do not know what it could be called that would reflect its true nature, but what it does is say that to get on the market initially the product has to meet the same safety criteria as it is currently meeting. The criteria are not relaxed.

Once the product is on the market, Health Canada has the ability to order further clinical trials or withdraw the licence if there is no compliance. I think that is important, because there could have been such a strict restrictive process, so as to assure absolute safety, that no new pharmaceuticals would ever come on the market.

• (1545)

However, with this process, we assure the safety of the product through clinical trials, and then we have time to do the evaluation as it is being used in the market, because the absolute use might be different from the use that had been foreseen. We heard at committee that the United States food and drug regulations use the 10,000 dosage system. After 10,000 dosages, they do a re-evaluation. Here, it could be different for any therapies.

However, once the experts at Health Canada see how a drug is evolving in its use, they can order further clinical trials at any time. I think it is important to try to understand what this means.

Number one, we know that almost no pharmaceuticals, and I could almost say zero, are approved for use by children. They are very seldom approved for use in pediatrics because it is so difficult to do clinical trials for pediatrics. The clinical trials before the first approval of a drug are done with adults. Then, over time, dosages or uses of prescriptions are studied by specialists in their work. When they find there is some value for use in pediatrics, they try to find the right dosage.

A drug might be developed for one specific use. For example, we have heard about Viagra being used in pediatric care, and while a drug might be developed for one specific use, it can be found through time that it is even more useful for other conditions that had not been considered. This is called off-label use.

I remember reading not so long ago about a cancer drug being used for macular degeneration. It was just as effective as the drug that had been used for macular degeneration. Thus, we can see how a drug might be used in a therapy other than the purpose for which it had its first clinical trials.

We now have the ability, with this bill, for Health Canada to order clinical trials in that area of use and in that population. If we discover with time that the major use of a certain therapy or pharmaceutical product ends up being done by seniors, those between the ages of 50 and 65, then perhaps Health Canada could order that a specific clinical trial be done in that area. If it is for people who have certain diseases and there are risks, we can do those things.

That is a logical, smart approach, which permits the drug to come on the market under the same criteria that it does now. This is what I think Canadians have to understand: this is not the relaxation of the initial criteria. It is a reasonable, intelligent way of monitoring the use of that product over time and changing the licensing standards.

Again, I think it is important to respond to the scare that is being put out there, because there are a lot of Canadians who are finding very good benefits in using non-prescription health products, therapeutic products, natural health products, organics, or whatever we want to call them. They are under different names. People are concerned when they see this bill that it might mean they can no longer access those products. I have had calls about this, as all the members of Parliament will.

I take the minister at his word. When I read the bill, I did not see any effect on the natural health product directorate and I did not see that these products were moved, but the fear is out there among Canadians and I think we will have to ensure, before the bill goes through the House of Commons and the Senate, that it is cleared up.

Yesterday when we were looking at Bill C-52, I raised a question on the power to recall and said that we have to be careful. We have to be careful that the power to recall does not become an obligation to recall. If we give the power to the minister and his inspectors, we have to make sure that this power is used only when all other methods fail and only when all other methods have been attempted, because we do not know of any problems we have had so far. So far, negotiations have been successful.

I see that my time has run out. I thank members for their attention.

• (1550)

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary for Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his speech and for what appears to be a very thoughtful and cooperative approach to this government legislation. I think it demonstrates that this Parliament has the potential to work very well in that together we can move forward legislation that is important for Canadians.

I have a question for the member. The life cycle approach has a lot of merit, I think, and we have heard the minister speak to that. I wonder if the member would agree that the life cycle approach is the right approach to take when it comes to products such as those we are discussing today.

Hon. Robert Thibault: Yes, Mr. Speaker, I believe it is. It gives the tools to the Department of Health. It gives the department the potential to ensure the safety of a product as its use evolves. Currently, all we can do is look at whether the product is safe for the use for which the application was made. With time, the use might become completely different than what was considered when that product was developed and when clinical trials were happening.

As I mentioned in my speaking notes, if we want to make the initial licensing so restrictive and so strict as to ensure our safety on all uses in the future, no therapies would ever come to market. No new drugs and no new therapies would ever become commercialized and Canadians would not have access to them.

I think this is a logical way to do it. It is a smart regulation. I do not know why we would ever have accepted stupid regulation, but this is an intelligent way of having regulation and ensuring safety.

Government Orders

It is important to have the necessary tools and the will at the Department of Health to impose those further clinical trials after the drug has been on the market for a certain amount of time. Again, that is going to require some cooperation from pharmaceutical producers.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the commentary of the member, who is the health critic for the official opposition.

We have had some experience in the past through the reproductive technologies bill. It was supposed to take two years for regulations to come forward, but several years later we still do not have all of the regulations. I see here that there are other regulations.

My question for the member really has to do with the fact that half of the clauses in the bill would make consequential amendments to other acts. I do not know how many members of Parliament would be able to inform themselves as to the nature of those changes and whether they should access all the other bills to see if the changes would be meaningful.

Will the member undertake as part of the review, should the bill pass at second reading and go to committee, to ensure that Health Canada would provide to committee, which would therefore make it accessible to other members of Parliament, a proper explanation as to the rationale for the consequential amendments to other acts so we can be absolutely assured that we do not have other areas that should be examined and may impact areas of concern to the public?

Hon. Robert Thibault: Mr. Speaker, that is a very good point. It is a point that is often overlooked by the House when we approve a bill. We saw it with Bill C-10. One small element of a regulation was missed by the House, but luckily it was picked up by the Senate, as it would have led to censorship in our film and television production.

In this case, there are a number of acts, such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency Act, the Fisheries Act, and some agricultural aspects, which the next speaker will certainly want to raise. The joint administration and the cross-regulation between the Health Act, the Food and Drugs Act and other acts necessitate all these amendments.

These are some of the things that we certainly will be studying at committee. We will ask the Library of Parliament for the analysis, which it does very well. We have had the preliminary one. As well, witnesses will appear who can show us if there will be difficulties within their areas of jurisdiction or administration.

• (1555)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-51. In fact, as my colleague from West Nova said earlier in his remarks, these are two bills in a row, Bill C-51 and Bill C-52, that we are certainly most interested in moving forward to committee for further technical analysis and more research, but we do believe the bills in principle need to be carried forward.

The section of the bill with which I really want to deal is on the food side of it. I think there is strong interest in ensuring that products are indeed safe. I would say there is an almost public wave for stronger action in this regard. There has been the recent incidence of unsafe food. Health and consumer products have underscored the need to modernize the Food and Drugs Act. The fact of the matter is

that the act was developed in 1953 and these amendments certainly update the bill.

Basically, the bill would amend the Food and Drugs Act and modernize the regulatory system for foods and therapeutic products. It would improve the surveillance of benefits and risks of therapeutic products through their life cycle. It is designed to increase compliance and enforcement measures by corporations to encourage them to report adverse reactions or potential health threats associated with market products. It would, I will admit, give substantial regulatory power to the minister.

I know there are some concerns about that. We have a number of letters already. That is why it is so important for the bill to go to committee relatively quickly, so that the witness lists can be prepared and those concerns can be addressed. We certainly support the idea of improving the safety and health of Canadians. We are committed to improving the safety and health of Canadians. We support measures to strengthen the regulatory system to ensure that Canadians are able to access the safest and most effective food in the world as well as with therapeutic products.

I want to turn mainly to the food area of the bill and that is in clauses 4 through to 6. The bill would create new offences relating to food, therapeutic products and cosmetics. It would require licensing for importing food and for the interprovincial trade in food.

In a previous Parliament there was Bill C-27. We in fact looked fairly extensively at the regulations surrounding the importing of food and the interprovincial trade in food. In all seriousness, there had to be improvements made in that area to ensure that imported food was safe and met the same kind of regulatory requirements as indeed Canadian food had to meet.

This bill in all areas would expand the regulatory authority, but in the food area it would expand the power of inspectors. I want to point out that it is not our intent nor do I believe it is the government's intent or even the bureaucracy's intent that the expansion of the powers of inspectors is to be overbearing. It is to ensure that the human resources and the authority are there to deal with some of the incidences that can happen on grocery store shelves or that imported food can face.

• (1600)

I would put a caveat in. Those of us who are on the agriculture committee know that certainly more human resources must be added to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency for it to do its job. The government did indicate the other day that there are some budgetary measures in that regard, but there do need to be the human and financial resources for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to do its job and the additional authorities granted to it through this bill.

Government Orders

I also want to underline the fact that one of the concerns that we raised at our committee level was that these costs should not be passed on to primary producers. We have had enough of that. Primary producers should not be the ones bearing the costs for food inspections in this country. That is a public safety and health and safety issue. It is a public responsibility and we would hope that the government takes that seriously and funds the Canadian Food Inspection Agency appropriately to do its job.

The new prohibited activity in the bill really gives the government the authority to take action if someone knowingly provides the minister with false or misleading information relating to any matter in this bill, whether someone knowingly is tampering with a food, therapeutic product or a cosmetic, including tampering with a label or package.

A number of years ago, we heard about a substantial number of those where people, as a hoax or a threat or an act of terrorism really, had sent out the word over the media or email, or by other means, that they had in fact tampered with a food product on a grocery store shelf. That creates tremendous concern among the consuming public. It certainly creates difficulties for the businesses so affected. Under this bill, I do believe there is more authority for the authorities themselves to deal with those matters where there are hoaxes or threats, or indeed actual tampering with food itself.

The other area in clause 4 will also prohibit the importing of food that is injurious to human health. That is an important aspect of the bill that was not there previously in terms of the trade that goes on. It is very important that imported food be treated in the same way as domestic food on the grocery store shelves, and that action be taken against companies or individuals who may have both exported into this country or the company that imported the food that is injurious to human health. That is a very important measure.

We tend, in this country, to take our food system for granted. Canadian farmers provide the safest food in the world. The problem is they are certainly not paid well enough for it. Canadians only pay 13.5% of their income and by early February, their food bills are paid for the year. We do not want anything to happen on those grocery store shelves that will reflect badly on the Canadian primary producers.

●(1605)

The last point that I would make, as I see I am running out of time, is a point I made the other day, but I will make it again. Canadian farmers do face a double standard from their own government regulations. We must be on a level playing field with the rest of the world. We cannot add another regulatory burden.

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary for Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out to the member that \$113 million over two years has been put aside in budget 2008. Naturally, we would like to thank the member for his support for that budget. I wonder if the member could explain his position on the life cycle approach and tell us if he supports his health critic on that approach to product safety.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I am glad to see that those resources are there. However, I want to point out to the parliamentary secretary that we have seen this in the past, both with the current government and previous governments. The way the

system operates in Ottawa is that sometimes there is a small cost recovery fee or the government is in fact paying the fees for certain measures and after a while, as time goes on or the cost recovery fee goes up, the burden of cost is passed down to others in the industry. We want to ensure that does not happen in this case.

In terms of the health critic for the Liberal Party, on this side of the House we do not say “yes, sir” or “no, sir”. We have strong debates in caucus and we will on this issue. However, when the decision is made, we operate as a team, and certainly I will be supporting my health critic in this regard.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's comments on the bill. I know the member comes from Prince Edward Island and I know that, having been out there, a lot of people in Prince Edward Island actually use natural health products.

He will remember, because I know this member has been in the House for a while, that over the years there have been discussions about the Food and Drugs Act and how to regulate natural health products. After a number of machinations, natural health products, which were promised to be a third category, ended up as a sub-category of drugs. Indeed, they have been regulated as a sub-class of drugs.

I wonder if the member has heard concerns from his constituents, as I certainly have, about the regulation of natural health products under this proposed bill. In fact, therapeutic products replace drugs and natural health products, so NHPs equal drugs and drugs equal NHPs except for the regulations. However, the bill has very serious and strong seizure, forfeiture regulations attached to this. Does the hon. member think it is appropriate for drugs to be applied to natural health products, is it a concern for him as we are hearing from some people across the country?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, indeed, we are hearing, and we had a discussion here earlier among members on this side of the House, about the concern that is coming forward from people in the natural health products industry. In my overview of the bill, I do not think it hurts the natural health products industry or helps it at this point in time.

However, as the health critic said, it is extremely important when the bill gets to committee that witnesses be brought in and that they have their say. If there are concerns, they should be addressed. I think the natural health products industry is a growing industry. These are more natural products and they get us off the drug hook, if I can put it that way.

●(1610)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): A very brief question or comment. The hon. member for Yukon.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, actually, my question was not brief, so I guess I will ask the short part. I have two emails. The short one reads:

I am opposed to the police state powers in Bill C-51. I want my access to natural health products protected and there is something wrong with the state making personal health decisions for us. Health decisions are fundamental to our personal autonomy.

I wonder if the member has any comments to that email.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, it is a legitimate question and it is one that should be addressed when the bill gets to committee with witnesses in that regard.

However, on the food side, which I generally talked about, we do need the authority as a government regulator to move rapidly if there are concerns in the system or a small issue becomes magnified and mushrooms into a huge issue.

I would suggest that those concerns should be addressed at committee. I do not believe there are police state powers in the bill.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to second reading stage of Bill C-51 to amend the Food and Drugs Act. We know this act has been around for 40 years and that not too many changes have been made to it with respect to food and drug safety.

Bill C-51 bears a strong resemblance and is closely related to Bill C-52, which seeks to better monitor products on the market and reassure the public about product safety.

Here the government is taking things a bit further. It wants to cover other products, including pharmacological products, and look at pharmacovigilance.

Why does the government want to modernize this act? Because the public is quite worried. In the past few months and years, it has come to our attention that some products are harmful to our health. Certain drugs have adverse effects causing death.

For example, there is Singulair produced by Merck Frosst. This is an asthma drug that causes suicidal ideation. Champix, an anti-smoking drug produced by Pfizer, also causes suicidal ideation and depression. What is more, anti-psychotic drugs for children apparently cause obesity. These are some of the harmful effects of taking those drugs.

More and more people are worried about some of the drugs on the market. Some consumer products, such as children's toys or toothpaste from South Africa, also contain toxic substances. Other products contain mercury. The government is introducing this bill, which it was asked to do, to reassure the public about drug safety.

The minister has been asked about this a number of times. In 2006, the Auditor General issued a scathing report saying the government should make some changes. The lack of control by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency was among the Auditor General's many criticisms. Even that agency admits that unsafe products may be found on the shelves and that the public has cause for concern.

Will the bill properly respond to this situation and ensure food and drug safety?

The minister probably wants to reassure citizens with his bill. The purpose of Bill C-52 is to increase the industry's accountability with regard to the food supply. The government may also require that

Government Orders

food safety monitoring be implemented. To that end, it gives the minister the authority to conduct inspections at any time. It will also require the industry to report the adverse effects of consuming certain foods. It also provides for a tracing system not just for foods but also for cosmetics and therapeutic products.

Is this the right approach? The objectives are laudable. How will it be done? We know that a whole set of regulations will come after the bill. However, today, we cannot discuss the regulations because they are not available. We hope that they will be provided when the bill is studied in committee. With regard to the Assisted Human Reproduction Act, passed in 2004, only one regulation was submitted to committee review and we are still waiting for the regulations. We hope that the regulations will follow on the heels of the bill so that they may be debated in committee.

Will the government meet the expectations of Canadians?

• (1615)

In response to the fears surrounding the safety of food and therapeutic products, the Auditor General was headed in the right direction when she sounded the alarm for the government by asking it to increase human resources and particularly to provide funding for inspections.

We need only think of natural products, for example. We know that there are between 33,000 and 40,000 products waiting for inspection in order to be licensed because of the shortage of inspectors. This applies not just to natural products but in particular to foods and consumer products. The inspectors quite often do not have the requisite training to properly inspect all these products.

There was a call for better training for staff and better human resources. I am afraid that this objective is not met by this bill. We can see that resources are lacking, as I was saying. Concerns about these shortcomings were expressed not only by the Auditor General but also by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Today, Bill C-51 goes one step further. In committee, we are studying aspects of post-market monitoring and pharmacovigilance. Over the past few months, we have met with experts and witnesses. We would have hoped to see Bill C-51 drafted along the lines that the committee suggested to the minister after it received recommendations from experts. However, he got a little ahead of the committee's work, and there was some duplication.

We are now considering this bill at second reading. We will vote in favour of the bill because we want it to be referred to committee for further study. That means that we will have to invite the same number of people, the same experts, to come tell us what they think about this bill. We would have hoped that the minister would have waited for our amendments and recommendations.

Government Orders

That is not what happened, so we hope that the minister will be open to some amendments to the bill in areas where he did not take into account all the concerns of the witnesses who appeared before the committee. We hope that the government will be open to these amendments. I am sure that amendments will be proposed, because the bill does not adequately address the issue of food and therapeutic product safety.

I would also like to talk about adverse drug reactions, which the bill addresses. Various experts commented on this and clarified things for us. That is what we would have liked to pass on to the minister before this bill was introduced. For example, consider hospitals' obligation to report on adverse drug effects, as set out in the bill. Many witnesses told us that that might not be the best way to go. Currently, between 1% and 10% of adverse effects are reported. Is the government hoping that by introducing this measure, that incidence will go up? Probably.

We would like to see greater interest in the reporting of adverse effects, but not just any old way. Some witnesses told us that hospitals may not have appropriate structures in place to fulfill this obligation. It might be too much red tape.

I do not know what kind of clarification the minister will provide on this issue. Regardless, we would have hoped to have had an opportunity to submit our recommendations after analyzing all of the testimony.

As I was saying, the bill also seeks to create a register of adverse reactions.

• (1620)

We wonder about the reporting of serious and rare adverse reactions, but especially about how this information will be passed on so that health professionals are kept abreast of information from the adverse reaction register. The frequency of common adverse reactions is already known because of clinical trials. According to some witnesses, what is important is what we do not know, the unknown reactions.

With regard to mandatory reporting by hospitals, as I said, since all adverse reactions will have to be reported, not just unknown and more serious reactions, hospital pharmacists are afraid their workload will increase significantly. Should the emphasis be on the quantity or the quality of adverse reaction reports? An increase in the number of reports could dilute the most valuable information.

A number of witnesses told us that the focus should be on unexpected adverse reactions. Is the frequency of an adverse reaction important? These are questions we are still asking ourselves in committee. We believe that this issue has not yet been resolved. That is why we are going to question the government about this in committee.

For example, one witness, Bruce Carleton, a senior clinician scientist from the University of British Columbia and B.C. Children's Hospital, suggests looking at human genetics and drug biotransformation. According to Dr. Carleton, drug reactions have a genetic basis. If further genetic research were conducted, it would be possible to predict and avoid adverse drug reactions.

This is an indication of the complexity of detecting adverse reactions. We would have liked to see a more innovative, proactive approach that goes beyond just adverse drug reaction reporting. As I said, this is known as pharmacogenomics.

One of the major concerns we had in committee about the creation of a register of adverse effects and adverse reaction reporting by hospitals pertains to the method of post-market monitoring. As I said earlier, the effectiveness of post-market monitoring will depend on how the register of adverse drug effects is structured and on the effectiveness of feedback from health professionals, including pharmacists and physicians.

It is not enough to simply create registers and collect data. In her testimony on April 10, the Auditor General said that there were weaknesses in the analysis and interpretation of adverse events, and there was no proactive system to identify patterns that could signal a serious safety concern.

The committee's work could have enlightened the minister about this bill. As I was saying earlier, we would have liked for him to wait for our reactions and our recommendations after our three-month-long analysis on pharmacovigilance. Some witnesses also suggested that an independent evaluation board be created.

What about that? Will the bill cover that? We know that clinical trials are done by the manufacturers, and that often, a number of adverse effects are known, but are not revealed and the drug is put on the market. We would have liked to see an independent evaluation board, and a number of witnesses agreed.

The life cycle of a drug will supposedly be extended, but we would like this to be done not only by manufacturers, but also by an independent evaluation board throughout the life cycle of the drug. We know that drugs are often tested on certain patients, but other groups of people have not been tested—for example children and seniors—and often, these drugs have serious adverse effects if they are used.

• (1625)

The creation of a research centre of excellence, in partnership with our universities, has also been suggested. This centre could engage in pharmacoepidemiology studies that would be required by law and funded by the industry, but not conducted by the industry, which is currently the case. Another guide was suggested, one that would be much more proactive and independent in relation to the pharmaceutical industry.

Any mandatory adverse reaction report will be ineffective if not dealt with properly. That is more or less the conclusion reached by several witnesses who want the government to do something about this. Will Bill C-51 address all those concerns?

For now, as I said earlier, some drugs have been taken off the market, but they could have been not put on the market right away in the first place. The industry could have waited for further clinical trials to be done.

There are also fears that there is an attempt to shorten the process before a drug is put on the market. There are some fears about the life cycle of the drug and following it after it goes on the market. That is a step in the right direction, but there is also a fear that this would shorten the period before the certification of clinical trials. We heard this from several witnesses. Thus, the life cycle of a drug should not be an excuse for premarketing studies to be reduced nor for the door to be opened to such a possibility.

A number of witnesses have told us that they would like the minister to be open to certain amendments they would like to see made to this bill. It is hoped that the minister and this government will be open to the decision made during clause by clause consideration of the bill.

As I was saying earlier, the regulations are not yet available. Will they be satisfactory? It is hard to say. It is rather a blank cheque right now. We know that the regulation will give life to the bill.

The vote here in Parliament will send the bill to committee, as I think all hon. members want to address it. Work will be done in committee.

Nonetheless, we hope—I am saying this again because I do not want anyone to forget it—that the minister will be open to the various voices that have been heard. For three months, we have been studying the drug monitoring program and the new life cycle for drugs, which takes a different approach, namely that trials continue after the drug is put on the market, in the interest of human safety.

For example, we know that some people have died after taking certain drugs. We also know that often, for genetic reasons, some drugs should not be given to certain patients. There needs to be openness in order to better address this whole issue. We have to take into account all the problems we have in properly understanding the effects of drugs on patients, those who use these drugs.

Labelling was also discussed. Warnings have to be issued, for example, if a person is sick and there is a contraindication to taking a certain drug. We would hope that the minister is open to that and that this will address the entire problem.

We are in the process of reviewing this approach. Given the openness of the parliamentary secretary, who sits on our committee, he can relay the questions to the minister. We are counting on his openness in this matter and we hope he will be proactive and sympathetic to our demands.

• (1630)

[English]

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the New Democratic Party caucus also has concerns with regard to this legislation, specifically in the areas she addressed, and that is the safety of drugs and the shortcuts that can be taken in clinical trials.

I remind everyone that some years back the Liberals closed Health Canada drug labs and entered into what they called partnerships

Government Orders

between drugs companies and Health Canada. That activity has compelled the NDP to take a very close look because it would seem to compromise the safety of some products.

Could the member opposite comment on that? Does she see a need to return to a more rigorous Health Canada review?

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

We are in the process of looking at pharmacovigilance, and a number of witnesses came to tell us that they would like to have an independent board. We hope that the government also wants to extend the life cycle when it comes to the safety of a pharmaceutical product.

We would like an independent body with the authority to oversee the products on the market. Witnesses told us that they do not want to decrease the amount of time required for clinical trials of drugs before they are put on the market. They also hope that an independent body will then be able to monitor these drugs.

Some drugs are subject to clinical trials, but their adverse effects are often kept secret. They are not known. How is it possible, for example, that 51% of drugs present serious side effects after being put on the market? Would it not be good for an independent body to also have the oversight on these clinical trials, instead of leaving it to private enterprise?

[English]

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary for Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I assure the member that there are no shortcuts when it comes to clinical trials. In fact, the bill, through the life cycle approach, is much more effective in ensuring the safety of Canadians because it would allow the government to monitor the products after they reach the market.

I will also address a concern raised by the Bloc. Proactive measures have been taken by the minister and the government. It has been demonstrated with the presentation of Bills C-51 and C-52. It has been demonstrated again in budget 2008 in which \$113 million has been invested to ensure that we will have a food and consumer safety action plan that is well funded.

Will the member agree that a life cycle approach is the right way to go and that it is important for the Minister of Health to have the ability, in rare but extreme cases, to remove a product off the shelf? Those are really the main points of the bill. I hope the member will be open to accepting that the government is on the right track without predetermining, what is so often the case, negativity.

Does the member agree with the life cycle approach and mandatory recall, if necessary?

• (1635)

[Translation]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Mr. Speaker, I will reply to the Parliamentary Secretary for Health.

Government Orders

I am not negative; I am quite open. It is not about the life cycle approach. We have to look at the life cycle of a drug so that it is analyzed and tested even after being put on the market. I am saying that there are certain fears.

I believe that in a democracy we can express these fears. To show our good faith, we will vote for the bill to be sent to committee. My intention is not to be negative. It may be a good idea, but is it the best idea? Perhaps the intentions are good. The intention is still there. However, perhaps some amendments could be introduced. The minister may find that it is a good idea to have certain safeguards, for example.

We are worried about the criteria from the International Conference on Harmonization of Technical Requirements. We know very well that it wishes to reduce regulation. It would like to shorten the approval process for drugs and lower standards of protection in order to reduce drug development costs and the time required to bring drugs to market.

It is well known that Health Canada collaborates with this organization. Therefore, we simply want to establish certain safeguards. I believe that one of our responsibilities when studying the bill is to shed some light and ensure that we all understand what the witnesses have come to tell us.

[*English*]

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I know government representatives are in the lobby watching this on TV. I would ask if the department could answer my two emails in writing, the one I referred to in my last question and the one I will read now. I also would like the member to answer these questions as well.

The email states:

The consequences of this Bill from, what I can understand, are far reaching. The search and seizure, as well as the fine possibilities are frankly scary. I feel that this Bill could be trying to limit our access to natural food products and potentially put natural food stores out of business. In these days of recession, this is hardly time to be putting legitimate businesses into receivership, not to mention the risk to Canadian rights and freedoms.

Here are my questions:

Will this new law be used to abuse and punish special interest groups, minorities, religious groups or others?

Why do bureaucrats want to bypass Parliament and Senate's approval to create new laws?

Why do bureaucrats want seizure warrants without judge approval?

With fines being increased a 1000 times, and seizing authority without a warrant, is Bill C-51 meant to bankrupt and silence its target audience?

Could the member provide some answers for my constituent who sent this email to me?

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christiane Gagnon: Mr. Speaker, I believe that the goal of this bill is to reassure the public about food safety, the safety of therapeutic products and the safety of products for sale on the market to ensure that they do not contain toxic elements.

The industry must therefore conform to certain standards. We currently import many products from other countries that may not have the same standards as Canada does. We need to strike a balance with the viability of a company.

In the newspapers over the past number of months, we have seen recalls for toys and medications that put many peoples' lives in danger. In some cases, people did die. In my opinion, a balance must be struck. As the member said, if searches are conducted without a judge's approval, we should look at this in committee.

In my opinion, when a company puts peoples' lives in danger, we have to put the safety of people before the viability of a company that has been delinquent in terms of standards, regulations and the law. I believe this protects us.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): 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 Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Private Lumber Producers; the hon. member for Kitchener Centre, Ethics.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to join in the first round of debate on Bill C-51, a bill to amend, in large measure, the Food and Drugs Act.

I bring to this debate a lot of skepticism but it is a healthy dose of skepticism based on the history of this whole aspect of Health Canada and our regulatory regime in Canada.

It will be no surprise to the House to learn that this is the fifth attempt by government in the last decade to overhaul the Food and Drugs Act. Four times before the Liberals attempted to do so and each time they failed. Why? They failed because the community spoke up and demanded more accountability from government and much clearer answers around accountability and regulatory authority.

Members will recall Bill C-80, a draft piece of legislation that was supposed to do much of what we have before us today. That bill was supposedly attempting to modernize our food and drug provisions, bring us into the 21st century and bring our rules and our regulations in line with modern day science.

It did not take too long for Canadians to quickly figure out that this was a ruse. It was an attempt to make Canadians believe the government would be on their side but was in fact loosening its hold over regulations, minimizing its role and moving us away from what has been an entrenched part of our history, and that is a bill that regulates the safety of food and drugs in such a serious manner that it is part of the Criminal Code.

That legislation operated on the basis of the do no harm principle, the precautionary principle, which means that we do not allow products on the market unless there is evidence that they are safe beyond a reasonable doubt. That is the do no harm principle. It is not the buyer beware principle. It is not the risk management model that we have seen with the Liberals before and with the Conservatives today.

Government Orders

There is a marked difference between the do no harm principle and the risk management model. Do no harm means that we put people and safety first. The risk management model means that we can only go so far in ensuring Canadians' safety so we will allow the products on the market and then we will see what happens. It will be up to individual Canadians to determine whether or not it is worth taking the risk. It will be up to the corporations that produce the products to regulate themselves and decide if they are in line with the standards on paper.

The risk management model is not a proactive regulatory model that puts the needs and concerns of Canadians first. It is a model that puts the needs of big pharma, large corporations and global capital forces ahead of ordinary citizens. It is a model that makes guinea pigs out of Canadians.

We have had our share of offering up people as guinea pigs for large pharmaceutical corporations. I do not need to tell the House about the incidents in our past, especially when women were treated as guinea pigs. Thalidomide comes to mind as does Depo-Provera, breast implants and the list goes on.

•(1645)

We need to ask ourselves some questions. If we cut through all the rhetoric and tough talk about putting safety first and modernizing our system, are we better off? Are we any closer to the kind of system that Canadians thought we had and expected to have, which was abandoned by the Liberals?

It was abandoned when, in 1997, the former minister of health, Allan Rock, in his first gesture as minister of health, killed the federal drug laboratory, the only independent federal research lab in this country for testing on a post-market surveillance basis. It tested whether drugs that were on the market were safe and whether there were any negative consequences when that drug was combined with certain foods, other drugs or natural health products. It was a lab that performed a very important safety function in our country.

That was the beginning of a whole string of actions taken by the then minister of health, Allan Rock, and subsequent Liberal ministers of health to dismantle our regulatory system and move us away from the do no harm model toward a system where corporations pay for their drug approval processes. The bulk of the fees for our drug approval process comes from the corporations themselves.

Scientists at Health Canada have seen numerous incidents and they said that enough was enough. I think of Dr. Michèle Brill-Edwards who spoke up about being cornered to approve something she thought was not safe. She had to leave Health Canada to have any sense of integrity intact.

There were many others. Who can forget the whole group of veterinary scientists who stood tall about the tampering with food products and the adulteration and modification of veterinarian drugs? They were chastised, disciplined and lambasted by the Liberal government.

Whatever happened to the government being a bastion of independent, objective science that operated on the basis of the constituents it is supposed to serve? Whatever happened to government for the people, by the people and of the people?

Nowhere is this more important than when it comes to the food we eat, the drugs we take because of medical conditions and the water we drink to sustain us and yet in those areas the government has abandoned us in large measure.

Today we are supposed to believe that the Conservative Government of Canada has such integrity, courage and vision that it is offering us a blueprint for a do no harm precautionary model around drugs and food. I bring to this debate a dose of healthy skepticism because I have seen nothing from the Conservatives to date that leads me to believe that the government is on the side of ordinary Canadian families and is not on the side, first and foremost, of the big corporations and their profit margins.

I have not seen that when it comes to housing, education, health care, women's equality, people with disabilities, the environment, jobs and child care. I have not yet seen the government stand up for Canadians

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Nor will we.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: My colleague from London—Fanshawe says, “Nor will we”. That is why I bring to this debate my concerns.

However, that is not to say that there are not some good provisions in this bill. I do recognize that the government has moved a significant distance from the days of the Liberals. Ironically, this legislation is more proactive than the Liberals ever presented to this House. However, it still has lots of problems and it still does not mean we will be supporting it but it is a step forward.

•(1650)

I would like to point to a couple of those initiatives. The bill has provisions for the recall of drugs and food products that have contaminants. The bill sets out hefty fines for corporations that do not reveal problems or side effects with drugs. There is new emphasis in this bill around ensuring that government has the tools to protect Canadians. I commend the government for those initiatives and I support those aspects of the bill that take us forward toward what I consider fundamental to this whole debate and that is a do no harm approach when it comes to food and drugs.

However, beneath those specific clauses and the fine words of the press release that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Health presented to Canadians about safety first, there are enough concerns to make me and others suspicious of what the government is all about and where it is trying to lead us.

We only need to look at a couple of the areas that we have heard about to date. I hear some of my colleagues on the Conservative benches chuckling. I do not think they would chuckle if they were to listen to the words of Dr. Barbara Mintzes, who has brought to the attention of the House a clause in the bill that appears to move the government closer to direct to consumer advertising. That is so well documented that some of the officials have already said that they acknowledge that is a problem and maybe it needs to be addressed.

Government Orders

Why is that important? Do we want to see another \$6.3 billion added to our pharmacare bill? Do we want to see big pharma pushing their drugs on Canadians without scientific basis? Do we want to see full-blown advertising in this country, as is the case in the United States?

Is it not enough that we have this grey area where drug companies can find a loophole and advertise all they want the lifestyle and create the appearance of something helping this person without naming the drug. We need only to look at the Viagra ads. They are pretty clear and impressive and they have led to all kinds of people demanding prescriptions for certain drugs from their doctors without necessarily a basis in terms of either their condition or the science available.

Direct to consumer advertising is just one of the problems in the bill that will make us very cautious about supporting it. Unless this loophole is closed and there is a firm commitment from the government to absolutely close the door to direct to consumer advertising, which not only means where we are today but going back and closing the door in terms of the loophole, there is no way in the world we should support the bill because of the ramifications it would have for our entire health care system, a system where costs for pharmaceuticals are now outstripping all other aspects of the system.

I will give another example. We have heard mentioned in the Chamber today the words “lifecycle approach” to drug surveillance or “progressive licensing”. It all sounds great, innovative and progressive but we need to realize that underneath it all there could very well be an agenda to speed up the approval of drugs at the front end and create the illusion of safety or the reality of safety at the other end.

However, what does it matter when we have already digested a drug that is not safe and has produced serious health consequences? Can it be that the government has listened to the drug companies when they say that they would rather deal with expensive lawsuits and pay out big money after being sued than to put in the money that is needed at the front end to ensure that the drugs are safe in the first place?

• (1655)

The real question we have to ask today is the one Alan Cassels and others asked in the media when the bill was released. Would this bill prevent another Vioxx? Would it stop a situation where hundreds of thousands of people are dying because they took a drug without realizing there were serious side effects unrelated to the condition for which they were taking it? What in this bill would stop that? Where is the inspection force? Where is the apparatus? Where is the infrastructure to make that happen? Where is the commitment from the government to deal with contaminated drugs coming into this country? How will the government handle another heparin, a contaminated drug from China? Is it prepared to send inspection officers to manufacturers in China? Is it prepared to put surveillance officers at the border? Is it prepared to take seriously the side effects that Canadians talk about? Is it prepared to act the minute there are serious reactions to drugs?

I hope that is the case. I do not know if that is the case. I do not know if this bill would do that. I want to keep an open mind about

that. When we get to committee, I want to ask those questions. Witnesses will testify. We are going to seriously study that aspect. The fundamental bottom line when it comes to this bill is, is it going to stop another Vioxx? That is the question. How will it do it? Will it do it in time? Will it really make drug companies provide the information that they may have held in secret which may reveal something? Would it have been able to get out of Merck Frosst the information around Vioxx that it kept secret that would have prevented hundreds of thousands of deaths?

Those are two areas of concern. There are others.

We have received hundreds of letters from people concerned about natural health products. We have been inundated with letters and communications expressing concern about this bill and whether or not there is a hidden agenda to bring natural health products under the rubric of drugs, after the huge battle we have had in this House for a decade to have a separate category for natural health products. This is something that the Conservatives took up with a vengeance some 10 years ago, which led to a health committee discussion and a report, which led to the establishment of a third category, which led to some reasonable approach to dealing with natural health products. Unfortunately, both the Liberals and the Conservatives since then have botched the whole plan. We now have hundreds of thousands of natural health products waiting in line to be assessed and licensed.

The question here is, is this a way to get around that? Is this an attempt to deal with the backlog like we have seen with immigration? Perhaps it is similar to the budget implementation bill and slipping immigration into that bill. We do not know.

Needless to say, when it comes to this area, there is nothing more important than how we protect people in terms of the drugs and the medications they have to take and the food they have to eat. It is the job of government to put safety first, to ensure that products on the market are as safe as possible. That means a proactive government, tough regulations, adequate resources, a government with the will to make safety fundamental and to put people before drug profits.

• (1700)

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was astounded to listen to the member's presentation and the one from the Bloc as well. I have come to the conclusion that maybe we should have a special law that prohibits big corporations from distributing and selling prescription drugs to NDP members and their supporters, and maybe Bloc members as well, because we would not them to take something they feel is unscientific and would not have any benefit.

Government Orders

Let us be clear. For every drug cleared through the clinical trial process, there are literally thousands of drugs that do not get to first base. This is not a slam dunk process and it costs an awful lot of money. There are a lot of other safeguards. The EU has a clinical process that is very tough. The Japanese have one that is very tough. The Americans have one that is very tough. If manufacturers fail in the United States, they get through the entire process and get a drug approved but if they make a mistake, they can be financially ruined by the American tort system.

However, for members of this House to say that we are just allowing drugs on to market without any due diligence or any comprehension for public safety and that there is some great conspiracy between members of Parliament and the drug companies to foist all these poisonous and toxic drugs on people is total nonsense. I cannot believe the member actually believes that. I do not want to disagree too strongly with her opinion because it might insinuate that I am challenging her intelligence.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Speaker, this is a very serious matter, not a laughing matter. It has to be debated in the context of the health and well-being of Canadians. I make my comments with all seriousness and based on significant input from many Canadians.

As I also said, we will pursue every one of those concerns at committee to determine the legitimacy. No one is making generalizations without basis in fact. No one is casting aspersions without any reason.

We are here today with one of the most important pieces of legislation this Parliament has seen in a long time. We are questioning on the basis of evidence that has been provided to us. I do not need to tell anyone how many Canadian lives are put at risk every day because we do not have an adequate safety system right now. All I have to do is read through the papers and list off numerous cases.

Maybe the member is interested in this one, if he is not interested in some of the others. It is a recall order for a product for erectile dysfunction. This is Libidus, an unauthorized product promoted on the manufacturer's website as treating erectile dysfunction, saying it does not produce health risks. Well it does. Where is the government?

How about Evra, a birth control product for women, a patch that produces blood clot risks. Why is that? Why are young women at risk right now as we speak?

What about the drug to quit smoking that came out not too long ago, Champix, which produces all kinds of psychiatric side effects?

What about as I mentioned, heparin, in which contaminants were found after production in China?

What about all of these examples? Does it not matter? Should Canadians not feel safe? Is that not what we are here for? It is not to put people at the will of the marketplace and let them take chances. It is about trusting government, and if we cannot trust government when it comes to the safety of the drugs we have to take and the food we have to eat, then when can we trust government?

● (1705)

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary for Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unlike my colleague from Prince Albert, I actually love the loony left. The loony left allows average Canadians to see the ridiculousness of the arguments. I commend the member on the passion of her case, but I think the member knows that she is mistaken on numerous points including the suggestion that products or drugs coming onto the market are less safe. This bill does not deal with that. The drugs that have come onto the market are under the same regime with or without this bill. That is important for the member to know.

On the issue of direct consumer advertising, the member also knows that this government is in court to prevent direct advertising of pharmaceuticals to the Canadian market. The member knows that and this bill in fact strengthens the government's position on that.

I would also like to read to the member proposed section 2.3 of the bill:

The purpose of this Act is to protect and promote the health and safety of the public and encourage accurate and consistent product representation by prohibiting and regulating certain activities in relation to foods, therapeutic products and cosmetics.

We can see that the intent is in the best interests of Canadians. I would ask the member to put aside the worries about the black helicopters, put away the tinfoil hats and come to committee with an open mind. All the other parties are. We are. If there are reasonable suggestions for amendment, we will listen to them. Will the member come to committee with an open mind and listen to the facts and read the bill for what it is, an improvement to the health and safety of Canadians?

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Speaker, you will know that I have already said that we come to this whole process with an open spirit, wanting to know if in fact the substance of the bill meets the rhetoric of the government. We enter the process willingly and with open minds.

I just wish the hon. member were open to some of the concerns being raised because when he suggests that this is about the loony left speaking, he is insulting thousands of Canadians across the country who are raising concerns. He is actually casting aspersions on Dr. Mary Wiktorowicz. He is casting aspersions on Joel Lexchin, on Dr. Barbara Mintzes, on Dr. Steve Morgan and Alan Cassels, many people who came to our committee and expressed their concerns. So, I hope he is open and I hope he is willing to actually amend the bill when those concerns have been substantiated.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, another one upon whom the Conservatives could have cast aspersions is one of my constituents who asked questions. I wanted to ask the government, but it is not putting up any speakers, just the minister who introduced the bill, so I cannot ask the questions. Maybe the member could answer just three concerns that this constituent put forward.

Government Orders

Will this new law be used to abuse and punish special interest groups, minorities, religious groups or others? Why do the bureaucrats want seizure warrants without judge approval? With fines being increased a thousand times and seizing authority without a warrant, is Bill C-51 meant to bankrupt and silence its target audience?

• (1710)

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Speaker, those are all questions that need to be addressed by the government and vetted at committee. I certainly hope the member will encourage those who have raised these concerns to present them in writing to the committee or in fact to attend our committee hearings.

I hope that we will have a wide open, serious, indepth review of the bill in terms of all of its aspects, because when it comes to judicial oversight and RCMP investigations, as he has mentioned, these are very serious issues. When we are talking about direct to consumer advertising, progressive licensing, natural health products, oversight, investigative forces and discretionary powers, all of those issues are critically important in an area of such fundamental importance.

I look forward to a very serious debate and indepth discussion on this bill.

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary for Health, CPC): I want to assure you, Mr. Speaker, that when I was referring to the loony left, I was only referring to the members I sit beside on my right. I note that you are not one of those members, Mr. Speaker.

Canadians want their government to do the best job possible to ensure the safety of foods, health and consumer products. We committed to meeting this expectation in the Speech from the Throne. The bill that we are now debating is an important part of meeting that commitment. It is a major component of the food and consumer safety action plan, which the Prime Minister announced in December.

The plan seeks to modernize and strengthen our food, consumer and health products safety system. It is a plan that is now supported by a two year funding commitment of \$113 million, announced in budget 2008. It is a plan which shows that the government is taking product safety seriously and is taking action.

Our plan takes a new approach to food and product safety, based on active prevention to stop as many problems as possible before they occur, targeted oversight so the government can keep a closer watch over the products that pose a higher risk to health and safety, and a rapid response so that we can take action more quickly and effectively to the problems that do occur.

Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

The next step in the plan is updating our product safety legislation. As a result, Bill C-51, An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act, is now before the House. It has become very clear to the government that the Food and Drugs Act needs to be modernized. The act is now more than 50 years old and it has simply not kept pace with modern expectations or standards.

Given the significance of the task, our effort has required discussions with stakeholders. We have heard that it is not good enough for our laws to focus largely on one stage in the health products life cycle. Yes, it certainly makes sense to assess health products carefully before they reach market, and today we are doing that vigorously. Bill C-51 does not propose to change that.

Instead, it seeks tools to conduct ongoing assessments of risks and benefits, even after the product is in use by Canadians. Instead of only focusing on products before they reach Canadians, we want to require companies to provide information throughout a health products' full life cycle.

Under the bill, and every step of the way, we will be able to ask whether a product's risks outweigh the benefits. This means that consumers and health professionals will have access to more and better information. They will be able to make better informed decisions about the safety and the use of the products.

Second, it seeks to anchor the safety planning in law. The reality is that the vast majority of companies already do plan for safety. They know it is just good, responsible business to do so, and with more information made available, it will be possible to update plans for improving safety to reflect new data or emerging concerns.

With Bill C-51, the government will have greater information. With greater knowledge we can work with companies and health professionals to better protect the safety of all Canadians.

With provisions that support greater openness and transparency in the regulatory system, Canadians can access the information they need about a product, the risks and the benefits, to ensure that they are making informed choices for themselves and their families.

We can use greater knowledge to target our oversight and we can use it to learn about problems as early as possible to respond more rapidly to better safeguard the health of Canadians.

• (1715)

This bill also accounts for the fact that today we receive many products from abroad. As a result, it would provide for modern inspection authorities and new strategies to oversee the safety of imported products. This focus on prevention is critical. Our focus on information is also essential to supporting rapid responses by the government when problems do occur.

Through Bill C-51 we are seeking the power to order a recall of a product that poses a safety threat. I want to mention one example of safety risks, what experts call "adverse drug reactions". That is the health system term for people reacting negatively to a drug.

Government Orders

Under Bill C-51 we are seeking the authority to work with the provinces and territories to enhance the reporting of adverse drug reactions from hospitals. This would go a long way in helping detect safety problems earlier and the sooner we know, the more rapidly we can respond and better protect Canadians from unsafe health products.

I do not want to suggest that the modernization of the Food and Drugs Act will mean a night and day kind of change for most health products or companies. They do a good and reasonable job now. The vast majority of industry takes consumer safety very seriously. It is only a small percentage that acts irresponsibly and this is who we seek to protect Canadians from. In the process, we will allow law-abiding Canadian businesses to compete on a more level playing field and we will also target those who act irresponsibly with steep penalties.

Today, a serious incident under the Food and Drugs Act can just receive a \$5,000 fine. Under Bill C-51, we are seeking to raise that up to \$5 million because the health of Canadians is worth it.

The Government of Canada is taking consumer safety seriously and taking action. Many partners across the health system share our commitment to this direction, including consumer representatives. We believe all parties should support the direction set out in Bill C-51. I urge all of my colleagues on both sides of the House to support Bill C-51, so we can modernize the health and food product safety for Canadians.

We have all listened to the debate today and the health committee will have another opportunity to listen. The government will listen and, there is no doubt about it, the government will act to protect the health and safety of all Canadians.

• (1720)

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have just started debating this bill and I have received many emails from constituents and organizations that represent natural health products.

Because Bill C-51 would amend the Food and Drugs Act, and one really has to look at the Food and Drugs Act while looking through the bill, I want to raise just one of the concerns, which is that many natural health products that have been sold in Canada for decades would become unavailable and remaining products would cost much more under clauses 13 and 18.7 of the bill.

Clause 8 replaces sections 17 to 21 of the act, but clause 13 states:

No person shall conduct a controlled activity unless they are authorized by an establishment licence to do so.

It creates now, I believe, a licensing requirement. I do not see the details on licensing. I assume that licensing is either included under the Food and Drugs Act, in the appendices or regulations, but the member will appreciate when someone makes that assertion, there must be an answer. If the allegation is that these products will not be available because they will require a licence, and the provisions of getting a licence may be so onerous, lengthy or specific, that it may in fact result in there not being the availability of certain natural health products.

I wonder if the parliamentary secretary is aware of that issue and whether he can provide an answer to the concerns of those who rely on these products.

Mr. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, this bill looks at the risk profile of particular products and if the risk is low there is nothing to worry about. The only time that there will be something to be concerned about is if the product is dangerous to Canadians.

If the product is dangerous to Canadians, there are going to be hefty fines and I think Canadians expect that. They expect the government to ensure that the products on the shelves are safe. I hope the member does not disagree with that.

There are many natural health products that are healthy, that improve the quality of people's lives. Those will be okay. It is the small percentage of products that harm or even kill people that we are concerned with.

Right now the minister does not have the ability to require that products be removed from shelves and the fine is a maximum of \$5,000. We do not think that \$5,000 is enough. That is why the maximum fine would be \$5 million. Canadians support that and Canadians support the government protecting Canadians.

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member knows which questions I am going to ask because I have already asked them, but the government did not have any members on the list so there was no one to ask and I am sure he has his answers ready.

The questions are from two constituents. The first one is basically worried about access to natural health products being protected and thinks that this bill gives police state powers in taking those away.

The other constituent is asking whether the new law will be used to abuse and punish special interest groups, minorities, religious groups or others and why do bureaucrats want to bypass Parliament's approval to create new laws? Why does it want seizure warrants without a judge's approval? With fines being increased a thousand times and seizing authority without a warrant, is the bill meant to bankrupt and silence its target audience?

I am sure the parliamentary secretary has well thought out answers.

Mr. Steven Fletcher: First of all, Mr. Speaker, to suggest that there is some sort of police state initiative does a disservice to the people who actually live in a police state. I just find that just over the top and not helpful to the debate. The only products that people will see affected are products that are dangerous to Canadians. If people put a product on the shelf or market a product that is dangerous to Canadians, they can expect to experience the full force of the law. Under this legislation, that includes a \$5 million potential penalty—

• (1725)

The Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry. I am going to have to interrupt the hon. parliamentary secretary. We want to resume debate, so that the member for Kildonan—St. Paul has some time.

The hon. member for Kildonan—St. Paul has the floor.

Private Members' Business

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to Bill C-51, an act proposing amendments to the Food and Drugs Act.

First, this proposed legislation is but one element of our government's action for meeting an important commitment.

In October's throne speech we committed to taking action on food and product safety to ensure Canadians had confidence in the quality and safety of what they buy.

Following this, the Prime Minister announced the food and consumer safety action plan last December. This is a comprehensive plan with the goal of modernizing and strengthening Canada's safety system for food, health and consumer products.

In February, budget 2008 invested \$113 million for two years to support the plan in meeting its purpose. Now we are taking the next steps by introducing important legislation.

Along with introducing the proposed new Canada consumer product safety act, we have also brought in Bill C-51 to amend the Food and Drugs Act. Taken together, these two complementary pieces of proposed legislation include measures that will further protect the health and safety of Canadians, and this bill is all about that.

They propose to do this by stressing: first, active prevention to stop as many problems as possible before they occur, second, targeted oversight so the government can keep a closer watch over products that pose a higher risk to health and safety; and third, rapid response so we can take action more quickly and effectively to problems that do occur.

I want to begin by noting upfront that despite the need to update it, how durable our Food and Drugs Act has been over many years. Let me provide a bit of history.

Although certain food laws were in place before Confederation, the first federal legislation dealing with the issue of food safety was enacted in 1874. It is interesting to note that the United States did not pass similar legislation until 1906.

Canada's 1874 law did not receive its main impetus from adulterated food. What apparently forced the legislation were the large quantities of grossly adulterated liquor being consumed. Parliament was besieged with requests to do something about the situation. Hence in January 1875 an Act to Prevent the Adulteration of Food, Drink and Drugs came into effect. In 1920, just in time for America's prohibition act and the roaring 20's, it was superseded by our Food and Drugs Act.

That the world has changed since the 1920s is certainly an understatement. In fact, it has changed a great deal since the 1950s when the act was last updated. While the act has proven resilient, it is now 50 years old and definitely in need of updating.

Our foods and health products now come from the four corners of the earth. Moreover, new technologies and production practices have radically changed the industry. It is also the case that consumers today are more health conscious and have higher expectations about the food and drugs they purchase.

While on the whole food quality has increased, incidents of contamination are by no means rare. Furthermore, production and technological advances have created new risks and challenges for food inspection and oversight mechanisms.

Today, however, modernizing our food safety system means adopting a more integrated and proactive approach. Moreover, any improvements made today should lead to more extensive information on food and drug risks being provided to the Canadian public. They should involve the food industry and the consumer as well as government in addressing risk. This only makes for greater safety. The proposed amendments should help streamline and provide more consistent regulatory mechanisms across all sectors.

Bill C-51 would do all of these things and more, and I will elaborate.

The government's proposed amendments will make the Food and Drugs Act much more proactive. Let us look, for example, at the amendments in the bill, focusing on the food regulatory system. They will permit us to focus on identifying where potential risks may be introduced in the food system and on taking more active steps to prevent food safety issues. Moreover, the amended act would extend its coverage prior to the point where food is actually sold. In fact, the amended act would apply to food from the moment it arrived in Canada to the point of sale. With these—

• (1730)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. member, but the time has expired. The hon. member has five minutes left in her time when the House returns to this bill.

It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE ACT

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ) moved that Bill C-513, An Act to amend the National Defence Act (foreign military mission), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am very proud today to debate Bill C-513, which I introduced on February 25.

This bill has to do with the process for deploying or placing Canadian armed forces on active service as part of foreign offensive missions. This bill would make the process for deploying our troops much more democratic.

Private Members' Business

We believe that the federal government should obtain the authorization of Parliament before deploying troops in foreign offensive missions. The deployment of troops is a government prerogative under the National Defence Act, but we think this act must be amended so that elected members determine whether or not Canada will participate in a foreign offensive mission. In fact, excluding parliamentarians from this decision amounts to a denial of democratic principles.

Let us look more closely at this bill. It amends sections 31 and 32 of the current National Defence Act, which govern troop deployment during foreign missions deemed offensive.

First, in section 31 we recognize the government's prerogative to place the Canadian Forces on active service. However, we amend this section so that the placing of the Canadian Forces on active service is subject to section 32, which we amend as follows.

First, the government must lay before the House a motion before sending Canadian troops on a foreign mission that includes or might include an offensive facet. This motion must be laid before the House within five days after the declaration of intention to place the Canadian Forces on active service is issued.

Second, once the motion is laid before the House of Commons, the House must immediately take up and consider the motion.

Third, the debate must not go longer than three hours, after which the Speaker must put the question.

Fourth, the placing of the Canadian Forces on active service takes effect only once the House of Commons has ratified the motion.

Currently, under these two sections of the National Defence Act, the power to place the Canadian Forces on active service is in the hands of the Governor in Council and therefore the government alone. The act also gives the government a great deal of latitude; in fact, the government can make such a decision when it sees fit. Moreover, Parliament has no responsibility for giving prior approval, although Parliament must be summoned within 10 days if it has been adjourned for more than 10 days.

Nothing in the current act requires the government to consult Parliament before deploying troops on offensive missions. I can give a good example of this. We remember the arrogance of the Liberal government under Jean Chrétien, who refused to hold a vote in the House on the deployment of 3,000 Canadian soldiers to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2006, despite repeated demands by the three opposition parties that the government hold a vote in the House on sending armed troops on offensive missions.

I therefore hope that I will have the near-unanimous support of this House, seeing as how at the time, the Conservative Party, the NDP and the Bloc were calling for a vote in the House.

I could give other examples regarding how the government sometimes consults Parliament and sometimes does not, as it pleases. The Korean war is a perfect example. The government did not seek the consent of Parliament before going into Korea.

● (1735)

Nevertheless, on June 30, 1950, the Prime Minister decided that Parliament could be consulted if new facts emerged. In the end,

Parliament never voted on the deployment of Canadian soldiers to Korea. However, if there had been legislation and if there had been an amendment to the legislation, Parliament would have been consulted before the government deployed troops to Korea. Members could have voted on whether or not they wanted Canada to go to war in Korea.

The Gulf war is another example. Because it was a UN-sanctioned multilateral action, like the Korean war, Canada did not have to declare war officially. The House was not able to vote on the matter before troops and ships were sent to the Persian Gulf; it was not consulted. On September 24, 1990, the Minister of National Defence tabled an order in the House to the effect that Canada was deploying troops and ships to that region. On October 23, 1990, the House passed a motion that supported sending military members, vessels and aircraft, but that motion was nothing more than approval after the deployment.

These examples clearly show that whether or not the government consults the House depends entirely on its own whims.

The bill that I am sponsoring today would free the House from the government's arbitrariness, regardless of the party in power. The government would not lose the power to deploy the Canadian Forces. Deployment would simply have to be approved by the House to take effect. After all, the government's power, like it or not, comes from Parliament. Parliamentarians are the ones who passed that legislation, and I believe that parliamentarians also have the power to amend it.

It is now 2008. I think it is high time we modernized this legislation by making it more democratic, by making the process of deploying troops abroad more democratic. Let us not forget that the decision to deploy troops abroad is a serious decision because it puts human lives in danger. Such decisions must not be taken lightly. They have a direct impact on men and women who risk their lives in foreign countries, who risk death.

It also has a major impact on the lives of these people, their families, their friends, their loved ones, and their community, which is directly affected when these people go away. It is not just about leaving a place, about leaving family and children behind. When the troops left for Afghanistan, we saw heartbreaking scenes of men and women leaving their children.

Regardless of the causes and the ideological reasons justifying deployment, we are making serious decisions here in the House when we decide to send the troops to fight in foreign countries.

We must not forget that it also has an impact on the people in the places to which our troops are deployed with their guns and weapons, regardless of the ideology participants are trying to protect. It has a major impact. Civilian populations endure invasions and the presence of foreign troops on their soil. Every day, women, men and children die. We have people being killed, but we also have people living in utter poverty because they are in a state of war.

It is our responsibility to protect our people and our soldiers, but it is also our responsibility to protect the civilian populations wherever we decide to get involved.

Private Members' Business

● (1740)

When troops are sent abroad to engage in war and take the offensive, there is a risk that these men and women might harm civilian populations. It is our responsibility to consider these casualties, what I would call terrible human losses.

Furthermore, I would say that war not only has a human and social impact, but an impact on society as a whole. We see this quite clearly in Quebec right now. The latest polls show that 70% of the population is completely opposed to our presence in Afghanistan. This has a major impact on the lives of these people, even if they do not have a brother, father, uncle, cousin, or mother serving in Afghanistan. Every day, when they turn on the television they see war and violence. Whether we like it or not we are fighting violence.

I do not believe in fighting violence with violence. It is not a good image for the country in question. I am talking about Canada. Perhaps one day we will be talking about Quebec, but Quebec will not go to war.

It is an image. I want to tell hon. members something. When I went to Lebanon during the Israeli-Lebanese crisis, people told me that Canada is a country of peace and human rights. It is a country that stands up for human rights. They wondered, "What is happening to Canada? Why did Canada take a unilateral position with Israel? What is going on?" We project an image and our troops project an image. But we, as elected representatives, have a message. We project an image and we have our soldiers project that image. If we make bad decisions, it reflects on our soldiers in Afghanistan, Lebanon or anywhere else. They are currently not in Lebanon, but if they were there or elsewhere, it is important to consider what is going on here.

We make the military decisions, but we are not the ones on the ground with the weapons. Other people have to go there with their weapons and deal with the consequences of our decisions. We have to make our decisions properly and democratically to at least have the support of our constituents for the decisions we make.

The people are never wrong. They can be fooled, but they are never wrong. When 70% of people say they do not want Canada to be in Afghanistan, that means something. We must listen. I think it is our duty to have the ability to be humble and realize that, even though we are here, we are not gods and we do not know everything. We are here to make difficult but important decisions and we must make them together. The decisions should not be made by just one side, by the government, and suddenly, we are all at war. No, such a decision should be made by everyone in this House and then we should bear the consequences of that decision together, because it is the people who will also have to bear them.

Sending troops overseas has a major economic impact. I am a caring woman. Since I see I have only a minute left, I will speed up.

Economically speaking, war is very expensive. There is a great deal of poverty in Canada. There are a million children living in poverty. It would be good to use this money to address or perhaps eliminate poverty, instead of investing it in weapons.

In closing, with Bill C-513, we hope to enshrine in legislate the government's obligation to obtain the assent of the House before

deploying troops overseas. We think this is a major democratic reform, and I strongly urge all members to vote in favour of this important bill.

● (1745)

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, two years ago, during the Lebanon crisis, the hon. member for Ahuntsic said the following during a committee hearing on August 1, 2006:

I understand what you're saying, but I have to wonder why it is American convoys are getting into southern Lebanon and managing to evacuate US or Australian nationals. Why is Canada unable to reach an agreement with Israel while at the same time, the US has managed to do so and send in convoys? [...] Summing up, I think Canada could follow the lead of the United States and go in and rescue these people.

I wonder how my hon. colleague can reconcile that understandable desire for rapid action in the case of a crisis with the bill that she is proposing before the House today. When we go into a war, even if it is to recuse people, we have no idea whether we are going to be offensive or defensive. So, I just wonder how she can reconcile her statement then with her bill now.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Mr. Speaker, I thank the minister for this question. This brings back painful memories of 2006.

As a member of the specially convened committee, I spoke to the then Minister of Foreign Affairs about this. In fact, in speaking to the people on site and the Red Cross representatives, I realized that American convoys were managing to get through areas under heavy bombardment. The Americans had agreements with Israel for safe corridors in order to move their nationals to the Canadian vessels moored outside Tyre.

Whether we like it or not, there was a need in that area: many Canadian citizens were trapped in the area; they were prisoners.

How did the United States manage to conclude agreements with Israel to obtain safe corridors, but we were unable to do so in order for our people to get to the port of Tyre and get on the ships? The minister acknowledged that there were many more Americans, Australians and other foreign nationals than Canadians on the Canadian ship.

We provide unilateral support to Israel but we cannot even manage to obtain some very small humanitarian corridors in order to get our people to our own ships. We have some work to do when we decide to repatriate our people. We have a great deal of work to do in this regard. I realize that the government was caught by surprise, but it should have taken action quickly, as did the Americans, French, Australians and others.

Private Members' Business

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to know what my colleague thinks about the impact the proposed changes would have on potentially extending the mission in Afghanistan past 2011.

• (1750)

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

I would be completely opposed to extending our presence in Afghanistan. In fact, I am in favour of immediately withdrawing our troops. That said, let us be honest—we must acknowledge that this government has asked the House a number of times to extend the mission, something the Liberals did not do. It should be acknowledged, but it is still at the government's own whim.

Now, if the act were changed, whatever government is in power would be obliged to go through this House to get a decision on whether or not we would be in Afghanistan. The decision made on the motion would be respected. I remember a time when we wondered whether a majority motion against extending our presence in Afghanistan would be respected by the government. That is another story.

What is happening now in Afghanistan is serious. We must think hard about our presence over there, because in my opinion, we have no business being there.

[English]

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, deploying military personnel to trouble spots around the world is one of the gravest decisions that the Government of Canada can make, or any government can make. Like every government before us, we take this responsibility very seriously because Canadian interests and values are at stake, and lives hang in the balance.

Canada has a history of being able to react rapidly in support of our allies, our international obligations, in support of freedom and human rights. The only two parties that have ever governed, or likely will ever govern this country, have taken the same basic approach. While this government wholeheartedly supports and promotes vigorous parliamentary oversight of Canadian military operations, this bill goes beyond oversight. Unfortunately, Bill C-513 would fundamentally change the relationship between the government and Parliament in critical areas related to national defence.

At issue here is the government's authority to act quickly and decisively in defence of Canada and Canadians, and in support of international peace and security. Aside from restricting the Crown's prerogative in vital areas of foreign and defence policy, the bill is poorly worded and simply unworkable in the real world. And the real world is where the Canadian Forces must operate.

If this bill were adopted, the safety and security of Canadians would be compromised. Moreover, Canada's standing as a reliable ally and our capacity to play a leadership role on the world stage would be diminished.

[Translation]

The government takes parliamentary oversight of military deployments seriously.

Since we came to power, we have twice held votes in this House on the future of the Afghan mission: in May 2006 and in March 2008.

The Afghanistan issue has also been raised on numerous occasions during oral question period and on opposition days.

At least a third of the members of Parliament from all parties took part in the five-day debate that led to the decision to extend the operation until 2011.

In addition, the committees of the House and Senate have studied the issues related to military deployments, including deployments in Afghanistan. To date, two parliamentary committees have issued reports on the Afghan mission, and a third committee is preparing a report.

The assistance we give these committees clearly shows how important our government believes their work is. Ministers and senior officials regularly appear before these committees.

We have organized visits to Afghanistan so that the members of these committees can see for themselves the extraordinary work Canadians are doing there. The government has benefited from the hard work and thoughtful recommendations of the parliamentary committees.

My colleagues and I are glad that a new committee of the House has been set up to look at the mission in Afghanistan.

I would like to say that in addition to its oversight role, Parliament controls the public purse. Parliament has voted the funds needed for the Afghan mission and, ultimately, any other Canadian Forces operation.

No government could take part in a military operation as important as the mission in Afghanistan without the support of this House.

• (1755)

[English]

In short, the means exist for parliamentary oversight of Canadian Forces deployments abroad. And it is important that the tools available for the exercise of oversight be coherent. The proposed legislation does not meet that criteria.

The proposed legislation is unworkable. As written, the bill would require the government to receive Parliament's approval before it could put members of the Canadian Forces on active service and deploy them outside Canada on an operation with an "offensive facet".

The term "active service" is used incorrectly in the proposed legislation. There is no legal requirement to put Canadian Forces members on active service when they are operationally deployed abroad. The placement of Canadian Forces members on active service simply allows the Canadian Forces to retain members in the service if required and allows service tribunals to impose more severe sentences in respect to some service offences.

Private Members' Business

Also, from a legal and military perspective, the phrase “offensive facet” is so ill-defined that it is essentially meaningless. When we deploy on an operation such as Afghanistan, or any peacekeeping operation that we have embarked on in the past, we have no idea about whether it is offensive or defensive. We may think we are leaving on a defensive operation, but it may turn offensive in a heartbeat.

In the modern security environment, lines can be blurred between what constitutes an offensive or defensive role. Would we wish to be deciphering the meaning of the term “offensive facet” when a situation arose that warranted the immediate deployment of Canadian troops to defend Canada's interests? I do not think so. I am sure we can all agree that we would not.

The most significant problem with this bill is that it seeks to redefine the relationship between the government and Parliament in critical areas of national defence. If adopted, this bill would require government to seek parliamentary approval before it could authorize military operations outside Canada. This could jeopardize Canadian interests and lives.

What if Parliament were not in session, or prorogued, or dissolved for an election? The delay in securing authorization of a military deployment could be lengthy and disastrous. Delay could cost Canadian lives.

I cannot imagine any country that would want to impose such restrictions, and with good reason. The government must be able to act quickly and decisively in the nation's interests. When there is a crisis, somebody has to be able to make a decision. That somebody is the Prime Minister, who, along with cabinet, can make decisions on behalf of the democratically elected Government of Canada.

If this bill were adopted, the government and the men and women of the Canadian Forces could face impossible challenges. Almost every military operation conducted outside Canada by the Canadian Forces is within a binational or multilateral framework, whether it be the United Nations, NATO, a coalition or NORAD.

Any country whose government cannot take military decisions quickly and decisively is a liability to its allies. A country that has to publicly debate a military mission could risk the operational security of its own forces and those of its allies. It would limit our forces' ability to respond effectively when crises occur in other countries. It would introduce a delay that could mean the difference between saving lives and being too late to do so.

In conclusion, this government supports rigorous parliamentary oversight of military operations. We have engaged Parliament through numerous debates and committee appearances. Members of the House twice have voted to extend the Afghanistan mission after lengthy debate, but the proposed legislation before us is not about oversight.

It is an attempt to fundamentally redefine the powers of the government and Parliament in critical areas related to national defence and it is misguided. It is misguided because it can prevent the government from acting quickly and decisively in a crisis. It is misguided because it could jeopardize Canadian interests and Canadian lives. It is misguided because it could cripple Canada's

standing with our allies and diminish our capacity to play a leadership role on the world stage.

I urge all members of the House to oppose the bill. I think that members opposite in the Liberal Party, from their experience in dealing with these situations, would share the same view that the Conservative Party of Canada has had throughout history.

● (1800)

Hon. Bryon Wilfert (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to enter the debate this evening. First of all, I want to salute our forces, both at home and abroad, for the great work they do.

We are always cognizant of the fact that we have the ability to put our forces in harm's way and therefore the bill this evening is very interesting in terms of what it proposes to do. As we know, currently it is a Crown prerogative—that is, cabinet—to determine the sending of troops abroad, or it can be done through statutory powers under the National Defence Act under sections 31 and 32.

Obviously Bill C-513 is designed to enhance the role of the House. Currently we have debates on foreign policy issues, on issues with regard to Afghanistan and on the deployment of troops et cetera, but ultimately the authority rests with cabinet. A similar proposal was made in the United Kingdom in 2005-06 and the same debate occurred as to whether or not that role should be enhanced to give Parliament that ability.

Clearly, although the bill is well intended, the issue comes down to the fact that it would undermine the ability of a government to act quickly or to have flexibility in times of a crisis. The element of surprise of course would be lost as well in dealing with operations with the potential of jeopardizing our troops.

The bill does not specifically say whether or not it includes current missions and whether that would require additional troops; for example, if we wanted to add troops to particular operations abroad. The discretion of deploying troops rests with the governor in council, with cabinet. In my view and the view of our party, we should not try to constrain that.

Obviously there are questions that emerge in regard to the bill. If I may, I would like to address a few of them.

First, there is the definition of “foreign military mission”. I do not think it is workable. Does it include the smallest offensive act, such as, for example, a four man special operations team? Would it include that? Would it include the largest, such as a task force, for example, that we may be sending over?

As it is worded, this definition would include humanitarian missions. It could constrain the development, for example, of our DART capabilities. As we know, the team has responded in times of disaster. For example, it responded in Pakistan during the earthquake of 2005.

It is difficult to send any military force outside the country in less than a week. If we are going to debate it, it does not seem very practical. Clearly if we are sending our forces into a conflict situation, the other side, the enemy, would certainly be assessing what we are doing.

Private Members' Business

There is also the issue of “offensive facet”. It could be problematic. Again, it is not very practical. What type of deployment is this subject to? Theoretically, rules of engagement do not necessarily define the nature of the mission. For example, the Afghanistan mission could be labelled a defensive mission, but in reality it may require offensive tactics. I think we all understand that.

What falls under the umbrella of “offensive”? Offensive tactical measures are an effective component of a strategic defence.

If Canada is attacked, will self-defence be covered under this bill? Under NATO's article 5, will Parliament return to debate if collective defence is in fact decided upon by NATO countries? Will it be covered under the bill?

Will peacekeeping missions or peace enforcement be covered under the bill? What about warship deployments that can be offensive or defensive or that simply show the flag?

There are many issues. How about deployments of fighter aircraft or armed helicopters to escort humanitarian supplies? These are other examples that I would note.

I do not think that the bill as it is worded is very practical, because a peacekeeping mission can quickly turn into a peacemaking mission. Again, the issue is one of constraints. We have certainly seen examples of that over the years.

There is the definition of “active service”. What does that mean in practice? What does it mean for the regular forces? Are not all overseas missions active service? Therefore, is there a need for such a declaration? Our regular force elements might already be on an active service and require no further designation. With regard to reservists, here too, they have been brought to full time service, on contract, to support our regular forces without any formal declaration of moving to active service.

● (1805)

The intention will not be workable in practice and it cannot, in my view, be supportable. Again I refer to the armed forces parliamentary approval participation under Bill 16 that was done in the United Kingdom. A similar process was gone through and many of the same arguments that my hon. colleague across the aisle and others, I am sure, are going to be making were made at that time.

The regime suggested by the bill would be effective only in a minority situation. In a majority government, it would not be very practical. It lacks the legs to support its intentions. In theory it is a good idea, but again, the practical, workable aspects are not there. Under the bill it would not increase democracy, because certainly if there were a majority government, it would occur anyway.

In weighing the value of the efficiency in reacting versus the value for thorough debate, this bill is unworkable in a number of areas, in my view. The kind of debate outlined in the bill would be more effective if it took place early on, for months rather than hours. In three hours, I suggest, people are not going to be able to make the kind of critical decision that needs to be made. And as I said, sometimes one has to react very quickly to a situation. Parliament may not have all of the information at its disposal, such as classified information or documents of that nature, so sometimes it is going to be a making decision based on only part of the information.

This does not cover all foreign deployment in practice. Obviously that is an issue. In special circumstances that require quick deployment, the government may decide to act in advance of parliamentary debate. Once it is started, obviously these issues are debated in Parliament. The Liberal Party has been in government and knows about the kinds of situations that develop, and sometimes one simply cannot expect to have a three hour debate or a three month debate on an issue that requires a quick response, particularly when responding in concert with allies.

There is a culture and practice already in place in regard to parliamentary debate. We saw that on Afghanistan. It may not be perfect, but it certainly involves parliamentarians. This section does not include emergency offensive foreign military missions. That would have to be revised.

On the Emergencies Act, I note that it was developed to ensure that the Government of Canada can invoke, in exceptional situations, powers to deal with emergencies. This replaced the old War Measures Act, which some of us are old enough to remember.

Examples would include public welfare emergencies, severe natural disasters or major accidents affecting public welfare that are beyond the capacity or authority of a province or territory to handle. Government needs to respond quickly to these. Again, do we need to have a three hour debate to decide whether that should be done?

There are public order emergencies, such as security threats, that are beyond the capacity or the authority of a province or territory to handle, and there are international emergencies, including intimidation, coercion or the use of serious force or violence that threatens the sovereignty, security or an integral part of this country or its allies, again in terms of the response. Finally, there are war emergencies, such as war or other armed conflict, real or imminent, involving Canada or its allies.

Again, the Emergencies Act guarantees Parliament's right to review and if necessary revoke emergency powers. It ensures the government is accountable to Parliament. Ultimately, the government is responsible and accountable to this place. As I wind up, I suggest that this is an important check and certainly also an important balance.

Again, there are issues with the language, which are problematic, and although the bill is well intentioned, there are issues on the operational side that need to be fleshed out.

Ms. Alexa McDonough (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to speak briefly in the debate on Bill C-513, An Act to amend the National Defence Act, introduced by my colleague in the Bloc, the member for Ahuntsic. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the bill, and I commend the member for bringing forward a bill that generates an important debate.

Private Members' Business

At the very heart of the issue is the notion that there needs to be, to the maximum extent possible and feasible, parliamentary oversight for one of the most serious decisions, if not the most serious decisions a government makes and in which a Parliament either participates in a democratic, constructive way or is shut out. That decision is to send into harm's way the women and men of the Canadian armed forces to serve their country.

No one in this chamber questions the depth of commitment and the severity of the demands that places on what are largely the young men and women of our country and the impact it can have on their lives. I think we all are seized, whatever our particular perspective is on the details of this proposal, with the severity of such a decision. One hopes we are all committed to ensuring that the best possible reflection of the views, desires and wishes of the Canadian people is taken into account when such a decision is made.

In fairness, both the member for Richmond Hill on the Liberal bench and the parliamentary secretary from Edmonton Centre have raised some very practical questions and legitimate concerns about the workability of the private member's bill. However, without equivocation and without reservation, I and my colleagues support the intent of the bill, which is to ensure the Canadian people have, to the maximum extent possible, an opportunity to have their views and wishes on what is agreeably one of the most serious decisions we are ever compelled to make on their behalf as their elected representatives in Parliament.

I am also pleased a Bloc member has introduced this bill, at least bringing into the light of day the real issue about how we exercise responsibility around such issues. I was both surprised and disappointed, as I think a lot of people in Quebec were, that the Bloc, when given the opportunity to vote on the question of the Afghan mission, saw fit to give support the extension of it in what seemed at the time to be a very surprising decision, particularly given how extremely truncated and shrunken down that debate was. I am not talking about the most recent vote, but the previous one,

I remember, with a real sense of horror and dismay, the environment in which that debate took place here. It took place when I and the member for Richmond Hill had been back less than 72 hours from having visited Kandahar and Kabul, having come to the realization that there were many problems with the mission. Not a word was said by the foreign affairs minister at the time, now the defence minister, about the fact that this would be rammed through Parliament on very short notice, with absolutely no opportunity for there to be any real consideration of the implications. Also very little information was forthcoming on the basis that one could make a responsible decision.

Therefore, if this means Bloc members have thought about this and perhaps even have had second thoughts and some regrets about their decision in that context, then I would applaud them for giving it that further consideration. This may be one of the motivations behind the bill.

● (1810)

A great deal would be served by the bill going forward for further detailed consideration.

It did not surprise me but I was disappointed when the parliamentary secretary opened his comments by showing that it has taken the Conservative government less than two years to become every bit as arrogant as the Liberals. I do not want to misquote him but he basically suggested that since the Liberals and the Conservatives are the only parties that will ever govern this country it therefore is only what they think that matters and since both parties think this is a ridiculous idea then we should not even consider it.

I could spend a lot of time talking about how often those words were spoken by Liberals or Conservatives in the provinces and territories across this country where it turned out to be a ridiculous assertion. We just need to look at Saskatchewan and Manitoba. I hope this time next year I can say we can look at Nova Scotia where people said that when I sat alone in the Nova Scotia legislature.

It does not surprise me that kind of arrogant comment is made but it disappoints me in the context of such a serious debate.

I want to briefly quote from Professor David Bercuson, a witness who appeared before the national defence committee in the fall of 2006. I very much agree with his comments. He said:

... there ought to be much greater parliamentary control over troop deployments abroad. I have called for the necessity for Parliament to approve deployments of as small as 200 to 300 troops being sent overseas. I believe this is extremely necessary, not simply because of the forms of parliamentary democracy, but to engage the Canadian people in the debate about whether or not troops should be sent overseas.

That sentiment used to be expressed very often by members on the Conservative bench when they were in opposition, and now it is just like a closed door, not even worth a discussion, and mostly hurling insults at how inadequate this proposal is.

The bill merits further consideration. I think we all agree that this is the most serious thing that we are asked to do. We should be looking at this bill in detail. Other private members' bills have come forward that were inadequate and needed the expertise that comes before a committee. I think of Bill C-293 that was originally introduced as a private member's bill by the NDP and then taken up by the Liberals. It has been worked over both at the Senate committee and at our own foreign affairs committee. The bill has been improved to the point where I hope every member is ready to pass it after a huge investment of time and resources at committee level both in the Senate and in the House.

Private members' bills often start out as good ideas, with good intentions and in response to a genuine aspiration by the Canadian people. It is our responsibility to take those bills into a committee, discuss them, do further research, improve them and then move them forward. This bill is one that I genuinely believe Canadians would support.

I will finish by further quoting David Bercuson who said the following:

The people whom we are deploying abroad are also going in harm's way. By signing up to the Canadian military they have taken up, in a sense, an unlimited liability. They will lay their lives on the line for the people and the Government of Canada if necessary. There is no other citizen in this country, including the police, who has a liability that is unlimited. That is why I think your committee needs to have more power and authority than other committees in Parliament and why Parliament should vote on overseas deployments.

Private Members' Business

I hope we can move this bill forward and improve it to where it is a genuine reflection of what is needed in this country by way of accountability.

• (1815)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Bouchard (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, BQ): Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I would like to congratulate my colleague, the member for Ahuntsic, for having thought to introduce Bill C-513.

I am very pleased to speak about Bill C-513, especially because the Bloc Québécois has long been asking Parliament for legislation requiring that Canada's involvement in important missions subject to international treaties or long-term foreign military missions be debated and voted on in the House of Commons.

Just as the House of Commons must ratify an agreement or a protocol with other countries, we believe that in 2008, the House must ratify a decision that commits Canada to a long-term military mission with an offensive facet.

The government must make decisions and choices, but when the decision pertains to long-term military operations where we must deploy men and women to another country and there is a risk of losing lives, we must, as democratically elected representatives, have the right to debate the matter in the House. This is a matter that goes well beyond political partisanship here in this House.

Furthermore, although Bill C-513 amends the two sections of the National Defence Act on sending troops on foreign missions that are deemed offensive, in other words, sections 31 and 32, it recognizes the government's prerogative to place the Canadian Forces on active service.

We are calling on the government to introduce a motion in the House of Commons before deploying Canadian troops on a foreign military mission that includes an offensive facet.

Bill C-513, introduced by my colleague from Ahuntsic, is a step in the right direction for updating the National Defence Act. In the past, there have been historic precedents where the government sought the support of parliamentarians before deploying troops abroad. I will provide some examples in a few minutes.

The wording of the bill is clear. The Minister must table a motion for ratification of the declaration of intention to place the Canadian Forces on active service before the House of Commons. In fact, the motion must specify the purpose of the mission, the location and the duration of the intervention. That said, this bill is not about one military operation in particular, but all military operations with an offensive facet.

As elected members, we all have a role to inform our constituents. When we make an important decision on a mission, it is extremely important to inform the public of the issues involved.

The National Defence Act currently stipulates that putting troops on active service is the prerogative of the government in power. We believe this act should be amended so that it is the elected representatives of the public who determine whether or not Canada takes part in an offensive mission abroad.

Since there is nothing in Canadian legislation that stipulates that the government must seek the permission of House of the Commons to pursue a foreign mission, we believe that the amendments to the National Defence Act will help modernize this legislation.

In the case of Afghanistan, the minority status of the Conservative government and pressure from the opposition parties to debate the matter in the House forced this government to introduce a motion in Parliament and hold a debate on the issue.

• (1820)

Bill C-513 would simply require future governments to use more or less the same formula. In case of an emergency or a foreign mission expected to last less than a week, the parliamentary approval process would not apply.

My Bloc Québécois colleagues and I believe that it is important to hold an emergency debate and a vote on the issue in order to make an informed decision.

To the Bloc Québécois, sending Canadian troops abroad is a very important matter. Such decisions must not be taken lightly. The Bloc Québécois believes that we have to modernize this legislation in order to democratize the deployment of troops to foreign countries.

Currently, the dynamics of the minority Conservative government are advantageous because a majority in the House is needed to make a decision. Canadians and Quebecers would frown on a government that does not have the support of the majority making such important decisions without the support of a majority of the members of the House of Commons.

I would like to take a few moments to explain why this law has to be modernized. It is for reasons of principle and democratic reform.

All parliamentarians know that soldiers put their lives at risk during foreign missions. These soldiers are Quebecers and Canadians with families and friends. They risk their lives in other countries because Canada asks them to go there to achieve a set security objective, such as protecting local people from attackers, protecting the interests of Canadians, or establishing peace.

No decision is more important than the one to deploy soldiers to foreign offensive missions. It goes without saying that managing the army and deciding which operations to participate in should be the prerogative of the government in power. It is up to the Minister of National Defence and the chief of the defence staff to decide which offensive actions to recommend.

Our bill does not seek to remove that power from the government. We believe that the decision to deploy troops to foreign countries should have the support of the people. In other words, to deploy troops to offensive missions on foreign soil, the federal government should have a mandate from the people through their representatives.

There are some clearly identifiable historical precedents. We can look at World War I, World War II and even the Gulf war.

Adjournment Proceedings

With regard to World War I, in August 1914 both Houses of Parliament debated the matter on the occasion of the throne speech. Subsequently, the House adopted a motion approving the throne speech and thereby accepting the deployment of troops.

For World War II, the House also adopted a motion, in September 1939, and the next day the government issued an order in council declaring war on Germany.

As for the Gulf war, in 1990 the House passed a motion to send military members, vessels and aircraft. However, this motion gave approval after deployment. That is the difference.

The Gulf war example is more similar to modern conflicts. In Canada, governments currently make their decisions without true debate, simply by accepting a unilateral intervention sanctioned by an organization such as the UN. Yet, it should be imperative that debate on the matter take place before authorizing the deployment of troops.

• (1825)

In closing, although the Conservatives and the Liberals have advised us that they do not support Bill C-513, I hope that all parliamentarians in this House will take the time to study it properly before voting against such important modernization of legislation.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*Translation*]

PRIVATE LUMBER PRODUCERS

Ms. Louise Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, this adjournment debate gives me the opportunity to come back to the question I asked on February 4 about the complete disregard for private lumber producers in the Conservatives' plan to "save" the forestry industry, or rather to diversify the economies of single-industry regions.

I remind the House that the private lumber industry represents \$400 million in sales, \$700 million in payroll, \$4 billion in processed products, \$500 million in tax revenue, 29,000 jobs and 35,000 producers. I also remind the House that these producers have lost \$70 million over two years, and are now on the brink of bankruptcy. But the situation facing private lumber producers was completely ignored—and still is—by the Conservative government.

There are many of these producers in my riding and elsewhere, and their demands are legitimate. I will mention a few of them.

The president of the Fédération des producteurs de bois du Québec, Pierre-Maurice Gagnon, and the president of the Syndicat des producteurs forestiers du Bas-Saint-Laurent, Jean-Louis Gagnon, are both worried, and with good reason. I completely agree with their requests, which can be summarized as follows.

First of all, they are calling for lumber producers to be recognized as workers, which would allow them to contribute to employment insurance and thus be eligible for benefits.

They are also calling for tax measures so that, like farmers, they can deduct 100% of their expenses in the year in which they are incurred, not in the year the income is received.

They are also calling for one-off, immediate assistance so that people in the industry can continue to manage the forest despite the crisis, in order to keep our forests healthy, as well as financial assistance for work on the logging road network and improved transportation, given that greater distances have to be covered and that the cost of fuel oil and gas is rising.

When we think of the effect of the crisis on the owners of private woodlots, we must think about all the secondary losses suffered by the people in the industry. This affects people in transportation, people who sell machinery and the employees. All sectors that benefit from the purchasing power of these individuals are also affected indirectly.

In the Lower St. Lawrence region, these producers supply 80% of the material required by the factories. This gives an idea of the importance of this sector for our regions, especially mine, of course.

In the Lower St. Lawrence region, 7% of our producers live exclusively off the forest. The others make 25% of their income from agriculture, the maple syrup industry and the forest. Losing 25% of one's income can often be disastrous. That often makes a great difference for people whose net family income is between \$25,000 and \$30,000 a year.

I would like to reiterate my question, for I think it is completely relevant. How will the Conservative government help these private wood producers? These are self-employed people who create their own employment and do their work while fully respecting the environment. They are entrepreneurs who bring a crucial dynamic quality to our communities. How could the Conservative government have forgotten them completely and how can it continue to ignore them?

• (1830)

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the national community development trust is a very important initiative, and I am glad to have the opportunity to give you our point of view.

Thanks to the national community development trust, our government plans to provide real, lasting benefits for communities and workers that have to adapt to changing global economic conditions. Although Canada's economy is very prosperous on the whole, we are aware that global economic instability weighs heavily on some communities and groups of workers, especially those that depend on a single industry or a single company that is in difficulty.

That is why we will invest \$1 billion in the national community development trust to support provincial and territorial projects that help these communities and workers cope with economic upheaval. Communities across the country told us that they needed help quickly, and that is why this government introduced Bill C-41 to create the trust without further delay.

Adjournment Proceedings

I am proud to announce that Bill C-41 was unanimously approved by the representatives of all parties in the House of Commons and received royal assent on February 8, 2008. We are currently working with the provinces and territories in order to identify the priority areas for action and to seek their public commitment to support communities consistent with the objectives of the trust. When these conditions have been fulfilled, the government will set up the trust as quickly as possible.

The community development trust is another important measure that we have taken to stimulate the economy, to improve the business climate and to allow companies in all sectors to increase their competitiveness and to make an investment in the future.

We have adopted significant measures that provide tax relief and we are on our way to becoming the country with the lowest corporate tax rate in the industrial world.

We have invested in skills development and training in order for all of Canada to have the most educated and flexible work force in the world. We have allocated an unprecedented level of funding for infrastructure—\$33 billion over seven years—in order for our infrastructure, which is essential for a modern economy, to be on the leading edge of technology.

And we have taken steps to reduce the burden imposed by government so that businesses can concentrate on what they do best, namely investing, creating value and creating jobs for Canadians. Our government intends to put in place conditions conducive to economic progress and to help the disadvantaged, and the community development trust is an indicator of this commitment.

•(1835)

Ms. Louise Thibault: Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my constituents, I always jump on the opportunity provided by an adjournment debate to reiterate all of my questions because I am asking these questions for them. Clearly, the parliamentary secretary and the departmental team have not looked into this. It is just as obvious that the parliamentary secretary did not hear me as it is that he was simply reading his speech.

I discussed one single industry: producers operating private woodlots and forests. I did not talk about sawmills; I talked about independent workers. We know that the trust completely ignores them. The government should not be trying to sidetrack us. Their trust would remove foresters from the forest for years to come.

What will happen when they are removed? What will happen in five, six or ten years when the crisis is over? What condition will the forest be in then? Why is the government not using the measures I described earlier to help them stay in the forest and take care of that very important natural resource? That is the real question. Why is the government completely ignoring these people? That is my question.

He should put his speech away and give me a straight answer. What will the Conservative government do to help private woodlot operators?

Mr. Jacques Gourde: Mr. Speaker, the government is aware that the communities and people facing economic hardship need help without further delay.

That is why we have taken action and introduced Bill C-41 providing for the creation of a \$1 billion national community development trust, which was unanimously approved by representatives from all parties in the House of Commons. The trust will be set up as soon as possible, following talks with the provinces and territories about proposed projects consistent with the objectives of the trust.

[*English*]

ETHICS

Hon. Karen Redman (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in February I asked a question in this House about election expenses. The Conservative government has always been quick to brag about its accountability, but we rarely see that rhetoric in action. One only has to watch the proceedings, or the lack thereof, in the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, of which I am a member, to realize that the government really has no interest in opening itself up to public scrutiny.

Those of us in the opposition are anxious to put aside partisan interests and resume the meetings of the procedure and House affairs committee. This committee has not met in over a month because the Conservative government members have refused to hold additional meetings to investigate their party's alleged scheme to subvert election spending in the 2006 federal election and go over the limits that are set for all parties. This was revealed by the Chief Electoral Officer. As a result of the stubbornness of the government, regular committee meetings have ground to a halt, and even government legislation has been left sitting idle.

Members of the procedure and House affairs committee, and this includes whips of all three opposition parties, have urged the government to return to the work on Bill C-6, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (visual identification of voters). This is just one of many important pieces of government legislation that have been left sitting idle and are not being dealt with by the committee because of the Conservative government's stalemate.

The official opposition is determined to make this minority Parliament work and to have the work of the committees be useful. The Conservative government's fear of accountability should not be allowed to paralyze Parliament. Earlier this year, the three opposition parties united to remove the chair of the procedure and House affairs committee because he was using obstructionist tactics to prevent the parliamentary investigation of his party's in and out scandal. Unfortunately, the new chair who was elected subscribes to the same book of dirty tricks compiled by the Conservative Party.

The Conservative Party has been under investigation by the independent elections commissioner since last spring for allegedly funnelling over \$1.2 million in national advertising costs down to regional candidates during the 2006 federal election. This was done in order to circumvent federal election spending limits.

Adjournment Proceedings

In January, Elections Canada filed an affidavit pointing out examples of how Conservative candidates booked widely different amounts to claim expenses for broadcasts of the same national party ad. It indicated its concern that this scheme was designed to make use of unused local campaign limits to book national campaign expenses rather than to actually fund local campaigns for local advertising.

The Conservative government has literally written the book on how to disrupt democratic operations and to grind parliamentary business to a halt.

Canadians want Parliament to work, and we as Liberals are committed to doing the work that we were elected to perform. Liberals even told the committee chairperson that we were willing to temporarily postpone an examination of the in and out election financing in order to enable the procedure and House affairs committee to make progress on other issues, yet this committee continues to be locked out.

Why is the government going to such great lengths to block an investigation by Elections Canada? When will this important committee get back to work on behalf of Canadians?

● (1840)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member will be quick to add in her supplementary that her party engages in the same so-called in and out techniques of which she accuses this party on the government side. That is why she put forward a motion at the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs meeting on November 13, 2007. It read as follows:

That the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs investigate the actions of the Conservative Party of Canada during the 2006 election, in relation to which Elections Canada has refused to reimburse Conservative candidates for illegitimate election campaign expenses.

She put that motion forward and we were actually quite excited to see that motion. I was very happy and prepared to vote for it, with one small amendment. That amendment asked only that all of the election expenditures and financial transactions of the opposition parties also be subject to the same study, so that we could examine whether in fact the Conservative Party practices were indeed unique.

It turns out that she was very angry about that proposal and she began to filibuster the meeting along with other opposition colleagues. Just before this amendment to study Liberal-New Democratic-Bloc finances came up for a vote, she and her opposition colleagues stormed out of the room, denied quorum to the committee, and shut down the proceedings so that we could not proceed with any investigation of the Liberal Party finances.

There are a number of theories about why the Liberals would be afraid to have their election finances studied. Some would suggest that there will be evidence unearthed of the whereabouts of the \$40 million that continues to be missing from the sponsorship scandal. That is money that was not only stolen and defrauded from taxpayers, but it also was transacted in the form of cash in contravention of Elections Canada law and probably led to overexpenditures in ridings where that untraceable cash was not reported.

Interestingly, as a side note, we observe that Elections Canada never bothered to investigate the sponsorship scandal regardless of the enormity of the criminal behaviour that was involved in the electioneering aspects of that scandal.

However, that is not the only reason why the Liberals are afraid to have hearings into their financial practices. They are also worried that we might show that they too engage in the exact same financial transactions of which we in the Conservative Party are now accused. In fact, the Liberal Party in the 2006 campaign transferred \$1.5 million to local candidates in the ridings and those same candidates transferred back about \$1.3 million. Most of those transactions would have been in one way or another in and out transactions.

We are not accusing the Liberals and certainly not that member, who is a hard-working and decent individual, of having committed any crime, but we are merely pointing out that the practices in which we engaged are identical to the ones to which her and her party have become accustomed. Those practices are perfectly legal.

I will give one example. After the 2004 election, the director general of the Liberal Party of Canada in Alberta wrote to local campaigns saying, "During the past election campaign the Liberal Party of Canada in Alberta transferred funds and/or paid for services in kind directly to the candidate". It continues, but the payment it is referring to in this case—

● (1845)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, I am sorry but the four minutes are up.

The hon. member for Kitchener Centre.

Hon. Karen Redman: Mr. Speaker, I would just point out to my friend that in the 11 years that I have been here in Parliament, it has been an absolute rarity to see government members filibustering. It has not been the opposition parties that have filibustered at procedure and House affairs, but indeed the government members.

The Elections Commissioner identified the Conservative Party alone as a party that had used a practice that it felt was inconsistent with the current application of the law. It is not whether or not money is transferred from the central party to individual ridings, it is the fact that there was no benefit and no bill incurred at that local level.

That has been the contravention. It has been the overexpenditure by \$1.2 million by the Conservative Party that is under investigation. The RCMP raided the Conservative Party headquarters. No other party has been under investigation. All hon. members and candidates know in this House, there is a regime by which candidates sign off on any kind of election expenses as do official agents—

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Adjournment Proceedings

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, if that is the case then I do not know why the member would vote against a motion to have an investigation into the books of the Liberal Party. Perhaps it is because of a letter that the Conservative Party has been able to get from Elections Canada, in which the director general of the Liberal Party of Canada in Alberta wrote local campaigns saying, "During the past election campaign, the Liberal Party of Canada in Alberta transferred funds and/or paid for services in kind directly to the candidate...". These transfers included an ad in the *Edmonton Journal*.

The only invoicing that was done for this advertisement was to the national Liberal Party. The media outlet did not deal with the local

campaigns. There is not even any evidence that the local campaigns approved those ads before they ran. They were then asked to pay the Liberal Party in order to compensate the party for the purchase of ads that that party had done. This is precisely—

The Deputy Speaker: 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 6:49 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency	
Mr. Hawn.....	5269
Wind Energy Institute	
Mr. McGuire.....	5269
MDF Plant in La Baie	
Mr. Bouchard.....	5269
Human Rights	
Ms. McDonough.....	5270
National Volunteer Week	
Mr. Wallace.....	5270
Aboriginal Affairs	
Mr. Valley.....	5270
Public Safety	
Mr. Allen.....	5270
The Great Builders Gala	
Ms. Gagnon.....	5271
Taxation	
Mrs. Grewal.....	5271
Zimbabwe	
Mr. Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca).....	5271
Economy	
Mr. Lebel.....	5271
Price Monitoring	
Mrs. Mathysen.....	5271
Religious Persecution	
Ms. Sgro.....	5272
Carbon Neutral Certification	
Mr. Lussier.....	5272
Conservative Party and the RCMP	
Mr. D'Amours.....	5272
Peterborough	
Mr. Del Mastro.....	5272

ORAL QUESTIONS

Elections Canada	
Mr. Dion.....	5273
Mr. Harper.....	5273
Mr. Dion.....	5273
Mr. Harper.....	5273
Mr. Dion.....	5273
Mr. Harper.....	5273
Mr. Ignatieff.....	5273
Mr. Poilievre.....	5273
Mr. Ignatieff.....	5273
Mr. Poilievre.....	5273
Mr. Duceppe.....	5273

Mr. Harper.....	5273
Mr. Duceppe.....	5274
Mr. Harper.....	5274

Election Expenses

Mr. Guimond.....	5274
Mr. Poilievre.....	5274
Mr. Guimond.....	5274
Mr. Poilievre.....	5274

The Economy

Mr. Layton.....	5274
Mr. Harper.....	5274
Mr. Layton.....	5274
Mr. Harper.....	5275

Elections Canada

Mrs. Jennings.....	5275
Mr. Poilievre.....	5275
Mrs. Jennings.....	5275
Mr. Poilievre.....	5275
Mr. LeBlanc.....	5275
Mr. Poilievre.....	5275
Mr. LeBlanc.....	5275
Mr. Poilievre.....	5275

Gasoline Prices

Ms. Brunelle.....	5275
Mr. Prentice.....	5275
Ms. Brunelle.....	5275
Mr. Prentice.....	5276

Manufacturing Industry

Mr. Vincent.....	5276
Mr. Prentice.....	5276
Mr. Vincent.....	5276
Mr. Prentice.....	5276
Mr. Brison.....	5276
Mr. Prentice.....	5276
Mr. Brison.....	5276
Mr. Prentice.....	5276

The Economy

Ms. Dhalla.....	5276
Mr. Flaherty.....	5276
Ms. Dhalla.....	5277
Mr. Flaherty.....	5277

Elections Canada

Mr. Albrecht.....	5277
Mr. Poilievre.....	5277

Officers of Parliament

Mr. Christopherson.....	5277
Mr. Toews.....	5277
Mr. Christopherson.....	5277
Mr. Toews.....	5277

The Economy	
Mr. McCallum (Markham—Unionville).....	5277
Mr. Flaherty.....	5278
Mr. McCallum (Markham—Unionville).....	5278
Mr. Flaherty.....	5278

Forestry and Manufacturing Industries	
Mr. Rodriguez.....	5278
Mr. Prentice.....	5278
Mr. Rodriguez.....	5278
Mr. Blackburn.....	5278

Omar Khadr	
Mrs. Barbot.....	5278
Mr. Bernier.....	5279
Mrs. Barbot.....	5279
Mr. Bernier.....	5279
Mr. Silva.....	5279
Mr. Bernier.....	5279

International Aid	
Mr. Goldring.....	5279
Ms. Oda.....	5279

Foreign Affairs	
Mr. Dewar.....	5279
Mr. Bernier.....	5279
Mr. Dewar.....	5279
Mr. Bernier.....	5279
Mr. Rae.....	5279
Mr. Bernier.....	5280

Equalization Payments	
Mr. Dykstra.....	5280
Mr. Flaherty.....	5280

World Food Crisis	
Ms. Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques).....	5280
Mr. Baird.....	5280

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Canada-U.S. Defence Treaty	
Mr. MacKay.....	5280

Elections Canada	
Mr. Poilievre.....	5280

Government Response to Petitions	
Mr. Lukiwski.....	5280

Committees of the House	
Public Accounts	
Mr. Murphy (Charlottetown).....	5281

Petitions	
South Okanagan-Similkameen National Park Reserve	
Mr. Atamanenko.....	5281

Immigration	
Mr. Malhi.....	5281

Cluster Bombs	
Mr. Storseth.....	5281

Missing Persons	
Ms. Crowder.....	5281

Student Loans	
Ms. Chow.....	5281

Emergency Service Volunteers	
Mr. Simms.....	5281

Security and Prosperity Partnership	
Ms. Black.....	5281

Income Trusts	
Mr. Szabo.....	5282

Questions on the Order Paper	
Mr. Lukiwski.....	5282

Motions for Papers	
Mr. Lukiwski.....	5282

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Food and Drugs Act	
Mr. Clement.....	5282
Bill C-51. Second reading.....	5282
Mr. Szabo.....	5284
Ms. Gagnon.....	5284
Mr. Fletcher.....	5284
Mr. Thibault (West Nova).....	5285
Mr. Fletcher.....	5286
Mr. Szabo.....	5287
Mr. Easter.....	5287
Mr. Fletcher.....	5288
Mr. Lunney.....	5288
Mr. Bagnell.....	5288
Ms. Gagnon.....	5289
Mrs. Mathysen.....	5291
Mr. Fletcher.....	5291
Mr. Bagnell.....	5292
Ms. Wasylcyia-Leis.....	5292
Mr. Fitzpatrick.....	5294
Mr. Fletcher.....	5295
Mr. Bagnell.....	5295
Mr. Fletcher.....	5296
Mr. Szabo.....	5297
Mr. Bagnell.....	5297
Mrs. Smith.....	5298

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

National Defence Act	
Mrs. Mourani.....	5298
Bill C-513. Second reading.....	5298
Mr. Hawn.....	5300
Ms. Bonsant.....	5301
Mr. Hawn.....	5301
Mr. Wilfert.....	5302
Ms. McDonough.....	5303
Mr. Bouchard.....	5305

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

Private Lumber Producers

Ms. Thibault (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les
Basques)..... 5306
Mr. Gourde..... 5306

Ethics

Mrs. Redman..... 5307
Mr. Poilievre..... 5308

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